

Artifacts and Jewish Spiritual Resistance During the Holocaust

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Artifact: Shofar



Age of students: 9th grade and above

Length of plan: Two 40-45-minute classes

Opportunities for Differentiation: Items marked in red

Behavioral Objective:

Students will be able to identify how turning to Judaism and Jewish ritual helped Jews generally resist the horrors of the Holocaust and why the shofar specifically was an important spiritual tool that Jews utilized for this purpose.

Materials: YouTube clips, *PRISM* essay and worksheet, Yad Vashem article and worksheet, paper, markers, pens, computers/iPads

Anticipatory Set:

Teacher should play the following link for students (sound of shofar being blown)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pb0A_cPIHlk&list=PL2ApEsoj7vdfwwDHW2wwilbaN7nU-889q&index=3

and ask students to listen and answer the following three questions:

1. What did that sound like?
2. Where would you imagine that sound would be played?
3. How did that sound make you feel?

After students share their answers, identify this sound as a shofar, a Jewish ritual horn that is sounded in the month leading up to the holiday of Rosh Hashanah and then on the holiday itself. This is an object that is meant to “awaken” the Jewish people and drive

them to do *teshuva*, repentance for their sins. It is a vehicle for bringing the Jewish people closer to God, and to each other. It is meant to elicit an emotional response and to let Jews feel that God is present in their lives and that He will respond to their actions with forgiveness.

After this introduction, pose this question: In what ways would a shofar have been meaningful to the Jewish people during the Holocaust?

Activities/Assessments:

Activity 1:

Divide students into two groups. Give one group the *PRISM* essay about artwork portraying spiritual resistance during the Holocaust (below, pp. 7–13) and the other the Yad Vashem article about the shofar from the Skarzysko-Kamienna camp (below, pp. 4–6). Each group will be responsible for reading the assigned essay or article and answering the attached questions. They may do so in small groups, in partners, or on their own, as you wish (here you might give students the opportunity to work in a way that suits them best).

Activity 2: After about 15 minutes, divide the class into partners, with one partner from each of the two groups (a sort of jig-saw arrangement). The partners will be responsible for teaching one another about the content of their essay and may use the essay as a reference. Ask the students to consider the following questions (either written and distributed or presented on the board):

1. In what ways did Jews use their religion to resist the Nazis?
2. Why did Jews turn to religion during this difficult time?
3. Why was the shofar a particularly important Jewish ritual item?

*If readings are too long for certain students, offer slightly shortened or paraphrased versions and pair the students working with that format.

Activity 3: After class has regrouped, discuss responses to the three questions.

Then, show students the following one-minute video (in Hebrew with English subtitles) and ask them to consider: Why couldn't Shmuel's father, a professional shofar blower, blow the shofar on that Rosh Hashanah in the Kovno Ghetto?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zrnfdKoanM>

Discuss with students how, even while this spiritual resistance was so helpful to many, for some, the difficult circumstances were just too hard to bear and they could not turn to God in such a time. With our historical perspective, the message is to realize that we are not to judge either side, but this story, too, helps us appreciate the extreme bravery and commitment of those who risked their lives to resist the Nazis through maintaining their Judaism when the Nazis wanted to destroy every trace of it.

Homework: For homework, ask students to consider a Jewish ritual item (or, if they are not Jewish, then a general personal item), practice, holiday, or idea that helps represent to them the messages of unity, solidarity, belief, resistance (or any other ideas that the class spoke about together), and then, either:

- a) compose a poem,
- b) draw a picture,
- c) write a description, or
- d) create some form of technological presentation

that illustrates this object. (Here students can choose their favorite medium, depending on whether they are visual, audio, or kinesthetic learners).

Helpful websites:

www.yadvashem.org

<http://iwitness.usc.edu>

www.ushmm.org

www.mjhnyc.org

Conclusion: In the second class period, encourage students to share their work and their rationale for their choices. Conclude the lesson by drawing students back to the sound of the shofar they heard at the beginning. Remind them of the feelings they shared: excitement, fear, majesty, presence of God, etc. Point out that for the Jews, the blowing of the shofar, along with other Jewish rituals, gave them the strength and comfort they needed to combat the Nazi atrocities, to survive the ghettos and camps, to continue on after losing family members and friends. Spiritual resistance was an important way that Jews both maintained their courage and fought back against the Nazis who were trying to annihilate them. When they blew the shofar, they put up their defense against the Nazis. By learning about this topic, we pay tribute to and memorialize the bravery of these Jews and we hope to allow some of their conviction, resilience, and perseverance to affect and inform our daily lives.

The Shofar from Skarzysko-Kamienna

Yad Vashem Collection, Jerusalem, Israel. Donation, Moshe (Waintreter) Ben-Dov z"l, Bnei Brak, Israel

By Sheryl Silver Ochayon



The shofar shown here brought together the community of Jews in the brutal forced labor camp of Skarzysko-Kamienna four years into the massive oppression, destruction and fear that characterized World War II. It was the product of one man's dream, and of another man's hands. Both men were inmates in the camp who took a great risk to fulfill the commandment of blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashana 5704 (1943).

The Skarzysko-Kamienna camp, which belonged to the German Hasag concern, was established in August 1942 in the Polish town of the same name, and was liquidated on August 1, 1944. Altogether, 25,000-30,000 Jews were brought to Skarzysko-Kamienna, and between 18,000-23,000 perished there. All of the factories located in the camp had two 12-hour shifts. Men and women, working together, were obliged to fill quotas they could not possibly fill. The sanitary conditions were unspeakable, and there was not nearly enough food. Prisoners were left to wear the same clothes for weeks. There were also terrible epidemics in the camps. Every once in a while there were selections---those prisoners chosen to die were killed by factory police. Right before Skarzysko-Kamienna was to be destroyed in the summer of 1944, the SS forced Jewish inmates to dig up the bodies of those victims and cremate them, in order to conceal evidence of mass murder. In late July many prisoners were massacred, and the 6,000 who remained were sent to [Buchenwald](#) and other German camps.

The idea of making a shofar was initiated by the Radoszyce Rabbi, Rabbi Yitzhak Finkler, who was incarcerated in the camp. He yearned to fulfill the commandment of blowing the shofar at the Jewish New Year. Finding the horn of a ram, as required by Jewish law for the making of a shofar, was far from a simple task. A Polish guard was bribed and brought a horn to the camp but it turned out to be the horn of an ox. Only in exchange for a further bribe did he bring a ram's horn. The Rabbi approached Moshe (Ben-Dov) Waintreter, whom he knew from Piotrkow, Poland,

and asked him to make the shofar. Waintreter worked in the metal workshop of the armaments factory at the camp. He did not at first agree. Preparing an item which was not an armament in the metal workshop, or even carrying something from the workshop to the barracks, carried with it a penalty of immediate death.



Moshe Waintreter

In spite of the danger, Moshe Waintreter ultimately carried out the task, and on the eve of the holiday brought the shofar to the Rabbi. Word spread and on the holiday eve the inmates gathered for prayers and to hear the sounds of the shofar.

Moshe Waintreter kept the shofar with him throughout his incarceration in Skarzysko-Kamienna and managed to keep it with him even when he was transferred to the camp at Czestochowa. When he was transferred from there to Buchenwald, the shofar remained in Czestochowa until the camp was liberated. At that time, the shofar was passed on to the local Jewish community and later taken to the United States. Moshe Waintreter immigrated to Israel after the war. In 1977 he assisted in the transfer of the shofar to Yad Vashem for safe-keeping.

Name: _____

Questions for “The Shofar from Skarzysko-Kamienna”

1. What type of conditions existed at the Skarzysko-Kamienna camp?

2. How was Rabbi Yitzhak Finkler able to obtain a horn for a shofar?

3. Why was it so important to Rabbi Finkler to create this shofar?

4. What did Moshe Waintreter do with his shofar after Rosh Hashanah? Was this significant?

5. Do you agree with Moshe Waintreter’s sacrifice? Why or why not?

6. What do you think the shofar symbolized to the Jews in this camp?

7. What does the shofar symbolize to you?

The paintings described by Pnina Rosenberg in this essay on two artists of Terezin offer graphic testimony to the power of religious resistance. These art works illustrate “a unified group of inmates who, despite everything, continue to cling to their faith, tradition, and identity as Jews and as human beings.” Pair this reflection with Vera Schiff’s memoir (pp. 53–58) and the poetry by Emily Borenstein (pp. 59–63) and Stephen Herz (pp. 64–65) [in the Spring 2012 issue of *PRISM: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Educators*, from which this essay, below, is taken; it is available online at <https://www.yu.edu/azrieli/research/prism-journal/>] for an interdisciplinary view of spiritual resistance in Terezin.

Pnina Rosenberg

Prayer and Observance as Jewish Resistance

If a prisoner felt that he could no longer endure the realities of camp life, he found a way out in his mental life—an invaluable opportunity to dwell in the spiritual domain, the one that the SS were unable to destroy. Spiritual life strengthened the prisoner, helped him adapt, and thereby improved his chances of survival. —*Viktor Frankl, 2000, p. 123*

TEREZIN: ART AND ATROCITY

From December 1941 until May 1945, the 18th-century fortified city of Terezin (in Czech; Theresienstadt in German), in northwestern Czechoslovakia, became a huge Jewish ghetto-camp. Primarily, it housed Czech, German, and Austrian Jews, but gradually it became a place of internment for Jews of other European countries as well. Although the Nazi propaganda machine cunningly called Terezin a “Paradise Ghetto” (Green, 1969, p. 20), a designation to deceive the outside world and to hide its true sinister purpose—to serve as a link in the chain that inevitably led to the gas chambers—approximately 35,000 inmates died there. Of the additional 87,000 Jews deported to the death camps in the East, about 3,800 survived (Blodig, 2001, p. 179).

As part of the Nazi hoax, the camp guards tolerated the cultural and artistic activities that flourished in Terezin, cynically using the skills of the artists, who “were themselves pawns and victims of the Nazis” (Milton, 2001, p. 20). The guards exploited talented and gifted artists-inmates, such as Bedrich Fritta, Leo Haas, Otto Ungar, Ferdinand Bloch, and František Moric Nágl, by employing them in the ghetto’s Technical Department, which produced charts, diagrams, and maps and outlined new roads that enabled them access to various parts of the ghetto. Yet, the artists were able to utilize material available to carry out those official assignments to produce clandestine works depicting life and death in Terezin. Some of the inmates, such as Charlotte Buršová, Otto Ungar, and František Moric Nágl, had brought art supplies with them from their homes when they were deported, a remarkable effort, as reported by Sybil Milton (2001), inasmuch as “official limitation of the quantity of personal belongings meant that for every sketch pad

packed into one small suitcase, something of vital importance had to be left behind” (p. 24).

RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES AS SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE

Any and all individual or collective endeavors to maintain humanity, integrity, and Jewish identity and thus oppose the Nazi attempts to dehumanize and degrade can be regarded as manifestations of spiritual resistance. **Observance of Jewish religious traditions in the midst of the bestial world served as consolation in the merciless place and was a manifestation of communal solidarity and faith.** Thus, it is not surprising that depictions of clandestine religious observance are not uncommon in the art of the Holocaust. Various works done in different camps depict the High Holiday prayers: *Rosh Hashanah* (the Jewish New Year), *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement), and *Sukkot* (the Feast of the Tabernacles), as well as Shabbat observances and various other collective prayers. Artists documented those ceremonies, which were held either in provisionally arranged spaces or in designated barracks.

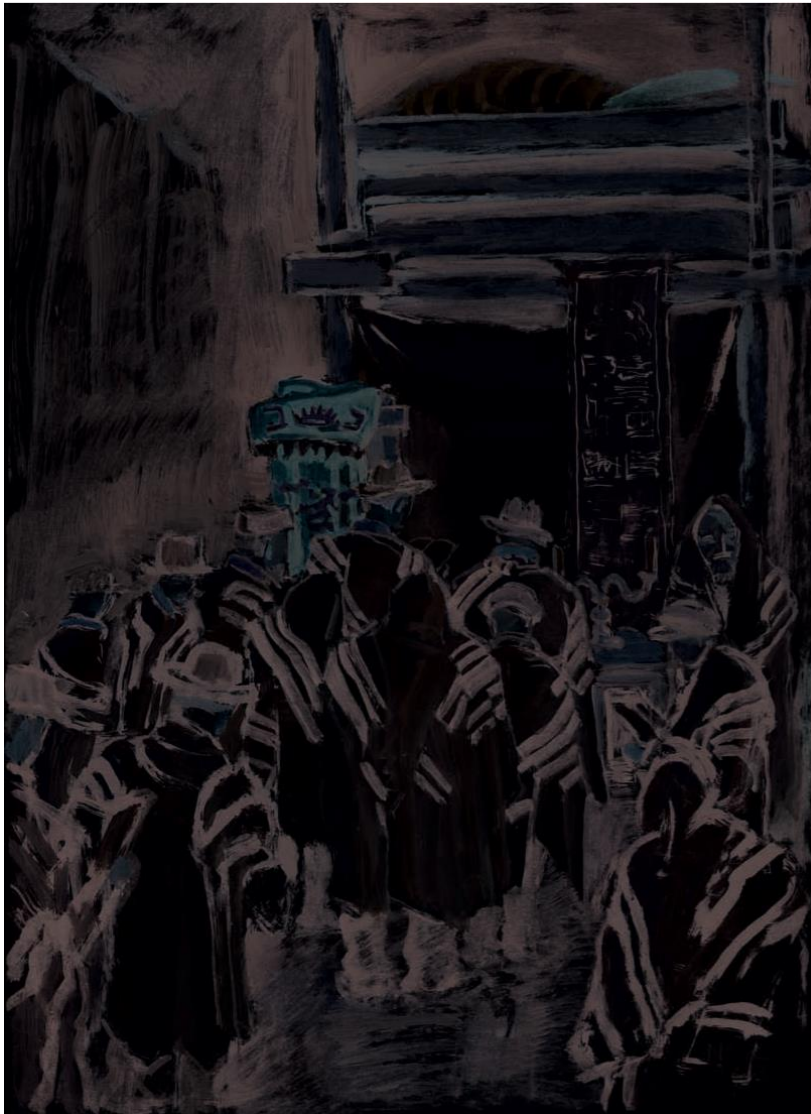


FIG. 1: *Men Praying in an Improvised Prayer Room, Theresienstadt, 1943*, by František Moric Nágl (1898–1944), gouache on cardboard, 35.2 × 25.2 cm. Signed and dated lower right: Nágl 1943. ©Art collection, Jewish Museum in Prague.

PRAYERS IN TEREZIN

František Moric Nágl (b. 1898, Kostelni Myslová, Czech Republic; d. 1944, Auschwitz) a highly skilled Jewish-Czech artist, was deported to Terezin with his wife and two children in May 1942. One of those who brought his painting equipment with him, he was employed by the Nazi administration to produce propaganda paintings. Secretly, he also produced numerous authentic indoor and outdoor ghetto scenes until his deportation from Terezin in the last transport to Auschwitz (October 28, 1944), where he perished in the gas chambers (Blodig & Kotouc, 2002, p. 136).

Nágl's colorful gouache painting [Fig. 1], an opaque watercolor mixed with a preparation of gum, depicts a prayer minyan—a group of 10 or more men, the required number for the reading of the Torah and the recitation of certain prayers in public.

The men are wearing their *tallitot* (prayer shawls); holding *siddurim* (prayer books); and facing the *parochet* (curtain) that covers the Holy Ark where the Torah is kept when it is not being read. To its left is the velvet-robed mantel, which covers the *Sefer Torah* (Torah Scroll) when it is not in use.

The painting, reflecting a solemn ambiance and a meticulous “construction” of the synagogue-like environment, is intriguing. The elegant and graceful two-branch, unlit candelabra in front of the ark indicates that this was either Shabbat morning or a *yom tov* (Jewish holiday, literally “a good day”) morning prayer, an uplifting and life-affirming time that accentuates the stricken, skeleton-like face of the only person facing the viewers. The mantel of the red velvet Torah Scroll is contrasted with the white *parochet*, a curtain traditionally made of the finest material and often enhanced with an intricate design; in Nágl's painting it is, of necessity, nothing but an ordinary white sheet, covering the barracks' wooden bed.

In either case, they reflect a unified group of inmates who, despite everything, continue to cling to their faith. František Moric Nágl's *Men Praying in an Improvised Prayer Room*, Theresienstadt, 1943 [cover and Fig. 1] and Ferdinand Bloch's [Fig. 2] *Sukkot Festival Prayer in an Improvised Prayer Room in the Attics of L319*, Theresienstadt, dated: October 21, 1943, follow this tradition.

In spite of the inmates' heroic attempt to simulate the environment of past tradition, the current reality of the cruel ghettoized setting cannot be concealed. The inmates' two-storied wooden bunk, “crowning” the scene, confers an atmosphere of unsteadiness and insecurity, contrary to the stability and comfort usually associated with strict adherence to the ancient tradition. The whiteness of the men's prayer shawls and the curtain are contrasted with the grayish brown mud-like color of the surroundings—the barracks' floor, ceiling, and walls. The blue-striped pillow on top of the upper bunk resembles and opposes the stripes of the *tallitot*. On one hand, the blue stripes could be an allusion to the *ptil techelet* (blue fringe) that is affixed to the shawl's corners, according to the biblical

instructions:

Speak to the Children of Israel and bid them that they make fringes on the corners of their garments through- out their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of each corner a thread of blue [*techelet*]. And it shall be for you as a fringe, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of G-d, and do them. (Numbers 15:38–39)

On the other hand, the blue stripes on the pillow are, first and foremost, a constant reminder of the ghetto atmosphere. Its vertical, “static” stripes are opposed to those of the *tallitot*, which are mostly diagonal, thus creating a vigorous and energetic atmosphere. Hence, despite the stillness of the event and the serenity of the prayers, they convey a dynamic impression that can be interpreted as their continuous struggle against the obvious intention to “still” them, a resistance fortified by their faith.

The painting’s dual spheres—present reality and past revered tradition— representing holiness in the midst of the profane ordinariness of the bar- racks, create a constant tension, thus constructing a multilayered work, one opposing the other, similar to the inmates’ mood and condition of life that constantly shift from despair to hope.

Nágl left this moving memento of a subtle resistance through Jewish tradition that overcame, at least mo- mentarily, the diabolic Nazi scheme. Amidst the grayness and the ugliness of Terezin life that the artist is trying neither to conceal nor embellish, a tra- ditional Jewish prayer service shines.

FERDINAND BLOCH

The Jewish artist Ferdinand Bloch (b. 1898, Kynzvar, Czech Republic; d. 1944, Terezin) pursued a career as a graphic designer in Vienna and in Prague until his deportation to Terezin in July 1942, where he, too, was assigned to the drafting room in the Technical Office. Like his colleagues Haas, Fritta, and Ungar, Bloch made clandestine drawings depicting the sinister aspects of Terezin. He was caught, however, and, for his “crime,” he was held in Terezin’s Gestapo prison, The Small Fortress, along with the other subversive artists, for an alleged “propaganda of horror.” After ruthless torture, he was murdered there in October 1944 (Blodig & Kotou, 2002, p. 88).

Bloch’s *Sukkot Festival Prayer in an Improvised Prayer Room in the Attics of L319* drawing [Fig. 2] was done in the ghetto on October 21, 1943, depicting *in situ* Tabernacles, one of the three biblically mandated festivals in which Jews were commanded to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. During the holiday, the Jews eat and often sleep in a *sukkah* (booth/tabernacle, a temporary walled structure with a roof of plant material, such as tree branches, as a reminder of the type of fragile dwellings in which the Israelites lived during their 40 years of wandering in the desert after the Exodus from slavery in Egypt).

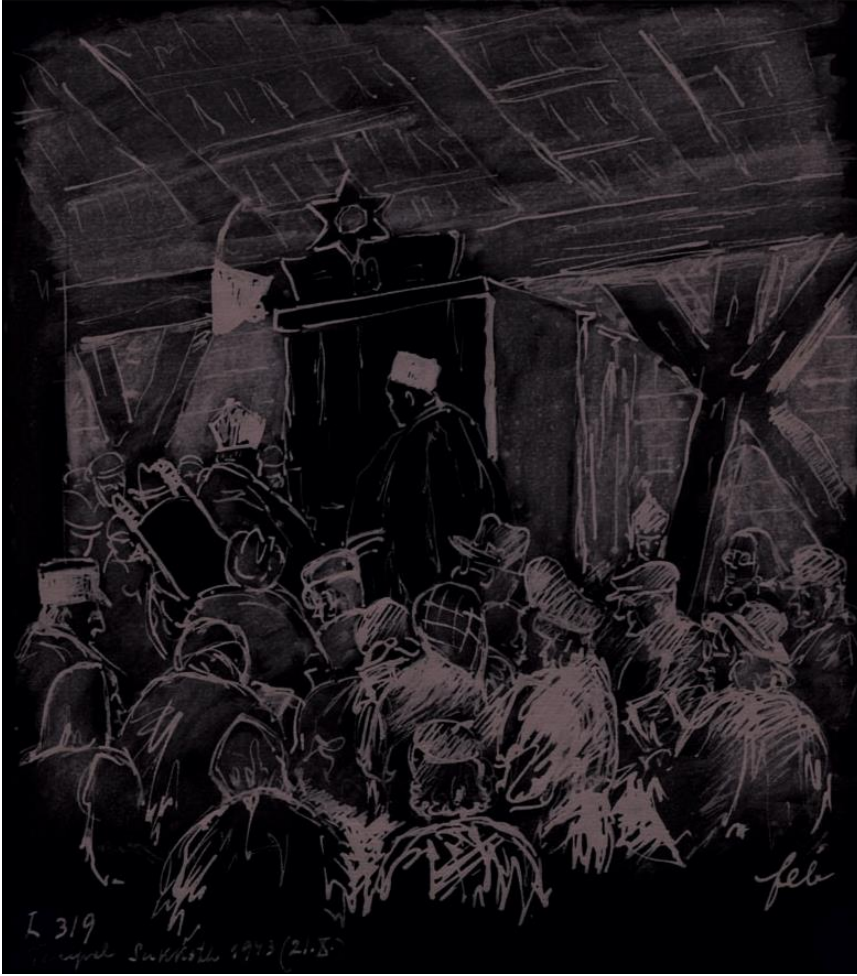


FIG. 2: *Sukkot Festival Prayer in an Improvised Prayer Room in the Attics of L319, Theresienstadt, October 21, 1943* by Ferdinand Bloch (1889–1944), is a washed pen-and-ink drawing on paper: 25.2 × 22.1 cm. Inscription lower left: L319 Tempel Sukkoth 1943 (21. X.). Signature lower right: feb. ©Art collection, Jewish Museum in Prague.

It is quite obvious that the *Sukkot* emblems and symbols—the wooden dwelling, a commemoration of the liberation from Pharaoh’s slavery—were literal for the Terezin inmates, and thus the historical-biblical event became a present cruel reality and a lively metaphorical hope for salvation. Bloch’s black-grey-white small drawing (25.2 × 22.1 cm) depicts a clandestine gathering in a barrack attic, lacking most of the formal and ornamental objects that appear in Nágl’s work. Only two men are wearing prayer shawls, probably the rabbi and the *chazan* (cantor), who conduct the ceremony. The inmates—men and women—seen from behind, depicted either from their backs or in profile, are hunched in their coats. Despite the small, crowded space, the drawing does not convey a claustrophobic feeling, nor does its monochromatic scale, which stands in sharp contrast to the white areas, express a feeling of distress. The three highlighted areas: the front of the wooden Torah ark, decorated by a Star of David (perhaps an ironic allusion to the yellow badge); the Torah Scroll, and the rabbi or the cantor, are particularly meaningful when understood in light of the date of the drawing: 21 October 1943. This date in the

Hebrew calendar is 22 *Tishrei*. It is *Simchat Torah* (“Rejoicing of the Torah”), a celebration on the last day of *Sukkot*, marking the conclusion of the annual cycle of public Torah reading and the beginning of a new cycle. The commencement, which, under normal circumstances, is a joyful and festive day for the entire Jewish community, might represent in the Terezin context the hope for a new cycle that will be free of slavery and torture, and with the freedom to worship without fear of retribution.

Tragically, neither of these artists lived to see the day of liberation. Both perished only a year after depicting this aspect of their Jewish identity and heritage, leaving behind works of art that helped to sustain the inmates’ morale, providing them with spiritual comfort and reaffirming their cultural and religious identity. Today, they serve as vivid testimony to the role religion played in helping Jews defy their enemy.

NOTE

I extend our sincere and deep gratitude to Dr. Michaela Sidenberg, Curator of Visual Arts, Jewish Museum in Prague, and Jakub Hauser, head of the Museum’s photo archive, for their invaluable cooperation, not only for so generously enabling us to reproduce two of their archive’s works of art, but also for their amiable and efficient support. I am immensely indebted to Dr. Vojtech Blodig, Deputy Director, the Terezin Ghetto Memorial, Terezin, and to Martina Siknerova, head of its Collection Department, for their continuous assistance, kind support, and constant readiness to share their immense wealth of knowledge with me.

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Name: _____

Questions for “Prayer and Observance as Jewish Resistance”

1. What type of camp was Theresienstadt?

2. How did the Jews in Theresienstadt engage in resistance against the Nazis?

3. In what ways, if any, does František Moric Nágľ’s painting *Men Praying in an Improvised Prayer Room* serve as an act of resistance?

4. What type of meaningful symbolism is present in Nágľ’s painting?

5. Why is the date of Ferdinand Bloch’s drawing *Sukkot Festival Prayer in an Improvised Prayer Room in the Attics of L319* significant?

6. Why was this artwork so important for Jews during the Holocaust?
