Michael Kraus, “*Drawing the holocaust. A teenager’s memory of Terezín, Birkenau, and Mauthausen*”

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Michael Kraus, *Drawing the holocaust. A teenager's memory of Terezín, Birkenau, and Mauthausen*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017, 144 p.

- 1 Documentation and remembrance of one of the darkest chapters of human history, namely the Holocaust, has taken place in different places and in various medial forms. It is dealt with in museums, memorials, fictional as well as autobiographical accounts, testimonies, feature films, and documentaries. Whatever the medium, Holocaust representation is never an unproblematic enterprise, yet artists, authors, survivors across several decades have sought ways to relay and "design" their experiences. Michael Kraus' book *Drawing the Holocaust. A teenager's Memory of Terezín, Birkenau, and Mauthausen* provides a unique insight into the event of the Holocaust through the perspective of a teenage Jewish survivor. The book, a memoir, contains the author's recollections, in the form of notes and drawings, of his experiences in the different camps he was sent to. Even though he already wrote and drew at the time of his stay in the Terezín ghetto, the documents compiled in the book stem from after the war, as the originals "were confiscated and burned" (2) upon his deportation to Auschwitz in 1943. The book is divided into four parts: Ghetto Terezín, 1942-1943; Birkenau 1943-1945; Mauthausen; and Post-War Hardships. Each chapter narrates Kraus' traumatic experience and is concurrently accompanied by his original handwritten notes and drawings. The notes chronologically narrate his journey from the Terezín ghetto to Birkenau, where he is separated from his parents and encounters the horrors of the camps. In his words, "[i]t was an empire of electric fences, suffering, and death – a hell on earth" (19). His assigned task of delivering "documents and news from one camp to

another" (36) saves him from extermination. Yet in 1945 he is forced to take part in the Death March, which brings him, after three days of walking, to the "infamous death camp – Mauthausen" (41). Significantly, Kraus is "astonished" by the reaction of the townspeople towards the marching prisoners: "They looked at us as though we were wild animals or real criminals who had to be kept under guard." (48) The time in Mauthausen is again filled with hunger, extreme cold, sickness, and misery, up until Liberation Day on 6 May 1945. It brings subdued "jubilation and joy", "both beautiful and awful" (79). Time in hospital is followed by Kraus' journey from Linz to Vienna by train, then to Bratislava on foot and finally to the Convalescent Home in Prague on 29 June 1945, when the published notes end. Kraus is 15 years old.

- 2 What is characteristic of the book, is the author's self-conscious selection process of the events that are to be narrated. Kraus in this regard writes, "I spent a year in Terezín ghetto, but as bad as it was, it cannot be compared to a single month in Auschwitz or Mauthausen" (5). Hence he chooses to focus on the miseries of the camps. Very shortly after the Liberation, Kraus already understands how crucial it is to remember and to write down his personal recollections: "It was important to me to record it briefly because, as time went on, I found myself forgetting more and more things." (2) He considers himself as one of those "people who endured and who SHALL NOT FORGET" (91).
- 3 During his stay in the hospital, after the war, he "[s]omewhere [gets] hold of a pencil and a stack of paper and beg[ins] to draw, especially maps of towns" (84). Remarkably, the maps as well as the drawings made by Kraus show the creative engagement of a teenage boy with a time in his life when he was not only subjected to nefarious conditions, but was looking death in the eye. Drawings of maps (at times detailed, at times rudimentary) document his journey from one camp to the next. Other illustrations include sketches of prisoners' sleeves with their number tags, buildings surrounded with barbed wire, SS men with guns, and crematorium chimneys. The illustrations and the corresponding notes convey a similar message: remember, as much as possible, before memory begins to fade. Drawing and writing about the terrible experience, as Kraus does, facilitates a certain coming to terms with a horrible past that will always inform the lives of the victims, but it also serves as an ethical imperative for future generations.

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