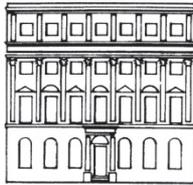


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H. G. Adler's Theresienstadt of 1960*

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## CLASSICS REREAD

### ***A HEROIC WORK OF EXTRAORDINARY SCHOLARSHIP: ON THE NEW TRANSLATED EDITION OF H. G. ADLER'S THERESIENSTADT OF 1960***

BEN BARKOW

H. G. ADLER, *Theresienstadt, 1941–1945: The Face of a Coerced Community*, ed. Amy Loewenhaar-Blauweiss, trans. Belinda Cooper (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 882 pp. ISBN 978 0 521 88146 3. £77.00 (hardback)

More than sixty years after its original publication, H. G. Adler's *Theresienstadt* remains indispensable to anyone who has more than a casual interest in what was among the most perverse and strange sites of incarceration in the Nazi empire.<sup>1</sup> Although sadly few people realize it, Adler's book is also essential reading for anyone engaged in trying to understand the Holocaust. Despite this, for much of its existence it has been unavailable to most people, and between 1960 and 2005 no edition was in print. Until now there has been no edition in English. Those who wanted to own a copy had to scour the second-hand market and pay dearly for the privilege.

The new edition is, to paraphrase Charles Dickens, the best of books, it is the worst of books. To begin with what makes it the best: H. G. Adler is a unique figure among writers on the Holocaust and he wrote a very special book indeed—and one with a complicated past. He had been an inmate in Theresienstadt (Terezín) for thirty-two months before voluntarily accompanying his wife and mother-in-law to Auschwitz, where both were gassed. He was then sent to a sub-camp of Buchenwald in Langenstein, where he was liberated in April 1945. He eventually settled in London and worked as a freelance researcher and writer, producing around two dozen books, covering history, fiction, poetry, and criticism.

<sup>1</sup> H. G. Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941–1945: Das Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft. Geschichte, Soziologie, Psychologie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1955; 2nd edn. 1960).

*Theresienstadt* is a work of extraordinary scholarship. Adler carried out immensely detailed research during the 1940s and 1950s, assembling a vast amount of documentation which underpins his work. The riches of his archival researches are so great that a supplementary volume was published to make a selection of them public (never reprinted, never translated). His ability to have done this outside the academy and in a world dominated by the Cold War, closed archives, and no external funding (that I know of) is truly remarkable.

The structure of the book reveals something of Adler's priorities. It is divided into three parts; History, Sociology, and Psychology. History takes up 150 pages, Sociology 336, and Psychology just 42. Sociology was the key to how he was able to take the raw observations which he had made in the ghetto as a way of coping and surviving it, and hang them on a conceptual framework, to be upholstered with his archival findings. Consistent with his title, we are examining a community. Whether or not this serves as a microcosm or paradigm of modern industrialized, 'mechanical and materialistic' society is another issue and in 2018, perhaps no longer the critical one. Adler had grappled with how to approach the writing of the book and found in the sociological thought of figures such as Georg Simmel and Franz Baermann Steiner the perspective that opened up his avenue of approach. The helpful Afterword by Adler's son, Professor Jeremy Adler (translated from the 2005 German edition by Wallstein<sup>2</sup>), reflects in detail on Adler's intellectual setting and inspirations.

I would add that for most readers, his theoretical commitments do not matter all that much, since his writing is idiosyncratic and rooted within himself and is not 'harmed' by the theories he followed. In a sense, being an 'amateur' turned out to be a strength rather than a weakness. Also, his insights and wisdom are greater than the theorists he read in many instances: he is by some length the better and more important writer.

What strikes the modern reader is that Adler is unashamedly the moralist, weighing evidence and bringing in judgements. His lengthy reflections on guilt and Judaism are fascinating. His refusal to put on rose-tinted spectacles when looking at his peers, or to

<sup>2</sup> H. G. Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941-1945: Das Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft*, with an Afterword by Jeremy Adler (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005).

reduce their behaviour to issues of black and white, contains an important challenge to anyone thinking about Holocaust commemoration and education today. In many cases, this is now based on such radical simplifications that it universalizes, relativizes, and instrumentalizes the Holocaust so completely that the most instrumentalized and politically correct end of Holocaust educational practice is almost as distorting as the soft end of Holocaust denial. Reading Adler is an astringent corrective to this tendency.

But there is a further dimension to the book that deepens it profoundly and gives it a very rare kind of authority—it is as much a survivor’s testimony as it is a scholar’s text. Survivor testimony, these days, is taken as a sort of gold standard of Holocaust education. This is questionable in and of itself, but even if we accept that it is, the failings go further. One of the tragic ways in which we are getting Holocaust education and commemoration so badly wrong is by ignoring the testimonies given in the immediate aftermath of the war (mainly because they are not on film, not in colour and not in high definition, not a hologram). But these early testimonies are among the most vital and significant we have. And while most testimonies are able to describe only what happened in one or two places at one or two moments, Adler’s testimony embraces not just the whole of the Holocaust, but wider human history, as he makes clear in his concluding chapter:

Theresienstadt is part of the history of an empire, and thus part of the simultaneous history of the world. The subjects of the camp’s history could not evade this interrelationship; the course of its history is first of all involved in and then largely determined by the surrounding history (pp. 559–60).

Many of the things Adler describes or explains are only possible because he was there to witness them, or the peer of those who had been. Indeed, his strategy for his own psychological and emotional survival involved turning himself into a detached, yet close observer of the camp/ghetto and its life. Taking all these qualities into account, I cannot think of a more monumental, towering, searing statement of survival and indictment.

I believe that this is a masterpiece and one of the most important books about the Holocaust that has been (and perhaps will ever be)

written. (One of the others would be Adler's own, utterly ignored, *Der verwaltete Mensch*, a study of the bureaucracy of deportation.<sup>3</sup>) I would suggest that Adler's fictional, poetic, and critical writings, now enjoying rapidly growing admiration and respect, can only be properly understood if *Theresienstadt* and *Der verwaltete Mensch* are taken into account. These books are the intellectual and moral core of his *oeuvre*.

Where does this work sit in the historiography of the Holocaust? *Theresienstadt* belongs to that first generation of studies of the subject that I personally think of as 'heroic'. These books are now often overlooked, but deserve to be at the heart of every student's reading list. Its peers include Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961), Gerald Reitlinger's *The Final Solution* (1953), Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1960), Eva Reichmann's *Hostages of Civilisation* (1950), and the edited volume by the Jewish Historical Institute Warsaw *Faschismus – Getto – Massenmord* (1961), among the works of many other authors including Jacob Presser, Reuben Ainsztein, Uwe Adam, Norman Bentwich, Arnold Paucker, and more.

There are shelf-loads of these early accounts and they offer something more than the semi-industrialized outpourings of university departments today. Such books are often not scholarly – or not primarily scholarly – but are informed by a passionate concern that the Holocaust be recognized, remembered, and understood as both an immense crime and a collapse of civilization and morality. The authors were frequently of the generation that lived through the war, if they were not themselves survivors. In our age of relativization, trivialization, and denial – not just of the Holocaust but truth and reality in general – these works, with their unshakeable moral core, are very much worth reconnecting with.

They are, of course, works of their time. They are products of the Cold War, and some are infused with Cold War politics. They are works written during Israel's youth, and often reflect that fact. They were written despite the fact that the authors had access to a grossly limited set of archives. They are generally not feminist in outlook. But against this they are responses of greater or lesser immediacy. They are not consciously seeking scholarly detachment but are pas-

<sup>3</sup> H. G. Adler, *Der verwaltete Mensch: Studien zur Deportation der Juden aus Deutschland* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1974).

sionate, angry books written to force recognition of crimes and injustices and to awaken the slumbering conscience of a largely indifferent world. Adler should stand at the very heart of this heroic generation. Thanks to the bizarre publishing history of his work, he does not, being thought of as obscure, difficult, and marginal (only the middle one of these terms is true).

Sometimes the heroic generation are criticized for the harshness of their judgements, for instance, relating to the conduct of Jewish Councils. Today's scholars are more nuanced and tend to make far softer judgments—if they dare to make judgments at all. (They would do well to consult this earlier generation of frequently non-academic writers in order to reflect on their responsibilities as historians, philosophers, social scientists etc. in relation to forming moral judgments.) Yehuda Bauer (perhaps straddling the heroic and subsequent generations), for example, has poignantly used Lawrence Langer's phrase 'choiceless choices' to describe the dilemmas facing Jews and Jewish Councils struggling to cope with Nazi duplicity and hate. There is certainly truth in this but Adler, who is remarkably sensitive to the circumstances under which Jewish Councils laboured, judges them harshly nonetheless. His reflections are worth looking at.

In the preface to the second edition he reviews some of the criticisms made of the first edition, and focuses on critics of his portrayal of Jakob Edelstein, the first leader of Theresienstadt's Jewish Council. Adler was accused of being unduly harsh in his judgements of Edelstein's actions and decisions. He defends himself by acknowledging Edelstein's sacrifices and good intentions but goes on:

No, this man does not deserve our hatred and scorn, but when we look back at the impact he had, he also does not merit being turned into a role model or hero. The fact that he did not avoid the unavoidable only fits into the larger picture, but the fact that he did not shy away from what was avoidable tarnishes his memory . . . There [in Theresienstadt] we see Edelstein stoop to new lows (p. xviii).

Most of Adler's contemporaries judged the Jewish Councils in terms of black and white and found them black. Today's scholars find them largely white (or at least 'choiceless'). Adler's contribution

(just one of many in this book) is to sift through the shades of grey that delineate reality and judge discriminately, but judge. In some areas the leadership was choiceless, in others choices existed. Where choices existed, the leaders deserve to be held accountable for the decisions they took. Adler finds much in their conduct that is weak, dishonest, and occasionally evil. This is the case with Edelstein's successor Paul Eppstein:

In this connection I would like to mention the case of Vladimir Weiss, a Zionist from Prague who was deported to Auschwitz in September 1943, with his wife and child, because he sent Eppstein a memo on corruption . . . This was not an instance in which Eppstein succumbed to tragic circumstances; these were actions he deliberated over and undertook of his own free will. Something like this cannot be whitewashed . . . (p. xix).

*Theresienstadt* is unusual in another way. It is, of course, annotated. But not like other books. Its 356 footnotes or endnotes extend to 180 pages, because Adler cites and quotes at length from dozens of sources, includes critical evaluations of them, and tells the stories of their authors. This 'sourcebook' aspect of *Theresienstadt* provides an invaluable trove of documents which illuminate Adler's argument but are equally important as free-standing contributions to our understanding of events and people. Among those quoted is Philipp Manes, a Jewish businessman who organized lectures, play-readings, and concerts, and wrote an almost 1000-page Chronicle before being sent to Auschwitz (the late Dr Klaus Leist and I edited and translated the manuscript).<sup>4</sup> Adler offers this evaluation:

Manes, a man of strict fairness, optimistic spirit, and subtle powers of observation did not succumb, like most of the inmates, to senseless political rumour; however, his outlook nevertheless confirms the tragic attitude of all too many elderly Jews from Germany towards the SS, whose abysmal villainy he did not suspect until the bitter end. Because people often do not believe in the presence of this attitude – this naïveté, which we have repeatedly described . . . (p. 709).

<sup>4</sup> Philipp Manes, *Als ob's ein Leben wär: Tatsachenbericht Theresienstadt 1942–1944*, ed. Ben Barkow and Klaus Leist (Berlin: Ullstein, 2005).

Adler then quotes passages from Manes's chronicle to illustrate his point, perhaps a little unfairly, since it is quite difficult, if you take the whole Chronicle into account, to work out what Manes's attitude really was. We will look at translation issues below, but the rendering of 'Ahnungslosigkeit' as 'naïveté', seems weak. I think 'cluelessness' approximates more closely to what I take Adler's feelings about Manes to have been.

I have sketched out some of the many things that make this 'the best of books'. It is time now to look at what makes it 'the worst'. This comes down to set of issues relating to the publisher, the translator, and the editor. *Theresienstadt* is a large book. But Cambridge University Press have opted to make it a *really* large book, a peculiar and uncomfortable format that is extremely heavy and sits very uncomfortably in the hand. Reading it involves a considerable amount of weightlifting. Despite this, the binding is that of a cheap paperback. This book will not last if handled regularly, as it should be.

More significant are some editorial decisions I consider to be deeply damaging. Firstly, the glossary. The original has a glossary spanning around thirty pages. This reflects the distinctiveness, and indeed, oddness of the ghetto terminology (not to mention Nazi terminology). I contend that you cannot understand Terezín if you do not grapple with the fact that it was part Czech, part German, and part other, more sparsely represented nationalities. This fact, coupled with the ghetto's long pre-history, shaped the language and the language in turn shaped the inmates.

Let us look at one central word: *Ubikation*. This refers to living quarters. Its use was universal. The definition Adler gives is: 'Czech, "ubikace", from the Czech and Austrian military terminology meaning quarter.'<sup>5</sup> The word thus brings to life Adler's comments about Theresienstadt as part of a larger history. It has its origins in time when Terezín was an Austro-Hungarian garrison. Readers of the translation will not encounter this key word anywhere in the book and their understanding will be the poorer.

The deletion of the glossary robs readers of a great deal and denies them access to the frequently ironic use of language through which the inmates tried to lubricate the grinding experience of the ghetto. Thus, *Mazzeorden* (matzo medal) = the yellow star;<sup>6</sup> *Vitamin B*,

<sup>5</sup> Adler, *Theresienstadt*, Wallstein edition (as in n. 2), p. lvi.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. xlv.

*Vitamin P* – B = Beziehungen (connections) P = Protektion;<sup>7</sup> *Průser* = a vulgar Czech expression meaning something like 'shit-through'. Adler explains that among the Czech Jews it denoted an illegal activity that had been spotted by the authorities.<sup>8</sup>

Another, even more significant example, is the term *Schleuse*. Literally it means sluice (as in a canal lock, not a funnel, as the translation has it). In Theresienstadt it took on a densely layered set of meanings. Adler's glossary gives it and its derivatives almost a full page, indicating how much there is to understand about it.<sup>9</sup> Adler states that these are the central words of the camp language. Readers of the English edition encounter the word with no explanation and can never understand its full significance. Yet without this word and its derivatives it is not possible to understand the workings of the camp and their impact on the inmates.

Characteristically, Adler classified the words in the glossary: unmarked words were those common in documents and usage; 'O' indicated words mostly confined to documents; 'U' meant words common in usage but not documents and so forth.

The original book boasted three indexes: persons, places, subjects – spanning some thirty-eight pages. They allow you to navigate through the 926 pages of the Wallstein edition in immense detail to locate whatever you are looking for, and to let happenstance reveal unlooked-for treasures. These indexes have been stripped out of the translation and replaced with a single twenty-eight page index of much lower quality. Look up the name Trostinetz (or Trostenets), to take one example at random: in the original you will find four entries; the translation offers only one. Look up Aachen, Egypt, or Europe, or an important witness such as Gerty Spies, and you will not find anything at all.

The original hardback editions reproduced a plan of the ghetto on the flyleaf, drawn at the time of the ghetto. On the verso was a full page of notes explaining the abbreviations and numbers on the plan. The 2005 Wallstein edition improved on this quite considerably, turning it into a fold-out page at the back of the book with both the plan and the key, so that you can have both before you the whole

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. lvii.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. xlvi.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp. l–li.

time you read. The CUP translation features the plan, much reduced in size so it is very difficult to work with, and missing the key altogether, on the back of the dustjacket. (The 2005 Wallstein edition is the best available, a superb production, adding the essay by Adler's son, a good size, sewn-in-sections so it lasts forever, and good value—€49 for the paperback when it was in print, although now much more expensive second hand. It is exemplary.)

Finally, and most disappointing, the translation itself. Words were the lifeblood of Adler, he cared about them profoundly and crafted his prose with immense deliberation and attention to detail. This is reflected in the first paragraph of the Preface to the first edition, and it is about words and language:

Although I made an effort to write this book using an untainted German, because of the topic involved—an SS camp set up for Jewish inmates—the text came to reflect and was often subject to the general deterioration of language in the age of mechanical materialism, as well as, in particular, the amorphous, coerced language of the National Socialists and the colloquialisms and written language of Theresienstadt. But the demon that created this camp and left it to vegetate must, certainly, also be conquered linguistically (p. xxiii).

You must take it on trust that, contrary to appearances, the original German of these two sentences is rather beautiful. But it is at least clear that we are dealing with a complex text which reflects and uses four kinds or phases of language. Adler's intention is to write an unspoiled German. He acknowledges that he cannot achieve this because three things prevent him. Firstly, the general decay of language in an industrial and materialistic age; secondly, the formless yet frantic language of National Socialism (the ideology, not the people who embraced it); and, finally, the extraordinary *patois* of Terezín. Things are made yet harder because Adler is being a touch disingenuous—his German may be 'untainted' or 'unspoiled' but that does not mean that it is plain. And it is not—it is dense, allusive, layered, and complex. His book is, aside from being a work of scholarship and testimony, a self-consciously literary work and a work of literature. I do not think Adler would have enjoyed the irony that his effort to conquer linguistically should have been turned into a linguistic quagmire.

While it may not be possible to recreate these linguistic layers and shades in English, the translator and editor should at least be sensitive to them and try to find ways to convey to the reader something of what Adler is doing. A good translation does not offer word-for-word equivalence (which results in nonsense—see below). It must recreate in the rhythms and idioms of the target language something of the music of the original, while also conveying the information in the text. To achieve this with Adler requires artistry as well as scholarship, perhaps backed up by an extensive apparatus of footnotes. The present edition sadly does not achieve this, or even seem to try.

Let us consider the book's title. Adler's subtitle is *Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft*, which is a brilliant formulation, and 'Zwangsgemeinschaft' is a word of his own invention. This is obviously a challenge for a translator. What we are given is *The Face of a Coerced Community*. I think this is problematic. 'Face' is a poor choice for 'Antlitz', which is a slightly archaic and poetic word, perhaps best rendered as 'countenance' or 'visage'. Working backwards I would expect 'face' to translate back into German as 'Gesicht', not 'Antlitz'. Stylistically 'countenance' is the best match for Adler's original. More significantly, 'coerced' also seems wrong. Nazi policy towards Jews after 1941 was characterized by extreme violence and force. 'Coercion' commonly implies persuading or bullying people by social pressure, rather than driving them into concentration camps at gunpoint. Coercion perhaps better describes the state of the home front. Those judged by the Nazis to be racially valuable were coerced into complicity. The Jews in Theresienstadt were put there by at gunpoint, and were violated in every way until they either died or were deported to be murdered somewhere else. That is not coercion; that is genocide.

I cannot say what the best translation would have been — I suspect that it should not be a direct translation at all (because the original is pretty much untranslatable). It calls for a creative, artistic intervention to produce something carrying the broad sense but with equal linguistic power. Either that, or something quite unrelated to the original, and a brief explanation of that decision.

The reader of this translation must not expect to experience anything approaching Adler's elegance and artistry. But can they at least understand what he is saying? Often, yes; frequently, no. On pages 123–4 we read:

To create these paradisiacal conditions, 17,500 people first had to vanish into Auschwitz. Simultaneous with the easing of conditions, partly to the benefit of a minority, partly to the benefit of all who remained, they were produced by a will that was responsible for the gas chambers. That will wore the undeserved and barely camouflaged mask of a benefactor. In this way, developments in Theresienstadt grew into the most gruesome ghost dance in the history of Hitler's persecution of the Jews.

This is bordering on gobbledygook. Adler is saying that the deportation of 17,500 people to Auschwitz led to conditions easing. In some respects this benefited a minority of the population; in other respects it benefited everyone left behind in the camp. Nevertheless, he continues, this easing of conditions expressed the same intention towards the Jews that was responsible for the gas chambers, albeit thinly disguised as by an ill-fitting mask of benevolence. Thereby developments in Theresienstadt became the eeriest of ghostly dances in the history of the persecution of Jews under Hitler. (If you imagine I have maliciously chosen the one passage that is badly translated, let me assure you, I could produce dozens of similar examples.)

Throughout the book there are formulations that are clumsy, confusing, absurd, or plain wrong. On page 70 Adler quotes from a lengthy document describing Theresienstadt which was written by Otto Zucker, an architect and civil engineer who had served in the First World War and was the deputy of Paul Eppstein. Among other things Zucker describes the functioning of the kitchens and food distribution in the ghetto. In one of these passages the translator offers us: 'For a normal mass kitchen operation one needs a cooking pot room that corresponds to 1.2 litres per person.' Cooking pot room? The original German is 'Kesselraum', literally, a boiler room, which does not seem to make sense. What I think is being referred to is some measure of capacity relating to the cauldrons used in military and field kitchens to produce hundreds of meals in a short space of time. Zucker specifically refers to military kitchens in this passage. He also refers to the fact that they were able to get new cauldrons, but could not install them owing to the labour shortage.

Overall, the translation reads like a first draft. It would have been a decent first stab and after revision and correction (perhaps two or

three iterations) might have recreated Adler's prose creditably. But it is so clunky and riddled with errors that it obscures a book that would have been challenging to read even if perfectly translated and edited.

I referred above to the Philipp Manes Chronicle edited by Dr Klaus Leist and myself. In preparing an English language edition of it we confronted similar problems to those facing the translator and editor of *Theresienstadt*: a poor basic translation, lack of support with copy-editing and proof-reading, and immense commercial pressure to hand over a finished manuscript. In our case we worked round the clock for several weeks to fix it, although the result is far from perfect (and our manuscript was a fraction of the length of *Theresienstadt*). I relate this to ensure that the translator and editor do not shoulder the responsibility alone. The publisher must share the blame.

Is it simply too difficult and expensive to produce a good English edition of Adler? Of course it is not. By way of comparison, consider the magnificent *Complete Works of Primo Levi*, published two years ago.<sup>10</sup> Three volumes, newly translated (and well translated), elegantly produced (still a cheap binding, though) and over 5,500 pages. Price on Amazon: £78.00. *Theresienstadt* has 882 pages; price on Amazon: £77.00.

If *Theresienstadt* had been written recently and published for the first time today, its impact would have been immense, and it would have triggered many a controversy and helped to shape the research agenda for years to come. It would be interpreted, I believe, as a critique of the fields of Holocaust research, commemoration, and education, and be seen to challenge fundamental aspects of how we engage in these activities.

As it is, the book has never been appreciated in the English-speaking world, simply because so few have been able to read it, if they could track down a copy at all. Tragically, what Cambridge University Press, with its associates, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Terezin Publishing Project – the three organizations behind this edition – have produced is a version that perpetuates the confusion about Adler and that, albeit in a new and unexpected way, continues to deny us the chance to hear his true voice. It is a huge missed

<sup>10</sup> Ann Goldstein (ed.), *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, with an Introduction by Toni Morrison, 3 vols. (New York: Liveright, 2015).

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opportunity and Holocaust scholarship, education, and commemoration are the losers.

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