Music Was Life
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Heroism is often associated with violence. Many think that heroism and moral courage are embodied chiefly by outrageous action movies and fictional super-humans who fight tirelessly against villains. It is easy for one to forget that acts of moral courage are not exclusively acts of violence against an oppressor. An act of moral courage is doing the right thing in the face of opposition. Moral courage is the ability to put others before oneself and to act selflessly to preserve life, both physically and emotionally, just as the Danish Resistance Movement did by transporting and saving the vast majority of Denmark’s Jews from the Nazi’s death camps. Like the Danish Resistance, Krasa displayed moral courage in the face of oppression and death. Hans Krasa was morally courageous by using his music as a form of resistance against the tyranny of the Nazis as well as a means of preserving human spirits in the face of incredible atrocities.

Hans Krasa was born into a wealthy Czechoslovakian family in 1899. His father was a successful non-Jewish attorney, his mother, a German Jew (Svatos). Krasa started composing at an early age and studied at Prague’s German Music Academy, eventually becoming a composer. Perhaps his most famous and important work, his opera *Brundibar*, a story of an evil organ-grinder who chases away two children trying to raise money for their ill mother, was composed in 1938, as Hitler and the Nazi party closed in on Czechoslovakia. By 1939, Czechoslovakia was subject to the Third Reich’s iron fist of oppression. In the summer of 1941, Brundibar was performed twice in secret, as the Nazis had outlawed Jewish cultural activities in Prague (Svatos). Krasa, however, was arrested before he was able to hear his work, and was deported to the Terezin camp one year later.
Terezin was a unique camp, established as a model Jewish settlement, a hell disguised with an elaborate façade of decency in an attempt to show the world the Nazis were treating Jews humanely. Although this was far from the truth, many prominent artists and educated Jews from Czechoslovakia were sent to Terezin perpetrate the fraud. It was not long before Krasa was appointed head of musical activities of the camp’s supposed “Freizeitgestaltung” (leisure activities)(Svatos). It was at Terezin, a camp with two full-sized orchestras and many chamber ensembles, that Krasa’s music was a form of resistance. Brundibar quickly became the most popular attraction in Terezin, being performed once a week for nearly a year. “It became almost a status symbol in the concentration camp…the reason is quite obvious…The children represented the hope for the future, while the story itself acquired a political connotation. The mean Brundibar personified Evil” (Karas 102). For the people of Terezin, performing and witnessing Brundibar was a means of fighting the Nazis. In a time when rehearsals were constantly interrupted by the children of his cast being deported to Auschwitz, the fact that Krasa and the people of Terezin stood up and performed a work symbolic of defeating Hitler and his evils is amazing. Brundibar and Krasa’s music gave a voice to the voiceless and empowered the people of Terezin to fight their captors without violence. Krasa showed oppression could be met with more than just a sword. It could be met with a pen, paper, instruments, and the will to not only survive, but to live.

Krasa’s music, however, did not just act as a means of resistance to the evils of Nazis; it also preserved the Jewish culture, heritage, and the very spirits of the Jews in Terezin. Music acted as a means of education when education was illegal. “The important role of singing in the education of children becomes obvious…it served a dual purpose: resistance to tyranny and boosting the pride of being Jewish” (Karas 88). Many children were given instruments to learn
and songs to sing, and not only did this take away from the bleak reality of starvation and death in the ghetto, but also encouraged the children to learn about not only their culture, but themselves as well. It is amazing that Krasa and the other musicians of Terezin were able to perpetuate a culture that was being destroyed and educate those who were not allowed education. To face the bleak realities of the Shoah with that sort of determination is true moral courage. Furthermore, Krasa composed several works during his time in Terezin, and his works acted to lift up the spirits of those suffering, as well as help ensure a flourishing cultural atmosphere in which hope could not be lost.

I personally know the impact that music can have on dealing with hardship. When I was 11-years-old, my best friend was murdered. I was not sure how to deal with it, and there were times when the grief was too much for me to bear. As a musician, I would often turn to my guitar, my trumpet, or even my iPod when I needed to find solace. Music could take me away from the bleak and sorrowful reality that was the loss of my friend, and it enabled me to comprehend and create beauty when I thought it had left my life forever. I know that without the beauty, raw emotion, tranquility, and reassuring peace that is listening to and performing music, I would not have been able to make it through the loss of my friend. I can only imagine the incredible pain of seeing the atrocities that occurred during the Shoah, but based off of my experience, I am certain that Hans Krasa and the music of Terezin helped.

Hans Krasa never picked up a gun to fight the Nazis. He never killed a man. Instead, he used his ability, his music, to inspire resistance, culture, and, above all, the importance of living in the face of death, even as he walked into the gas chamber in 1944. Krasa’s legacy is perhaps best exemplified by Terezin survivor Greta Hofmeister’s words: “Music! Music was life!”