Women as citizens in the Theresienstadt prisoner community

On February 19, 1945, Rolf Grabower, who had for many years served as a high-ranking civil servant in the German Ministry of Finance, and in Theresienstadt worked as a control judge, remarked of his women colleagues: “The women’s rule everywhere (women in leading positions) cannot be but completely insufferable for every sensible person. Women’s place is as housewives and mothers, and they have yet again proven, that, with the exception of correspondence clerks, they are quite impossible.” Grabower’s anger had a recent reason: during the tenure of the third, and last, Elder of the Jews, Benjamin Murmelstein in the last seven months of Terezín, women for the first time occupied leading positions in the Jewish self-administration. After the devastating wave of transports in the fall of 1944 which carried away two thirds of the Terezín population, Murmelstein restructured the self-administration, and most of the men under 65 years of age. This remodeling promoted among others the Pilsner Emma Goldscheiderová as the head of the Raumwirtschaft (Space Management), and the Dr Martha Mosse from Berlin, former leading functionary of the Reich Association of German Jews, who now led in Theresienstadt the detective department, a sub-department of the Ghetto Guard. Mosse complained about the difficult position she had as a female functionary in the ghetto. Her junior colleagues, also women, did not want to have a woman leader, because they thought of it as demeaning. In addition, she had to fight with her male colleagues who were her equals.

There are many similar stories from Theresienstadt. In this essay, I argue that we are confronted with a special moment of an enforced community in the Holocaust, which developed, in the mentality of some prisoners, into a sort of city state. In this view, the Theresienstadt ghetto was a polis whose citizens were the prisoners; however, men and women were not equal in this respect. For some of the Jewish functionaries, the enterprise of Theresienstadt as a state entailed innovative possibilities, thinking masses of people from the drawing table. This perception of Theresienstadt as a city state allowed to look at the ghetto as a reformed new society: a kind of default crisis model, an imagined primitive society with the knowledge, and to a small extent also the tools, of a modern society. Let me stress that in spite of a relative and limited autonomy from the SS — one of the reasons this mentality could develop —, thinking Terezín as a polis was a wishful interpretation rather than reality. Terezín was not a place where the inmates shaped their ghetto according to their plans. Unlike the prewar state citizenship models, this was, gender-wise, a men’s world. If women had any role as Terezín citizens, it was in supporting, affirming, and social roles.

Building on my work on gender and the Holocaust victims’ community, in this essay I explore the place of women in the forced community of Terezín. The gender shifts between the pre-deportation era and the Theresienstadt time in leading positions are very relevant: as so many things happening within the victims’ society in the Holocaust, the place women were assigned by the prisoner community is not just an intriguing footnote, but rather is indicative of larger issues shaping this enforced society. The tendency to dismiss the gendered power mechanisms in the Holocaust, the objections such as “it was war, what do you expect, gender was not important in the long run, because they all died” or “you cannot read the sources ahistorically” are linked to the genderedness of our understanding of the Holocaust, to our blind spots. Thinking about the forced society in the camps and ghettos points us to the power hierarchies and statuses. Women’s “citizenship” in the victims’ society thus emerges as an instrumental category of analysis. While much has been written about women in the Holocaust, and about citizenship and the Holocaust, the intersection of both subjects is still a lacuna, one that simultaneously offers a good vantage point to observe the ghetto of Theresienstadt.

How are we to understand the concept of “citizenship” in the context of the Holocaust society? A number of historians, including Rogers Brubaker, Andreas Fahrmair, Dieter Gosewinkel and Stefan Meyer, Ulrike von Hirschhausen, and Benno Gammerl, analyzed citizenship as a historical category. They promoted the concept of “hard citizenship,” in which “[c]itizenship is a central legal institution
of the nation state.” 9 They also examined the boundaries of citizenship, exclusion and statelessness and their historical consequences. 10 In opposition, Lauren Berlant, Kathleen Canning, and other scholars introduced the category of “soft citizenship,” a more encompassing concept that addresses subjective and performative belonging. Following Canning’s definition, it describes: “becoming subjects as […] meditative [process] that considers both the power of laws […] and the interventions and interpretations of those who encounter, embrace, or contest them.” 11 Recently, Maura Hametz has called for a combination of “hard” and “soft” definitions of citizenship, with hard citizenship referring to the actual citizenship of a country, defined by a state, and soft citizenship to all the privileges and duties such as, in Hametz’ study, those of the stateless women and soldiers in post-WWI newly Italian Trieste. 12

In this essay, I work with the concept of soft citizenship, “in the sense of participatory rights and claims,” 13 seeing citizens as (equal) members of a community, in this case a community of Central and Western Europeans whom Nazis deported to Theresienstadt transit ghetto because of their Jewish background. The usefulness of the soft citizenship is that it bypasses a narrow state definition; it is equally widely produced and confirmed discursively, by media, popular culture, or consumption. Even if members of the Jewish administration as well as many prisoners sometimes imagined Theresienstadt as a polis, the ghetto did not constitute a state and therefore we cannot apply here the concept of “hard citizenship.” It never produced a constitution nor held elections, classic acts by which the state’s rules are articulated and performed. 14 The absence of a formal state framework together with the benefits of scrutinizing the gendered hierarchies of the prisoner community lead us to use the “soft” concept of citizenship.

A number of historians addressed the issue of “hard citizenship” in the Holocaust, often a key factor of life or death. 15 In Germany in 1938, Jews who had Polish citizenship, even if they spent their whole life in Germany, were deported to Poland. 16 In France, once the deportations started in summer 1942, the difference in proportion between the deported “foreign” and French Jews was staggering. 17 In addition, many of the naturalized Jewish French were stripped of their citizenship. 18 Citizenship of neutral or enemy countries — Swiss, US American, Latin American, or Spanish— occasionally saved people from deportation to the annihilation camps, and could even, in a few hundred cases, lead even exchange to Palestine. 19 Well known is also the German Eleventh ordinance to the citizenship law from November 25, 1941, according to which the German Jews who had their permanent place of residence abroad, lost their citizenship, and with it their property, which was seized. The 11th ordinance thus paved the way for the mass deportations to the annihilation camps and ghettos which started soon after. 20 However, because Theresienstadt lay in the “Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia” and hence within the German Reich, the 11th ordinance could not be applied here. 21 The German authorities used other methods to legalize the deportations of Jews, of which best known are the Heimeinkaufsverträge, purchase contracts for a place of living that the German Jews were forced to sign. 22

Feminist scholars including Sybil Milton, Joan Ringelheim, Marion Kaplan, Dalia Ofer, Lenore Weitzman, and Atina Grossmann have established the intersection of gender and women’s studies and Holocaust history. The key question they asked, Where were the women?, is one on which the scholarship of gender and Holocaust studies is still building. The feminist historians started from the frequent absence of women from historical studies as well as from men’s narratives. For a long time, perhaps until today, women have not featured as important historical figures. In conceptualizing the mechanism of women as citizens in the victims’ community during the Holocaust we gain a better understanding of how women were left out of the framework of larger, official, histories – including the Holocaust’ history.

This essay is built in three parts: after sketching a history of Theresienstadt and explaining how ghetto prisoners started thinking about Theresienstadt as a polis, the second part examines the difference of treatment between men and women as practiced by the self-administration. The third part then looks at the ways how some “important” male self-testimonies excluded women protagonists, and the impact of this exclusion

Terezín: a history
Terezín (Theresienstadt in German; I use both terms synonymously) was founded in November 1941 as a transit camp for all Jews of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. This old garrison town is located halfway between Prague and Dresden. Since June 1942, the SS also sent the elderly and merited German and Austrian Jews there. The function of Terezín changed into a camp for the elderly, and as a “camp for the privileged.” In 1943, the SS fashioned Terezín as a propaganda camp to be shown to a delegation of the International Red Cross. While this aspect dominates public perceptions, what is ignored, however, is the rather minor impact that the Red Cross visit and the subsequent propaganda film had on daily life in the ghetto. Prisoners died of malnutrition, were surrounded by dirt and vermin, and lived with the ever-present threat of deportation to the East, which they feared to be deadly. The SS used Terezín as a transit ghetto: transports came in and out. The deportations were first directed to the Riga ghetto, later to ghettos and killing sites in the Lublin district, in Raasiku, Maly Trostenets, Treblinka, and Warsaw. From late October 1942, the outgoing transports went exclusively to Auschwitz-Birkenau. From the 87,000 people who were deported from Terezín to the East, only about 4,000 survived. Nearly 34,000 people died in Terezín of diseases related to malnutrition, the majority of them elderly. Terezín was the only ghetto to stay until the end of the war: on May 9, 1945, ca 15,000 veteran inmates were liberated.

Altogether 148,000 Jews were transported to Terezín; of these almost 74,000 came from the Protectorate, over 42,000 from Germany, and over 15,000 from Austria. These “large” groups were followed by smaller groups of Jews from the Netherlands (4,900), Denmark (471), and towards the end of the war, also from Slovakia and Hungary. Some of the deportees were stateless: among the Dutch and Danish deportees were also German, Austrian, and Czech emigrants stripped of their citizenship by Germany and who were stateless. However, citizenship did not play a role in the deportations in Terezín: in Denmark during the roundup of the night from 1st to 2nd October 1943, both Danish and stateless Jews were arrested and deported to Theresienstadt. In the Dutch transit camp of Westerbork, both Dutch and German and Austrian Jews could qualify for being sent to Theresienstadt which was considered as an privileged camp (as opposed to “Poland,” meaning Auschwitz and Sobibór). In Theresienstadt, families were separated, men and women living in different rooms usually containing bunk beds for between eight to 200 inhabitants. Most children were accommodated in Czech and German-language youth homes. Terezín fell under the authority of the SS, but with only thirty members on the spot, the SS was thinly represented; Czech gendarmes did the actual guarding. The Nazis were largely absent from the ghetto’s landscape. Several prisoners remarked that weeks could go by without their meeting any SS man. The actual job of running the ghetto was in the hands of the Jewish self-administration: the SS controlled Theresienstadt, but the Jews administered it.

The ghetto had a Jewish self-administration, a combination of different “national” (Czech, German, Austrian, etc.) and “ideological” (Zionists, Czecho-Jewish) streams. The self-administration was headed by an Elder of the Jews together with a Council of Elders. The self-administration gave birth to a sophisticated system of departments. In this respect, Terezín was rather over- than under-organized. Unlike Lodz and other ghettos, Terezín never became a labor ghetto. Due to the run-down conditions of the town and to the high percentage of elderly, 90 percent of the labor was used to maintain the town’s infrastructure. There was general labor duty for everyone between sixteen and sixty years of age, though the age boundaries shifted throughout the duration of the ghetto. The food supply in Terezín was insufficient and included little fruit and vegetables, or proteins. A majority of those who died in the ghetto succumbed to diseases caused by starvation. In May 1942, the self-administration introduced a food system putting people into three categories according to their working status: “hard laborers” (often those who did jobs thought of as indispensable) who were entitled to more food rations than either “normal workers” or “non-workers.” Both men and women could be categorized as hard laborers. An overwhelming majority of the hard laborers were young Czech Jews.

The prisoner community in Terezín, in spite of its ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and generational heterogeneity, was quite coherent, unlike the fragmented societies in Lodz or Warsaw ghettos. A key reason for this coherence was a unifying master narrative. This master narrative described Terezín as a site where Jews, banished from their homes and marked as pariahs, proved they could salvage something good out of something bad. In Terezín, following this narrative, Jews...
demonstrated that they could excel at manual labor, take care of the most vulnerable (children), and produce outstanding cultural events. The master narrative was directly connected to various key perceptions among the prisoners, one of which was a strong work ethic stressing everyone’s responsibility for keeping the ghetto working. This master narrative in turn produced corresponding memories, and in a altered form still shapes our notion of the Terezín ghetto.

**Citizenship**

The master narrative begot the notion of Terezín as a city state of sorts. This was an implicit mentality, not an explicit rhetoric. This idea of making the best out of something bad led some people to see the prisoner community as a kind of state. While the Greek *polis* was a hierarchical setup which excluded many people – women, foreign-born, slaves —, the imagined *polis* of Theresienstadt was an open, inclusive model. It was the inclusivity of this notion that made it appealing to many prisoners.

The accounts interpreting Theresienstadt as a *polis* were often set out by men, some of them older, working in the self-administration of Theresienstadt. Some of them worked in bureaucratic professions in their prior lives, yet others were younger Zionists. The vision of Theresienstadt as a training site for Palestine, prevalent among the Czech Zionist leadership, was an important factor behind the perception of Terezín as a *polis*. Jakov Edelstein, the Horodenka-born first Elder of the Jews, liked to imagine Theresienstadt as an extreme hachshara, a Zionist training site for emigration to Palestine. The influence of the Czech Zionist functionaries remained noticeable even after Edelstein’s demotion in January 1943. In November 1942, Otto Zucker, the deputy Elder of the Jews, the people in the Labor Center (Arbeitszentrale), and other close associates of Jakov Edelstein, put together an album commemorating a year of the ghetto. The album showed Theresienstadt as an autarkic settlement, where wise, supersized managers (the Zionist functionaries) directed the mass of people to build the ghetto as a working, livable settlement. The album depicted the inmates as citizens encouraged to recognize Terezín as a place in which they had what they created. Similarly, in July 1943, Karel Schliesser, the Zionist head of the Economic Department, sent a postcard to Nathan Schwalb, representative of the Zionist organization in Geneva. “Everything is perfectly all right here, we work diligently to bring the construction work we began here to a successful end. My wife works in the agricultural sector.”

This mentality encompassed not only the Zionist administrators: many of the Terezín contemporaneous sources display a real pride in work, collegiality, togetherness, and in the fact of building something together. In March 2013, tracing the eminent Theresienstadt gynecologist Franz Bass, I visited his stepson in Düsseldorf, whose father Bedřich (Fritz) Hahn died in the late 1950s. Fritz Hahn too was imprisoned in Terezín, where, thanks to his experience in engineering, he became one of the indispensable employees in the planography unit of the Technical department. Together with his colleagues, he drew a birthday album for their boss, the Zionist Julius Grünberger. The Grünberger album, as I held it seventy years later, speaks pointedly about how connected to the Terezín constructions, and in a wider sense to the Terezín world, the staff was. The Technical Department was not ideological: Zionists, Czecho-Jews, and Communists worked alongside. Their drawings in the Grünberger album also show their dedication in constructing the town in which they lived, making their ghetto into a world of its own.

Terezín had a social elite of young Czech Jews; they were the first to arrive in the ghetto, and often worked in advantageous positions as technicians, cooks, bakers, butchers, and physicians. Their living conditions in Theresienstadt were vastly better than everyone else’s and they succeeded in creating for them a livable situation many of them genuinely enjoyed. This social elite of young Czech Jews came to consider, in some ways, Terezín as their home. They were proud of their accomplishments, they subscribed and contributed to the Terezín master narrative. Yet their group did not think in terms of citizenship. Their point of reference and loyalties lay with Prague and Czechoslovakia.

The disparity between the living conditions of the social elite and those of the elderly inhabitants of the ghetto was for the old prisoners one of the key motivations of their immersion in the master narrative and especially in seeing Terezín as a *polis*. The elderly (defined as people over 60/65 years...
of age), who did not have to work, received the smallest and the less diversified food rations, and their accommodation was, especially until mid-1943, by which point most of them had died, the worst. The unfavorable treatment of the elderly was rooted in a triage mentality of the Czech veterans, and led to a drastic mortality of the old German, Austrian, but also Czech Jews. The overwhelming majority (92%) of the 33,600 dead of Terezín were over sixty years of age. Moreover, the Czech veterans confronted the “foreign” prisoners with skepticism, nationalist stereotypes, often even racism. The social elite in Theresienstadt was constituted by young Czech Jews, which put the older German and Austrian prisoners in a difficult position. Expelled from their home countries by their former countrymen after years of anti-Semitic persecution, they found themselves in an unknown, dirty, crowded environment, starving and surrounded by foreigners who often regarded them dismissively and contemptuously. This explains why the ethnically and generationally inclusive master narrative, which considered the ghetto not only as a place of suffering but also as a meaningful site of civilization, and even of construction, was so appealing for the older inmates. This master narrative enabled them to be part of something positive, rather than being persecuted. This was particularly true for the seniors who formerly held prestigious, important jobs; one of them was Rolf Grabower, whom we encountered in the beginning of this essay.

In his earlier life, Grabower used to be a tax expert; until today, he is considered as one of the fathers of the German VAT. Throughout his imprisonment, he drafted recommendations for restructuring the running of the ghetto as well as for the professionalization of its bureaucracy. In September 1942, the SS headquarters ordered the Jewish administration to set up a bank and to introduce a currency. It is not clear why the Germans did so; possibly to contribute to a normal, livable appearance of Theresienstadt, as the ghetto was being refashioned into an “advantage camp.” The first bank director, a Mr Pollak, set out to discuss with Grabower the technicalities of turning the barter system into a system of wage taxing \([Lohnsteuersystem]\). Grabower wrote a nine pages paper discussing the minutiae how one could tax, and in this way administer and improve, the ghetto economy. The ghetto crown was eventually introduced in May 1943 but never had any buying power. The prisoner community ran on bartering cigarettes, bread, and the Czech and German currencies. It would be easy to dismiss Grabower as a old weird Prussian, whose tax system project for Terezín was out of touch with reality. But there is a greater significance in this story: as odd as taxing a ghetto may appear to us, the notion of administering and improving was also symptomatic of the perception of Theresienstadt as a state, and of Grabower's as a citizen of this \(polis\).

### Sexism and administration

On some levels both sexes were treated equally in Theresienstadt: Both men and women between teenage years and 60/65 were subjects to labor duty, if they were young, were accommodated in preferential youth homes, older people being subject to harsher conditions. They were accommodated in the same barracks, threatened by the same transports; both men and women could be categorized, in the food system, as hard laborers and get the best food rations (although many more men were categorized as hard laborers). Both men and women subscribed to the Terezín master narrative, enjoyed and participated in cultural productions, and often also partook in the labor zeal. However, when we examine how men's and women's place in the community, how their citizenship was thought about, we find pronounced sexist differences.

Independent of their coping or not, women were often portrayed as emotional and struggling with their deportation. Interestingly, some of the few women in the self-administration subscribed to, or even coined this view. Edita Ornsteinová, head of the Women's Welfare (a sub-department in the Labor Center in charge of single women), described upset, emotional, “hysterical” women in the cold and dirty Dresden barracks in the winter of 1941/42, unable to react after having been separated from their men. Likewise, one of the leading Czech rabbis, Richard Feder, mentioned the special challenges that the former bourgeois housewives of his hometown Kolín faced in the ghetto:

“I will never forget the Day of Atonement in 1943 in the attic of the Hannover Barracks. The prayer room was filled to overflowing. A great many people crowded in front of me, among them hundreds of women. They were all wearing simple clothes with plain scarves on their
heads. When I recalled the elegance with which these once so influential ladies comported
themselves at home in the synagogue, the whole tragedy of our sad lot appeared before me.
Now these overworked laborers bore their sufferings with remarkable calm. Their only wish
was for the war to end soon and to meet up again in good health with their children, parents,
brothers and sisters whom a cruel fate had blown to all corners of the world and from whom
they never received word. They thought of them on this day, praying for them and vowing to
start a new, beautiful life once they get home. All they wanted was a small dwelling where
they would run things on their own without servants." 45

It will not come as a surprise when I say that we do not find corresponding comments about
distressed men missing the comforts of their bourgeois homes. Ornsteinová and Feder described
women as struggling, and hence inferior, Terezín citizens. In passages like these, male prisoners
construct the Terezín polis, while their wives, sisters, and mothers bemoan the missing comforts. The
women’s contribution to Terezín was only rarely recognized in these texts.

In spring 1943, several legal scholars among the prisoners, thinking Theresienstadt as a polis,
drafted a legal codex, the Ghettorecht. 46 A close reading reveals several gendered differences: the
codex did not include rape nor sexual blackmail. However, we know that sexual blackmail happened:
some functionaries pushed, or attempted to push, their female subordinates into intimacy. Some of
the blackmailed women dealt with the threat by telling other superiors in their department. Others
gave in, and as a result of social pressure and moral codes, found themselves in a narrative
deadlock: they could not tell about their “prostitution.” 47 Finally, many blackmailed women refused
to give in, and were put on transport as a consequence; only very few of them survived to tell their
story. 48 Because of the non codification of these specifically gendered crimes, the women had
limited, and only unofficial, options were they to seek help, and were thus left alone by the Jewish
self-administration. From that point of view, the polis excluded women as citizens by not taking care
of their specific needs.

While it was the SS who announced and enforced the transports, they were executed by the
self-administration. The law codex also held that the wife was to follow her husband if he was put on
transport. Until the fall of 1944, the Jewish self-administration kept to a system of family units,
defined by a couple and their children under 18 years of age. In this logic, the indispensable worker’s
status of the husband defined the fate of the whole familial unit. However, on a practical level, when
examining the petitions to be exempt from transport, we occasionally find women petitioning to be
taken out of the transport with their families, putting forward their important status as doctors,
nurses, or else. 49 But there seem to be only a few cases where a family could successfully apply for
exemption thanks to the worker’s status of the wife. 50 Women workers’ status was thus much less
valuable than that of men, as transport protection was one of the most important assets in Terezín.
Women were also paid only 75% of the Theresienstadt wages. The payment was not so important
because the ghetto crowns had hardly any purchase power, but the level of the pay was of
consequence for prestige reasons. 51

In winter 1945, Rolf Grabower worked as labor judge and was approached by Max Friediger, the
Danish head rabbi, who sought his advice on a theoretical case. “A couple lives in a kumbál [coveted
self timbered room of one’s own]. The man spends his nights at his girlfriend’s, who has a kumbál of
her own. Neither of the house elders reports this, they don’t want to make a scandal. Friediger
asked: who is guilty? I answer: the husband and both house elders.” 52 Not sleeping in one’s actual
accommodation was strictly prohibited: One of the dangers the SS feared most in Theresienstadt
were escaped prisoners; therefore, room and house elders were accountable for their residents,
whom they had to count once a day - hence the urgency to report an absent inhabitant. After the
large transports of the fall of 1944, the ghetto had far more living space available and some rules,
such as living at one’s official address, were no longer strictly enforced. Grabower still implemented
them: In February 1945, he sentenced the physician Alžběta Weinbergerová to eight days of prison,
commuted to thirty days’ withdrawal of sugar and margarine rations. 53 Back to Friediger’s question:
if Grabower’s literal reading of the ghetto law was remarkable, such was the absence of both
women from his judgment. For him, the wife’s or mistress’s accountability did not play any role. The
Prussian law, as seen by Grabower, was gender blind, which did not prevent it to hold a gender
specific statement about gender roles and assigned gendered power.
Hans Werner Heilborn and his girlfriend Hanna Kosterlitz were one of the couples who could have been confronted to Grabower for living at a wrong address. As young “Geltungsjuden,” mixed offspring categorized as Jews, they were deported without their parents to Theresienstadt in late November 1944, coming from a labor camp in the March of Brandenburg. 

Later that winter, Emma Goldscheiderová, the head of the Space Management, asked them whether they did not want to build their own kumbál. It was clear that living in their kumbál was illegal and that they had to make an arrangement with their old roommates. 

Goldscheiderová, the only female head of a department, demonstrated a very different, more praxeological, interpretation of rules than her male colleagues — including Grabower, whom she outranked.

Female functionaries deported to Theresienstadt also experienced a gendered shift in importance. Hanna Steinerová run the Emigration department of the Prague Jewish Community. Her post was so crucial that she was deported very late to Terezín, in July 1943, with the last percent of the “full Jews” from Prague. However, Steinerová had no special position in the ghetto. She acted as one of the unofficial advisors to the now demoted Jakov Edelstein, albeit she was not part of his inner circle — until his arrest in November 1943, four months later. Together with other prominent Zionist women, she organized a WIZO group in the ghetto and widely subscribed to the Terezín master narrative. The demotion of Martha Mosse, whom we met in the beginning, was thus by no means an exception. Mosse was not only the first female departmental director in the Prussian police; she, a lesbian living with her partner, run the vice squad, where part of her task was to prosecute male homosexual conduct.

Before the deportations, some of the West European Jewish forced umbrella organizations had important female functionaries: There was Gertrud van Tijn at the Joodse Raad in Amsterdam, who was, however, deported to Bergen-Belsen and from here went to Palestine thanks to an exchange program.

The case of female physicians was similar: Many medical experts struggled to find a position within the scope of their profession in Terezín, but it was much harder for women. In the ghetto, many of them were downgraded to nurses’ or manual jobs.

There is a certain irony in the fact that Hanna Steinerová and Martha Mosse were deemed so important as female functionaries that they were deported late; but like nearly all the Jewish functionaries who arrived in Theresienstadt late, they were appointed to marginal positions, whereas the men often were able to climb the career ladder. Another factor played a part in Mosse’s and Steinerová’s demotion: While the Jewish self-administration in the ghetto showed many continuities with the previous enforced umbrella Jewish administrations, it still underwent great changes. Terezín, with its notion of danger and simultaneously new beginning, was a men’s world, one that was far more gender normative. This world was both modern and old-fashioned: while much of the mentality was that of technical planning, seeing Theresienstadt as a problem that could be successfully organized away, the planning administrators also considered the basic, primitive conditions of the ghetto forced upon most of the Holocaust victims. These basic conditions seemed suitable for conservative gender roles, relegating women to serving positions, or to put it with Grabower, to correspondence clerks. Much about Theresienstadt was transnational: the sustained encounters between the prisoners, friendships, romantic relationships, cooperation at work, as well as seeing the ghetto as a city state. Theresienstadt reminds us that the Holocaust was, in many respects, a transnational history. Seeing female victims as subordinate members of the victims’ community, was, it seems, an equally transnational phenomenon, shared by Czech, Austrian, German, Dutch, and Danish Jewish prisoners.

Narratives as historical citizenship

The sex discrepancy in the administration and power relationships is mirrored in the testimonies of some of the men in the self-administration, in particular those who liked to consider themselves important. Felix Meyer, an 68-year old Berlin physician, worked in the Central Medical Library of Theresienstadt, and became head of this institution after October 1944. In his memoir, he described his staff, giving everyone’s names and places of origin: a string of men with doctorates, ending with an aside mentioning his only female colleague: “and a Danish woman.” His female Danish workmate comes up in the end, in passing, nameless, as if her work in the library did not guarantee her full membership in the institution, and if her name did not deserve being remembered. Moreover, Meyer did not mention at all Dr Marta Weinwurmová-Löwyová, his predecessor in the
Scholars of women’s history have long pointed out how women have been left out from history. In many classic autobiographies we find female protagonists on the margins, or not at all. To give just one example: in George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*, we only learn that Orwell was in Catalonia with his wife, Eileen O’Shaughnessy, in a passing remark. The love story in this memoir is not that of Orwell and O’Shaughnessy, but of him and internationalist socialism. Orwell presented O’Shaughnessy as a private, hence marginal, figure, without a voice or relevant historical views, whereas he mentioned his friends at length. The Holocaust, I believe, may have intensified this trend, generating conditions in which women can disappear from the historical account particularly easily. Without knowing that we ought to look for women, we will never realize they were there in the first place.

In a different project, Maria von der Heydt and I examined the mixed family of Heinrich and Irmgard Veit Simon and their six children who were “Geltungsjuden.” The Veit Simons were eminent members of the Berlin Jewish haute bourgeoisie. During the Third Reich, some of their children emigrated to Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Chile, while two daughters were deported in June 1942 to Theresienstadt. In May 1942, Heinrich, who was Jewish, was killed by the Gestapo. Irmgard, who was a Quaker, was the only one to stay behind in Berlin. Irmgard was connected to Harald Poelchau, the Quakers, and the Confessing Church in Dahlem. She was active in the resistance, helping Jews to go into hiding, as well as sheltering people on a short term basis, Jews as well as escaped forced laborers. To this end, she used up all of her considerable funds. Yet we do not know with which helpers’ networks Irmgard cooperated: work for the resistance was secret by nature. In spite of our exhaustive research into this topic, no one has ever heard about Irmgard Veit Simon. People in hiding often remembered the “famous” people, not ordinary helpers. It seems that, in keeping firmly to the rules of conspiracy, Irmgard was doomed to be absent from the records.

This lack of written records is really the crux of the reflections about issues of women in history. Until 1999, historians attributed a central document of the Confessing Church on the persecution of Jews to the welfare worker Marga Meusel. However, the proper author was a Berlin high school teacher named Elisabeth Schmitz who did not claim the document. It seems that Irmgard’s strict respect of the rules of conspiracy, her sex, and the fact that she left Berlin immediately after the war to get to her children in Britain led to her absence from the records. Today, one finds her in footnotes of famous, male Jewish genealogists, thanking for the materials she provided about her husband’s famous ancestors. In her work on women in the French résistance, Claire Andrieu examined how resistance female fighters were condemned to historical obscurity: “In the Resistance generation, only men ask for titles. When contacted by the ministry, women would answer: ‘I only did my duty.’ In women’s particular relationship to politics, moral standards took the place of politics. The result is a major under-representation of women in the current census of resisters.”

Are men more prone than women to write their memoirs? Not necessarily. However until the 1980s, this was the case. In her analysis of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Sara Horowitz famously remarked on the mother’s destroyed diary: “Anja’s missing diaries exemplify the marginality of women’s experience in constructing a master narrative of the Nazi genocide. We can observe a similar trend for the women protagonists from Terezín: Emma Goldscheiderová’s memoir was destined only for her family, and reissued in 2014 with a small press. I only found Goldscheiderová’s testimony after six years of searching. Emma Fuchs, *My Kaleidoscope* (self-published, 1974); reissued as *My Kaleidoscope: Surviving the Holocaust*, ed. by Shari J. Ryan (Seattle: Booktrope Editions, 2014). Martha Mosse’s heavily edited, unpublished, diary is kept at the Wiener Library. It seems, moreover, that men’s recollections seem often more commanding as “official history”, while women’s testimonies provide what is seen as (or what the authors present as) emotional, subjective foil. In some cases, it is a literal absence of records that erases the female protagonists from history: Everyone knows Nicholas Winton, but literally only a handful of experts are aware that he was by no means the only one who managed to save the Czech Kindertransport children. Winton left Czechoslovakia in January 1939, three weeks before the German occupation. There were many others involved in setting up the stage for his rescue work: Doreen Warriner and Trevor Chadwick, in addition to Bill Barazetti, Beatrice Wellington, Josephine Pike, and other, today nameless, local cooperators. None of the Kindertransport actions would have
been possible without the persistent work of the largely left-leaning human rights activists there. Chadwick and Warriner passed away in the 1970s; while none of the coverage mention their names, they were the initial motor of the operation. 71 Winton, on the other hand, was, as Rose Holmes suggested, “white, male, British, middle-class, articulate, extremely long-lived and has never expressed any controversial political views, all factors which render him unique among the Prague workers and make him a ‘safe choice’ for a simplistic hagiography” — and “important” history. 72

One finds a striking instance of the women’s exclusion from history in the often private female characters (sisters, housekeepers, lovers), close to some “important men” who wrote “important memoirs” and were sure to get a complete historical spotlight. 73 Leo Baeck, the revered Berlin rabbi, chairman of the Reich Association of German Jews, and honorary head of the Council of Elders in Theresienstadt, was deported to Theresienstadt in January 1943. The seventy-year-old Baeck quickly became a prominent prisoner, which meant he received much better food rations, and was not subject of labor duty. 74 He also received two rooms, where he lived with Dora Czapski, his Berlin housekeeper. She also became prominent so she could continue taking care of Baeck. Czapski, artist born 1882 in Breslau, lived with Baeck in his two rooms’ apartment (nr. 3 and 4 of the L 218, later Seestrasse 18), led his household, and acted as his secretary. 75 Significantly, Baeck, whose memoir has been received rather uncritically by the scholarship, 76 never mentioned Czapski. We know of her existence from other Jewish functionaries, and because she signed in for Baeck on an invite for a meeting of the Council of Elders. 77 When Czapski, living her last years in poverty in California, applied for Wiedergutmachung, Baeck did not write for her in support of her reparation application. Czapski, who made a point that she was Baeck’s Hausdame, did not want to trouble him: His status as an important man, which she quoted to elevate herself upon others, simultaneously prevented her from asking for a reference. In 1953, the Bavarian Jewish Community wrote to the reparation office: “We would like to stress that in connection with the fact that Professor Doctor Leo Baack worked together with Ms Czapski and that the lawyer R.A. Salomon is now supposed to call him to ask for a confirmation, we will do what the applicant asked us to do, and won’t unnecessarily trouble the old gentleman.” 78 Among the survivors, writing each other references for the reparation applications continued the transnational network of the bygone ghetto community. Some of the “important men” wrote only brisk, brief letters, but they did write them. 79

Are housekeepers important in the big scheme of things? I believe so: Czapski enabled Baeck to devote himself to his political and spiritual activity in Theresienstadt. The everyday activities in the ghetto with all its shortages kept people exhausted and severely limited their spare time. By looking after his house, washing his clothes, picking up his food rations, standing in line, Czapski did for Baeck all the work that would have otherwise exhausted his time budget. I came across only two acting housekeepers in Theresienstadt, the second being Ida Pisk, the housekeeper for the Murmelstein family. 80

Baeck had some relatives in Theresienstadt, as several branches of the Baeck family lived in Czechoslovakia. Describing the horrors of Theresienstadt, in particular for the elderly, Baeck argued that three of his sisters died in Theresienstadt before his arrival and that the fourth one died briefly afterwards. 81 This is not quite true: Two of his sisters did die in the summer of 1942: Bedřiška Feldmannová came from Prostějov and died in June 1942. Růžena Mandlová came from Olomouc and died in September 1942. However, Elisa Sternová from Brno, the third sister, died in March 30, 1944, fourteen months after Baeck’s arrival – a long time by Theresienstadt standards. Anna Fischerová from Brno, Baeck’s fourth sister, survived. Why would Baeck claim that his sisters died, when they did not? I don’t believe that someone would forget about the life and death of a sibling; in Theresienstadt the family bonds usually strengthened. Baeck probably wanted to magnify the focus of the story on himself and his suffering, even if comparatively, his conditions in the ghetto were quite good. In this mechanism, the sisters had to be whisked away, and used to perform the man’s own story, and increase the authenticity of male suffering.

**Conclusion**

The baroque system of Jewish self-administration in Theresienstadt offered many of the Jewish functionaries a possibility of agency, of asserting control through bureaucracy. They tried to interpret the horrifying place of the ghetto as something positive, as an autarkic, self-governing society...
showing humanity in the midst of horrors. The self-administration that emerged was a markedly male, and in many ways sexist world. The Jewish functionaries often brought pre-existing sexist views. In addition, they viewed the ghetto as too horrible and primitive for women to partake in its administration. The horrible, brutal times, like the trenches’ experience, were a men’s world. 82 Even the important, capable, well-connected, and extremely experienced female administrators like Martha Mosse were not assigned any important position. The reasons were a classic example of intersectionality, a confluence of factors: being deported to Theresienstadt relatively late because of the eminence of their position, the mentality of the Theresienstadt administration which celebrated the first arrivals, who were always male and usually quite young, as deserving veterans, together with gender issues. Intersectional instances like these can help us to discern the importance of gender in the power hierarchies of the inmates’ community: Gender was constitutive of power hierarchies. We need to remind ourselves that Holocaust histories like these are salient: Even if most of these protagonists were later murdered, we should not dismiss their temporary world as historically irrelevant.

The historical unimportance of women persisted after the war: many surviving women administrators did not write any testimony, deeming themselves inconsequential. Those who did were often not published. 83 Yet others stressed in their testimonies their social or supportive role. 84 The absence of women’s voices was further increased by some of the “important men,” who, to be sure to get complete historical spotlight, downplayed or even kept silence about the women in their lives. Claire Andrieu showed how female members of the French résistance often understood their activity as private, auxiliary to the more important figures, and historically irrelevant. “Private” seems to me to be here the key term: women’s lives are often categorized as such. Lauren Berlant argued that while practices of citizenship can be both public or private, the rhetoric of citizenship is in many ways a public matter. 85 This difference between “public” and “private” is thus linked to historical citizenship: there are almost no female “ideal citizens” in history, and thus women disappear from the historical record.

Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Carolyn Steedman have pointed out that our writing of history is based on what we find in the archives, which are thus constitutive for what we see as the past; but the making of the records is itself a political construction, an imprint of what is narratable. 86 In the aftermath of a genocide, bearing testimony became a form of citizenship: telling one’s form of history, claiming justice by speaking out about an immeasurable injustice, commemorating the dead family members and friends, having one’s voice heard about a slaughter in which all but the author died. As demonstrated in Gayatri Spivak’s examination of the subaltern, denying the voice is “epistemic violence.” 87 Having no voice is thus in this context of existential significance, denying one’s historical citizenship.

This article examined women in Theresienstadt from the point of view of citizenship. This perspective shows numerous inequalities in which women were construed as secondary citizens of this forced community. Moreover, this essay also demonstrated the making of important versus private testimonies, and thus by extension, of a valid historical voice. Gendered mechanisms like these suggest the crucial role gender plays in what is recognized as true, as authentic. 88 The issues of how gender shapes what we see as relevant and authentic are particularly germane when one thinks about the power mechanisms in the victims’ society in the Holocaust.

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1. I would like to thank Imke Meyer and Elissa Mailänder for their comments, as well as the first peer reviewer; and to Claire Andrieu and Léna Le Goff for their patience and editorial encouragement.
2. Rolf Grabower, Vermerke, February 19, 1945, Finanzakademie Brühl (thereafter Brühl), Grabower papers.
4. Diary of Martha Mosse, November 20, 1944, Wiener Library (WL), P.III.c, 1108.


7. Doris Bergen, “What Do Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Contribute to Understanding the Holocaust?” in Different Horrors, Same Hell: Gender and the Holocaust, eds. Myrna Goldenberg and Amy Shapiro (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), pp. 16-38. The above citations are frequent (occasionally subsequent and informal) comments authors received at her talks.


19. Alexandra Wenck, Zwischen Menschenhandel und "Endlösung": Das Konzentrationslager
Bergen-Belsen (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000).

20. The transports to Lodz ghetto from October 1941 were still in the Reich territory.


29. Circular of the Labor Center, January 28, 1944, YVA, O64, 34.


31. Letter of Elly and Ernst Michaelis to friends (1945), Leo Baeck Institute (LBI), AR 11148.

32. For an example of this often sentimentalized narrative, see Hannelore Brenner-Wonschick, Die Mädch en von Zimmer 28: Freundschaft, Hoffnung und Überleben in Theresienstadt (Munich: Droemer, 2004).

33. Edita Ornsteinová, “Iluse Terezín” (1945), Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), O7, 291. Edelstein never received Czechoslovak citizenship.

34. Working in a Trap: AZ Album, ed. by Margalit Shlain (Givat Haim Ihud: Beit Terezin, 2008).


36. Personal papers Peter Hahn, Düsseldorf. Thanks to the Hahn family for letting me view the album.


42. The age boundaries for labor duty shifted during the duration of the ghetto.

43. AZ Album.

44. Ornsteinová, “Iluse Terezína.”


46. Ghettorecht, YVA, O64, 28.


49. Petition of the Health Services to exempt Beatrix Schulhof (Božena Schulhofová), nurse for the elderly, and her husband Ladislav (December 1943), YVA, O64, 22/II. (Schulhofs were put on the transport.)

50. According to anecdotal evidence, the bacteriologist Gertrud Adlerová was able to protect her mother and husband, H.G.Adler, until fall 1944.


52. Grabower Aktenvermerke, February 27, 1945, Grabower papers.


55. Interview of Hans Werner Heilborn, September 26, 1995, oral history collection (Fortunoff interviews) of the Moses Mendelssohn Center (held at the Memorial of the House of the Wannsee Conference), nr. 23.


59. “und eine Dänin”: Dr Felix Meyer, LBI, AR 1437.

60. Health Services petition to be taken out of transport, YVA, O64, 22.


(O'Shaughnessy is mentioned here in connection with grocery shopping.)


68. It would be worthwhile to examine how the published Holocaust memoir numbers differ by gender, and how the ratio changed over time.


70. I only found Goldscheiderová’s testimony after six years of searching. Emma Fuchs, My Kaleidoscope (self-published, 1974); reissued as My Kaleidoscope: Surviving the Holocaust, ed. by Shari J. Ryan (Seattle: Booktrope Editions, 2014).


72. Rose Holmes, “Appropriating Group Memory: Voluntarism and the Kindertransport,” paper presented at Lessons and Legacies XIII, October 30-November 2, 2014. I should like to thank Rose for sharing her paper with me.

73. In this sense, Orwell’s treatment of O’Shaughnessy was symptomatic, albeit Homage to Catalonia does not quite fall into the category of a famous man’s memoir.


75. Czapski’s transport number neighbored to Baeck’s; Murmelstein, Lanzmann, tape 3172, USHMM; Hyndráková et al, Prominenti, 215. Grabower, Vermerke, February 26, 1945, Brühl. See also her reparation file, Bayrisches Hauptstaatsarchiv (= BayHStA), LEA 8575. Thanks to Max Strnad for viewing the file for me.

76. With the sole exception of Hermann Simon, Bislang unbekannte Quellen zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Werkes “Die Entwicklung der Rechtsstellung der Juden in Europa, vornehmlich in Deutschland,” Georg Heuberger and Fritz Backhaus, eds., Leo Baeck: 1873-1956, aus dem Stamme von Rabbinern; see also Fritz Backhaus and Martin Liepach, “Leo Baecks Manuskript über die “Rechtsstellung der Juden in Europa”: Neue Funde und


78. „Wir legen Wert darauf, dass im Zusammenhang damit, dass Herr Prof. Dr. Leo Baeck mit Frau Czapski zusammengearbeitet hat und jetzt von Herrn R.A. Salomon um eine Bescheinigung angerufen werden soll, im Sinne der Antragstellerin verfahren wird und der alte Herr nicht unnütz bemüht werden möge.“ Bavarian Jewish Community to the Bavarian Reparation Office, December 23, 1954, BayHStA, LEA 8575.

79. Dr Julius Spanier’s reference for Elsa Heinrichsmeyer, saying he cannot remember her because there were too many patients. BayHStA, LEA, 16100.

80. Ida Pisk née Blum (1887 České Budějovice-1972 Chicago) was a former nanny of the Murmelsteins; Pisk and the Murmelsteins were deported together to Theresienstadt in January 1943. Anna Hájková’s phone interview of Cheryl Gordon (Pisk’s granddaughter), May 5, 2015.


83. Gertrud van Tijn’s memoir was never published because it was deemed too controversial even as the (apologetic) memoir of her colleague David Cohen was published in 2010: David Cohen, Voorzitter van de Joodse Raad: De herinneringen van David Cohen (1941-1943), ed. by Eric Somers (Zutphen: Walpurg Pers, 2010).

84. Ornststeinová, “Iluse Terezína.”


