The unlikeliest storyteller

The first time he mentioned that his sister-in-law writes a blog on Terezin it didn’t register with me. “That’s nice,” I replied absently to the builder with the tattooed shoulders and the big silver cross. He shrugged and turned a power saw on. April sunlight glinted off the cross around his neck as he got back to building a deck in our yard.

It’s October and the builder is back, fixing a leaky kitchen ceiling while I put away groceries. He tries again loudly from the top of the ladder. “My sister-in-law writes a blog about Terezin.” I look up. With his black skull T-shirt and motorcycle jacket, he looks more like a Hell’s Angels gang member than the family member of a Holocaust chronicler. I try to form an appropriate response, but the only thing that comes out of my mouth is, “What?” “I’ll send it to you,” he says and disappears into the ceiling.

True to his word, that night I receive an email from the builder. It contains nothing but a link to something called “Butterflies in the Ghetto.” The author politely introduces herself as Tara Malone, an unlikely Holocaust chronicler, and states her purpose is “to share the stories of remarkable individuals who found the will and inner strength to create art while imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp.”

To be honest, although I grew up acutely aware of the Holocaust, I don’t know much about Terezin, also known as Theresienstadt. Like most Jews of my generation, stories of horror, suffering and loss permeated my childhood. But I seem to know much more about camps like Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen. I remember there was something “different” about Terezin, but I can’t recall what it was, where the camp was located or what exactly happened there.

This begged a few questions: Who’s Tara Malone? Why does she know these things? How is she related to my builder? I start clicking through her blog.

EVERY ENTRY is the brief biography of a person sent to Terezin. I’m struck by the obvious care taken by the author, whose website explains she converted to Judaism while at Bryn Mawr College. Each account lays out the life and work of the individual leading up to their imprisonment, during their time in the camp, and tells what ultimately became of them.

The stories breathe life into names: Karel Ancerl, who used music to bring a degree of normalcy and culture to camp life. Composer Hans Krasna, The unlikeliest storyteller

MOON LANDSCAPE, pencil on paper, as painted by 14-year-old Jewish prisoner Petr Ginz (1928-1944) in Terezin Ghetto in 1942. He died in Auschwitz two years later. (Collection of the Yad Vashem Art Museum, Jerusalem Gift of Otto Ginz, Haifa)
whose Brundibar children’s opera provided some respite for the camp’s youngest residents, despite later attaining notoriety for its role in what became known as the Terezin deception. That was the thing about Terezin that I’d forgotten - it had been a “model camp,” infamous for a propaganda film produced there as part of a larger attempt by the Nazis to fool the Red Cross during its 1944 visit to the camp.

An entry titled “The Astronaut and the Prodigy: Ilan Ramon and Petr Ginz” contains a drawing of the moon’s landscape made by 14-year-old Terezin prisoner Petr. The author explains that although Petr’s imagination took him to faraway places, he spent the rest of his short life behind barbed wire and died in Auschwitz two years later. However, she continues, even though Petr didn’t live to see Apollo 11 land on the moon, in 2003 a copy of his drawing went where he could only imagine – rocketing into space with Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon.

The entry on seven-year-old Inge Auerbacher is particularly vivid, describing cramped, smelly rooms, breakfasts of horrible sludgy coffee and watery soup for lunch. It’s so vivid in fact that it sounds like a firsthand account. I realize that Inge was one of the pitifully few children who survived Terezin – fewer than 200 out of 15,000 - and had told her story directly to Malone. Hesitantly, I type Inge Auerbacher into my browser. When a website with her name and email address appear, I send a short message. Not five minutes later my cell phone rings. Inge is on the line, cheerfully willing to chat and do her best to answer my questions.

“Tell me about the Astronaut and the Prodigy.”

“We didn’t know anyone Jewish while we were growing up,” says Inge.

“Tara was always a great reader.”

“When she was 11 she decided to read The Diary of Anne Frank,” says Joye Gliddon, Tara’s sister tells me, after her husband – our builder – introduces us.

“We went to Catholic school through 12th grade.” But Tara was always a great reader.

“When she was 11 she decided to read The Diary of Anne Frank,” says Joye. The book piqued her sister’s interest on the Holocaust and Judaism and “she just kept on reading,” she relates, “and when Tara got to college she had a chance to explore these interests.”

She eventually converted to Judaism, and as Joye explains, “always felt a special connection to the stories of Terezin.”

“We didn’t know anyone Jewish while we were growing up”
Lea Epstein, another Terezin child survivor, lives today with her family in Moshav Tzafriya. She was caught by a camp guard jumping out of a window when she was five years old. “I was on the ground, and he beckoned to me,” she recalls, “I was so scared! At first I couldn’t move at all.” When she finally got to her feet, shaking, the guard came over and dropped four candies into her hand. “I’ll never forget that,” says Epstein, “as long as I live.”

Inge Auerbacher still thinks about the stranger who noticed her sitting alone at age five, wearing a Star of David, and silently handed her a bag of rolls as she passed by. “I don’t even know who she was, but she was a hero,” says Auerbacher, “People like her, they were real heroes.”

“Terezin was not created to be a model camp; that’s a common misconception,” says Dr. David Silberklang, senior historian at the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem, “that came later.” In actuality, the establishment of Terezin as a ghetto-camp for Jews in November 1941 was a sinister harbinger of what lay ahead.

“The idea for the camp was conceived as the Nazi regime put together plans for what was to become the final solution to the Jewish question,” says Silberklang. “Terezin was created to serve as a transit point, a stopover on the way to death camps.”

By the fall of 1943, reports of death camps were spreading across Europe. The International Red Cross, under intense pressure to investigate, announced its desire to visit a concentration camp.

“This is where the model camp came in,” explains Silberklang. A visit to Terezin was negotiated and in preparation, says Silberklang, “the Nazis built all kinds of phony things – libraries, cafes, kindergartens. They even produced a documentary titled The Führer Gives the Jews a City.”

The film, directed by Kurt Gerron – himself a Terezin inmate – portrayed smiling and healthy looking Terezin “residents” enjoying cultural events and playing soccer. Featured in the movie is footage of a concert conducted by Ancerl, and a children’s performance of Krasna’s Brundibar opera.

Although the Nazis had promised Gerron his life in exchange for shooting the movie, shortly after production was wrapped up he and his cast – including Ancerl, Krasna, the musicians and the children – were put on a transport to Auschwitz, where, with the exception of Ancerl, they were all gassed upon arrival.

Malone visited Terezin on a chilly, overcast day in January 2012. The bus dropped her off in the town center.

“I knew people were living there, but it still seemed very strange. “There’s a museum, but I wish the whole place was a memorial,” she says, “like the other camps. “Being there in person is far more profound than reading about it,” she says. The layout wasn’t quite how she’d imagined, and it was bigger than she’d thought.

“But in the barracks, you could feel the oppressive sense of confinement,” she shudders. “It seemed like the whole place had been designed to destroy people’s hope. The whole thing really weighed on me.”

It was raining when she made her way back to the bus stop.

She says seeing the camp made her even more adamant to get the stories out. Her first attempt was in the form of a book she began writing the summer before she visited the camp-ghetto.

“My idea was to have it take place in Terezin and incorporate a lot of individuals who were actually there,” she explains. Malone finished her novel the following year, but the book was never published.

“I never realized how difficult a process that is,” she says. Undeterred, and more...
determined than ever to get the stories out, Malone came up with the idea of writing her blog.

“I think it’s a very impressive thing,” Silberklang says about Butterflies in the Ghetto, “the fact that this young woman recognized the importance of the Holocaust, how major an event it was in modern civilization. It was like a rupture in a watershed in many ways, nothing is the same after the Holocaust. She recognized that and wanted to do something about it.”

His words make me think of the old Edmund Burke quote flipped on its head. If “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing” then, maybe, the only thing necessary for the defeat of evil is for good men – and women – to do something.

Malone hopes her blog will serve another purpose, besides paying tribute to Terezin’s prisoners.

“I would like it to evoke a heightened sense of empathy in readers,” she says. Sarah Diamant, Judy’s daughter, thinks it has the potential to do just that.

“There are so few of my mother’s generation left. The idea of a listening heart like Tara Malone’s – being able to reach across all kinds of differences and barriers to listen attentively and really hear what’s being said – that’s something very precious. It holds so much importance for us today.”

All at once, I think of the builder – who’s named Tim – and how long it took me to look past our obvious differences and listen attentively to what he was trying to say. That weekend I go over and ring their bell.

“Hey, sorry I wasn’t listening,” I tell him when he steps outside. “What made you keep trying?”

It’s January now, but sunlight bounces off his big silver cross when he shrugs, “I thought you’d be interested. I knew you’d hear me sooner or later.”

See also www.butterfliesintheghetto.com