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Irma Lauscher and the Terezin Children's Tree

Story inspiration for the Terezin Memorial HS festival 2022–2023

Irma Lauscher's Life Before Terezin

Irma Lauscher (Lauscherova in Czech) was born in the Czech town of Heřmanův Městec in 1904, and moved to Prague with her family as a young teenager. She taught at a Jewish school in Prague until the Nazis closed the school in 1942. Even after the Nazis forbade Jewish children to go to school, Irma continued to teach small groups of children in secret, usually in the apartments of local Jewish families.

A Teacher in Terezin

Irma, her husband Jiří (YEAR-ji) and their daughter Míchaela arrived in Terezin in December 1942, where Irma resumed her work as a teacher. In early 1943, Irma and some other prisoners formed a council of educators, who were determined to provide an education for children in Terezin. Irma began holding secret classes in which she encouraged the children to continue to learn despite the hardship they were experiencing in the camp. Amongst other lessons, she taught the children about Jewish history and traditions. One of these traditions was the holiday of Tu B'Shevat, also known as the "New Year of the Trees".

Irma wondered how she could celebrate a holiday that was meant to be full of hope and happiness, when her students were suffering so noticeably. The prisoners in the camp did not have access to the traditional holiday foods of olives, dates, grapes and figs so she had the children draw pictures of them, yet she was not satisfied. She had another idea. To carry out her daring plan, Irma needed the help of a guard. While many of the Nazi and Czech guards were cruel, she knew a Czech guard who was kind. She took an immense risk, offered him a bribe and asked him to bring the children a tree to plant. He agreed. Because it was illegal to bring anything in or out of the camp he smuggled a small sapling in his boot and safely delivered it to Irma and the children.

Soon after, when no Nazi soldiers were around, Irma and her young students gathered in front of a large building in the center of town to hold the ceremony and plant the tiny sapling. They uttered speeches quickly and quietly and danced around the little cutting singing, "*The Jewish People Live.*" Once planted, the children watered the tree with drops of their own rations. At the end of the ceremony, a rabbi whispered a special blessing over the children.

“Perhaps this tree will testify for us for years. Perhaps for centuries. Perhaps this tree will be here and we will not. God grant that you may soon be planting trees in your own country - your own land. A land of freedom.”

Every day the children gave this little cutting a small amount of their rationed water and watched it grow. Some children wrote poems about the sapling.

*“There were three things the Nazis could not take from us.
They could not take the blue sky above us, for our gazing.
They could not take the flood of sunlight pouring into our courtyard,
nourishing our tree and us.
But most of all, they could not take Our Invisible God
who remained buried deep in our hearts.”*

As days and months passed the children continued to water the tree. The roots took hold and it became stronger and stronger. The children placed a sign at the foot of the sapling that read *“As the branches of this tree, so the branches of our people.”*

Irma’s Lauscher’s Life After the War

Tragically most of the children who planted and cared for the tree were deported and died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Irma, her husband Jiří, and daughter Míchaela all survived the war and returned to Terezin many times over the years in spite of the trauma their whole family endured there. During these trips Irma would visit the tree, which thrived and over time grew into a towering silver maple tree, nearly 60 feet in height.

A teacher to the very end, Irma dedicated the rest of her life to educating young people about Terezin until she passed away in June 1985 at the age of 81.

The Children’s Tree survived until 2003, when it was destroyed by a flood that washed through Terezin. But the tree lives on, for over the years, the tree produced many seeds and saplings which were planted around the world. From these seeds grew new trees that honour the memory of Irma Lauscher, the children from Terezin and their stories.

Text edited from the following source material:

Malone, Tara. “Irma Lauscher and the Terezin Children's Tree.” *Butterflies in the Ghetto*, 28 Apr. 2022, <https://www.butterfliesintheghetto.com/irma-lauscher-terezin/>.

Harris, Dede, and Sara Akerlund. *The Children's Tree of Terezin*. Publications International, 2017.