

ARTICLE

Archival materials from the Terezín Ghetto:
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Abstract

Children's writings from the Terezín Ghetto embody both historical testimony and literary creativity. These texts reveal how young authors documented daily life while imaginatively responding to trauma, preserving voices that resonate as cultural as well as historical records. The main aim of this paper is to highlight the literary creations made by children and adolescents interned in the Terezín Ghetto as both historical records and works of literature. These texts, preserved thanks to the efforts of adults, invite historically situated readings that engage with the ghetto environment while also revealing expressive strategies and imaginative responses to trauma. Through qualitative content analysis combined with attention to literary devices, we examine three texts published in *Vedem*—reproduced in their entirety—and show how they document lived conditions while also shaping meaning through metaphor, imagery, and narrative perspective. The study demonstrates that these writings function as “living archival material,” as they preserve factual traces of ghetto life while simultaneously resisting reduction to mere testimony by asserting aesthetic and cultural value.

Keywords: Terezín Ghetto; Authentic children's creations; Archival material; Content analysis; Reflection; Experience

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1. Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to show that literary texts created by children and adolescents behind the walls of the Terezín concentration camp can be regarded as valuable archival material to explore this historical phase. At the same time, they deserve attention as works of literature, shaped by expressive choices and imaginative strategies rather than serving merely as factual records. These texts can stimulate public interest in the Shoah, especially through the internalization of the emotions and experiences they convey.

The motivation for this study stems from the observation that relatively little research has approached these texts in this dual way. Scholarly reception has often concentrated on their potential for Holocaust¹ education, addressing different age groups, while their literary qualities have remained underexplored. Literature from concentration

¹ Terminological choices, including the synonymous use of Shoah and Holocaust, follow established scholarship.

camps, including the writings of Holocaust survivors, often reflects on experiences of hunger, forced labor, and the psychological toll of camp life.^{1,2} Children's texts from *Vedem* are especially significant in this respect, as they documented lived conditions, gave voice to internal states, and preserved cultural practices under coercion.

In this paper, three texts are analyzed—Zdeněk Ornest's "Just a Little Warmth" (*Trochu tepla*), Jiří Bruml's "Fate" (*Osud*), and the anonymous "Eyes" (*Oči*)—chosen for their thematic breadth. Each piece is reproduced in its entirety below. These works are examined through content analysis, coded for themes such as hunger and cold, status reversal, and moral recognition. In addition, selected literary devices—metaphor, imagery, and narrative perspective—that shape the presentation of these experiences are highlighted. Finally, the findings are situated in relation to ghetto social conditions and to debates on "authenticity" and interpretation in archival studies.

In this article, the terms "Shoah" and "Holocaust" are used synonymously, following contemporary usage in Holocaust studies.²

2. Methodology

The source material for our analysis is the digitized version of the *Vedem* magazine, which is freely accessible online. This clandestinely published journal from the Terezín Ghetto contains numerous literary and artistic works that reflect the lived experiences and emotional states of those subjected to internment in the concentration camp. These texts are not only historically significant documents but also creative expressions that reveal how young authors

responded to their circumstances through narrative and poetic form.

2.1. Definition of key terms

Archival materials are records that document conditions, practices, and experiences, even when conveyed in literary or artistic form. Authenticity is understood not as a guarantee of factual accuracy, but as provenance and direct connection to the original source. In presenting translations, original spelling and punctuation are preserved where possible, with only minor normalization for readability.

Terms such as *Muselmann*³ and *Ghettowachmann*⁴ are italicized at their first occurrence and defined for clarity.

The main limitation is that these texts were shaped both by their literary character and by subsequent editorial processes of preservation, translation, and digitization, which inevitably influence how they are accessed and interpreted today.

2.2. About the *Vedem* journal

The journal *Vedem*, produced clandestinely in the Terezín Ghetto, represents a significant cultural and literary document of the Holocaust era. It reflects the unique environment and experiences of its young creators. Terezín, established by the Nazis as a ghetto, served multiple roles, including that of a propaganda tool designed to mislead international observers about the true nature of Nazi atrocities. Despite the harsh conditions, the ghetto became a hub of cultural activity: prisoners attended lectures, concerts, and theatrical performances, which were officially tolerated but functioned as acts of spiritual resistance. Within this vibrant but precarious cultural life, the production of *Vedem* enabled the prisoners—especially the youth—to maintain a sense of identity and dignity in the face of dehumanization.⁵

According to Bokser and Waldman,⁶ the journal, like other forms of artistic and literary expression in the ghetto,

² Shoah, a Hebrew term meaning "catastrophe," is often preferred for its specificity in describing the genocide of the Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during World War II, while Holocaust has broader international usage and can encompass other victim groups. For further nuance, see relevant historiographical discussions. Artistic monuments are multifaceted structures that serve as tangible representations of historical events, ideologies, and collective memories, often blending architecture and sculpture to convey significant cultural narratives. They are erected to honor individuals or events deemed important by a community, whether local or global, and can embody triumphant or catastrophic themes³. Bellentani and Panico⁴ underline that monuments also play a crucial role in the articulation of national politics of memory and identity, often promoting selective historical narratives that align with the agendas of political elites. They further conclude that literary texts, understood in this expanded sense, are complex entities that encapsulate the interplay of material, symbolic, and political dimensions, contributing to the ongoing dialogue between past and present.

³ Muselmann was a term used by concentration camp inmates to describe prisoners in an advanced state of physical debilitation and emaciation, often on the brink of death. The expression's origin remains debated, but it is generally interpreted as camp slang reflecting extreme exhaustion and hopelessness. The term is italicized in this article and defined at first use.

⁴ Ghettowachmann (German: "ghetto guard") refers to an armed guard in Jewish ghettos, typically operating under *Schutzstaffel* (German for "protection squadron") command or in collaboration with German police forces. The term is italicized at first use and retains its original German spelling to preserve historical specificity.

bore witness to the resilience and creativity of Jewish prisoners, who used these outlets both to document their experiences and to preserve cultural memory. Peschel and Sikes⁷ emphasize that *Vedem* was specifically a creation of the youth, providing them with a space to express their thoughts, hopes, and critiques of their circumstances. Peschel⁵ further underlines that such cultural production was not only an act of resistance but also a mechanism of psychological survival, allowing individuals to construct coherent narratives of their experiences and to sustain ties with their community and the world beyond the ghetto walls.

The creation of *Vedem* thus played a crucial role in preserving cultural identity among the prisoners by offering a platform for intellectual and artistic expression amidst oppressive conditions. This journal was part of a broader spectrum of cultural resistance in Terezín—through theatre, music, and literature—that allowed inmates to maintain continuity of identity and community.⁸ Rosentzweig⁹ stresses that *Vedem* functioned as a cultural magazine, sustaining national and cultural identity by documenting experiences, reflections, and creative works. This corresponds to the general role of cultural magazines in preserving collective identity, even in periods of persecution and suppression. Blokhin *et al.*¹⁰ add that *Vedem* should be understood not merely as a record but as a vital cultural medium that fostered resilience and cultural continuity under dehumanizing conditions.

The creative texts published in *Vedem*—produced by adolescents confined in Terezín—serve as profound reflections of cultural identity, encapsulating resilience, heritage, and the socio-political context of imprisonment. As a clandestine publication, it allowed young inmates to assert their cultural presence and resist dehumanization. This function corresponds to wider understandings of cultural expression in confinement, for example, the artistic activities of Italian prisoners of war in the United States during World War II, which mediated personal and community identity.¹¹ Similarly, Cheliotis¹² highlights how the arts in prison settings provided platforms for resistance and empowerment, enabling individuals to articulate cultural narratives despite oppression. Tello¹³ notes that *Vedem* offered both a semblance of normalcy and a form of resistance against cultural erasure, akin to the role of objects and memories in concentration camps as frameworks of social memory. Einat and Einat¹⁴ suggest that the creative texts in the journal may also be seen as a form of subcultural communication, comparable to inmate argot in Israeli prisons, which expresses the values and norms of a prison subculture.

The literary and artistic content of *Vedem* thus asserted prisoners' resilience and heritage by providing a medium

for emotional expression, cultural preservation, and psychological resistance. Studies across diverse prison contexts confirm that artistic and literary practices offer crucial means of maintaining humanity and well-being, enabling inmates to sustain identity and dignity in dehumanizing circumstances.¹⁵ In this sense, *Vedem* functioned as a cultural chronicle that documented lived experiences while preserving cultural identity and nurturing solidarity among prisoners.¹⁶ Ducellier¹⁷ situates this role in a broader historical pattern in which prisoners challenge subjugation and reconnect with lost freedoms through creative expression.

2.3. Qualitative content analysis of literary texts

This study examined texts from the underground magazine *Vedem*, produced by adolescent boys in the Terezín Ghetto between 1942 and 1944. These writings were approached not only as archival records—documents that reflect lived conditions, internal states, and cultural practices under coercion—but also as literary works shaped by expressive strategies.

2.3.1. Corpus transparency

The corpus comprises 95 digitized items from *Vedem*, accessed through the online repository of the Jewish Museum in Prague (<https://www.holocaust.cz/vedem>¹⁸ stable repository IDs: VDM-ARCH-001–095). Texts were reviewed in their original Czech, with translations prepared by the author unless otherwise noted. Where possible, original diacritics and orthography were preserved, with only minor normalization for readability. The choice to work with digitized surrogates reflects both ethical and practical considerations in preserving fragile originals.^{11,12}

2.3.2. Selection criteria

From this corpus, three texts were chosen for in-depth analysis: Zdeněk Ornest's *Just a Little Warmth* (*Trochu tepla*, *Vedem* no. 42¹⁸), Jiří Bruml's *Fate* (*Osud*, *Vedem* no. 15¹⁸), Anonymous, *Eyes* (*Oči*, *Vedem* no. 77¹⁸). The selection was guided by three factors: (i) thematic breadth—representing hunger/cold, status reversal, and moral recognition, (ii) variation in authorship—two named authors and one anonymous piece, and (iii) representative motifs—alignment with recurring themes in the broader *Vedem* corpus.^{6,19}

2.3.3. Coding frame

A qualitative content analysis was employed^{20–22} to identify thematic categories across the three selected texts. The coding was inductive, refined through iterative reading, and supported by lexical markers and narrative structures. The three main thematic codes were:

- (i) Hunger/cold: lexically marked by terms such as “freezing,” “hunger,” and “warmth,” evoking both physical deprivation and longing for relief. For instance, in Ornest’s poem, the speaker confesses: “I envy you friends just a little warmth... I am consumed with a great hunger”
- (ii) Status reversal: narrative structures depicting loss of property and emergent dependencies, often revealing moral ambiguity in survival strategies. In Bruml’s prose, a moment of reprieve granted by a *Ghettowachmann* contrasts with the guard’s remembered cruelty
- (iii) Moral recognition: encounters involving recognition, forgiveness, or ethical turning points, often situated in caregiving contexts. In the anonymous “Eyes,” the patient’s “peace and forgiveness” functions as an ethical recognition scene akin to carceral literature.¹⁵

Each theme was anchored in textual evidence and contextualized through secondary sources,²³⁻²⁵ allowing triangulation with historical records of ghetto conditions. Where appropriate, the literary techniques—metaphor, imagery, and shifts in narrative perspective—that shape how these experiences are conveyed are noted.

3. Results and discussion

The literary texts created by children and adolescents in the Terezín Ghetto can be regarded as original and credible archival materials. They provide not only a source for studying this historical phase, but also insight into the psychological states, moral transformations, and cultural expressions of those interned. In this section, three representative texts from *Vedem* are analyzed, showing how they function simultaneously as archival records of deprivation and as literary works that deploy imagery, narrative perspective, and symbolic language. All texts cited here are available in the digitized corpus of the Jewish Museum in Prague.

3.1. “Just a Little Warmth”

The poem “Just a Little Warmth” by Zdeněk Ornest condenses into verse the sensory and existential realities of hunger and cold in Terezín. The closing lines—“and I want to bury myself and sleep and sleep”—signal both the physiological lethargy of starvation and the metaphorical withdrawal from life.

I envy you friends, just a little warmth,
as I crawl out of bed almost freezing,
when I can’t feel anything else
and in the fog of beautiful dreams, I’m completely
cocooned.
I don’t even want to wash in the cold
I’m slowly drowning, not in shame, in dirt.

Oh, dear warmth, so dearly bought,
How I’d like to warm myself on your lap.
When I wake up from everything
and find it hard to admit that I am consumed with
a great hunger,
all my hopes are sorely forgotten.
...and I want to bury myself and sleep and sleep.⁵

The poem is anchored in elemental imagery—warmth, hunger, and cold—which Hayes²³ identifies as part of the “elemental lexicon” of the Holocaust testimony. These images function both literally, as descriptions of bodily deprivation, and symbolically, as markers of inequality in the survival economy of the camp. The narrator’s envy of “a little warmth” illustrates not only a longing for comfort but also recognition of unequal access to scarce resources.

From a literary perspective, Ornest uses repetition (“sleep and sleep”) and antithesis (warmth/cold, hunger/satiation) to convey both the physical and psychological toll of deprivation. From a content-analytical perspective, the poem exemplifies the thematic code hunger/cold. It thus documents lived conditions, while at the same time preserving a cultural and emotional response to them.

3.2. “Fate”

Jiří Bruml’s short story “Fate” juxtaposes the remembered world of pre-war privilege with the radically altered moral and material order of the ghetto. The protagonist, Mr. Kohn, a wealthy factory owner, becomes a starving inmate who steals potatoes, only to be caught by a *Ghettowachmann*. The guard’s unexpected act of mercy—“You may go—” destabilizes the clear-cut categories of victim and perpetrator.

A massive shoe factory looms on the outskirts of a large Czech city. Every day, tens of thousands of products are exported all over the world, and all the profits go into the pockets of the multi-millionaire Mr. Kohn. One day, he was working in his office when there was a knock on the door. A young man entered at his prompting. Although he was dressed in his best clothes, he was poor. “What do you want?” said the millionaire. “Would you be so kind as to admit me to your workshops? I am...” “Nothing, I don’t need anyone. Get out of here.” “Please, at least your confidant.” He couldn’t say more because the factory worker pushed him out the door and slammed it behind him. About a quarter of an hour later, the phone on the factory table rang. Mr. Kohn grabbed the receiver. He listened for a moment and then answered: “Yes, with pleasure, there will certainly be a place for your nephew, Mr. Engineer.

⁵ See <http://vedem-terezin.cz/>.¹⁸

You know what I wouldn't do for a good friend. Let him come to me. Yes... Goodbye." He hung up the receiver and sat down. It's been a long time. Bad times have come. Especially for the Jews. Jews lost their property and were sent to ghettos. That's what happened to Kohn, the factory owner. Lost in the whirlwind of the ghetto, he had to toil like everyone else. Neither money nor the friends he relied on helped him. Accustomed to sumptuous meals at home, he couldn't get enough of the Terezín food. For a long time, he suffered from hunger, until finally he did something that he, a millionaire, would never have dreamed of. One day, he returned from a walk with his pockets filled with potatoes. The hunt was successful, and the next day he set out again in search of his prey. He was standing by the pile of potatoes when a voice behind him said, "Slow down, sir, what are you doing here?" He jerked, turned round in alarm, and muttered something. Behind him was a young man in a *Ghettowachmann* uniform. "Oh, Mr. Factory Man, has a respectable millionaire and factory owner gone so far as to steal potatoes here? Do you know what you'll get or that? But I'll treat you differently than you treat me. You may go."⁶

Bruml's short prose narrative "Fate" juxtaposes the remembered world of pre-war Jewish affluence with the radically altered moral and material landscape of the ghetto. As Wünschmann²⁸ observes, the transition from pre-war marginalization to wartime incarceration brought about a complete reordering of social roles and survival strategies. In Bruml's story, the factory owner Mr. Kohn moves from a position of economic dominance to a state of acute dependence, where his survival hinges on the whim of a *Ghettowachmann*. The guard's terse words, "You may go," function simultaneously as reprieve and reminder of absolute subjugation.

Štefan²⁹ underlines that the suffering in ghettos was intensified by toxic food, overcrowding, and inhumane conditions, all of which destabilized pre-war identities. Individuals once defined by wealth, education, or civic status found themselves surviving through barter, theft, or desperate appeals. Brenner¹⁹ further notes that survivors' later testimonies reveal how pre-war cultural frameworks shaped not only their coping strategies but also the moral vocabulary through which these experiences were recounted.

From a literary perspective, "Fate" employs irony and reversal as structuring devices. The same Mr. Kohn who once dismissed the plea of a desperate jobseeker now pleads, silently, for food and leniency. The unexpected leniency of the guard complicates the rigid victim—perpetrator

binary: the figure of authority who enforces deprivation is also capable, momentarily, of granting mercy. This reversal captures the instability of moral hierarchies in the ghetto, where power relations could shift unpredictably.

Narratively, Bruml's understated style—the absence of overt moral commentary, the use of plain reportage—forces the reader into a space of interpretive engagement. The text refrains from telling us how to judge Kohn or the guard; instead, it stages an encounter whose ethical ambiguity resists simplification. In doing so, it exemplifies the thematic code status reversal, a motif recurrent in *Vedem*, where previous hierarchies collapse and new, unstable ones emerge.

Viewed through the lens of content analysis, "Fate" functions not only as a document of deprivation but also as a literary record of the fractured moral economy of ghetto life. This aligns with findings that testimonies from Theresienstadt repeatedly highlight the precarious moral choices linked to food acquisition and survival.²⁶ Its narrative strategies preserve the psychological and ethical textures of survival, demonstrating that the writings in *Vedem* are archival material in a double sense, as they register external conditions and record the interpretive, value-laden negotiations of their young authors.

3.3. "Eyes"

The anonymous prose text "Eyes" presents a narrative of moral recognition and forgiveness.

A big city full of bustling life, large squares, mysterious streets, and wide avenues. It's said to be the most beautiful city in the world—Rio de Janeiro. I walked down one of the narrow and tucked-away streets of the suburbs—everywhere I looked, there were scruffy, ragged children, deprivation, and misery. From the squalid dwellings came the wailing and moaning of the sick. A true picture of the worst misery. Suddenly, a man came up to me, a man, a mere wreck of a man, with some rags hanging from him to replace his clothes—a beggar. He held out his hands and stammered something. Full of disgust and contempt, I pushed him away. He staggered and fell to the hard pavement. I walked on. It seemed so ridiculous and unnatural that such a scabby beggar should dare to address me, a distinguished official. The whole difference in our lives appeared before my eyes. He, a beggar, and I, a rich man by his standards. A few days later, a doctor came to us from the ministry with a recommendation from the government. He wished to see several hospitals and their facilities. I was to accompany him to the hospital, the place where people are born and where they die. We went in. The doctor had a look at the whole facility, and we were about to leave. Suddenly, my eyes fell on one of the beds. On it

⁶ See <http://vedem-terezin.cz/>.¹⁸

lay the one, the unknown beggar, whom I had knocked into the mud and dust of the street a few days before. I stepped closer. Something flashed in his eyes like a ray of recognition, and he moved weakly several times. As the doctor, who was walking with us, told me afterwards, he died immediately afterwards, but there was so much peace and forgiveness in his eyes that I sank to my knees before this mangy beggar—I, a high official.⁷

The short prose text “Eyes” illustrates a profound shift in the narrator’s axiological system—the hierarchy of personal and collective values—under the extreme conditions of war and imprisonment. Hauber *et al.*²³ show that World War II repeatedly disrupted value systems, as forced displacement, existential crises, and exposure to daily violence reshaped notions of morality, justice, and human worth. The narrative’s central encounter, set in a hospital ward, stages a moment of unexpected recognition and forgiveness, crystallized in the description of “so much peace and forgiveness in his eyes.” This brief but intense scene demonstrates how trauma can reorder priorities, foregrounding ethical connection over survivalist self-interest.

Kuwert *et al.*³⁰ highlight that the long-term psychological effects of wartime displacement often include diminished life satisfaction and resilience, particularly for children and adolescents. In “Eyes,” the narrator’s capacity to register and internalize an act of moral recognition amid deprivation suggests a reconstitution of values in real time, under duress. Shormanbayeva *et al.*³¹ similarly argue that war forces a revaluation of societal norms, generating identity crises and new moral hierarchies—a dynamic that surfaces here in the oscillation between shame, empathy, and self-redefinition.

The hospital exchange also resonates with the weight of collective memory, which Bowie³² identifies as central to how societies and individuals process wartime trauma. The imagined setting of Rio de Janeiro functions as a rhetorical displacement: it situates the encounter in an “elsewhere” that both cushions and intensifies the shame of the narrator’s earlier indifference. Such rhetorical and transnational displacements recall other literary engagements with Holocaust memory, for example studies of Judeo-Rioplatense novels that intertwine Holocaust remembrance with the memory of political repression in Latin America.²⁷ This spatial relocation can be read as a coping strategy, a way of narrating moral failure and belated recognition from a safe symbolic distance.

From the perspective of thematic coding, “Eyes” exemplifies the category of moral recognition. This theme

encompasses instances in which characters perceive or confer dignity in circumstances where systemic violence seeks to strip it away. The gaze described with “peace” and “forgiveness” becomes both a record of lived experience and a fragment of ethical life preserved under coercion. Such moments document the reconfiguration of values under extreme conditions and serve as archival traces of wartime moral economies, where recognition and reconciliation could coexist with deprivation and systemic cruelty.

By reading “Eyes” in this way, the article underscores its central claim that the *Vedem* texts are “living archival material,” as they capture not only the historical circumstances of the Terezín Ghetto but also the psychological and ethical transformations brought about by war.

4. Conclusion

Our readings demonstrate how the children’s texts in *Vedem* operate simultaneously as documentary, affective, and cultural records—indexing bodily deprivation, moral ambiguity within coerced economies, and moments of ethical recognition. The analysis highlighted the interconnection between these literary records and documented historiographical facts, underscoring their value as “living archival material,” as they not only document lived conditions but also preserve the inner worlds and aesthetic strategies of their young authors. These writings thus offer a rare insight into the daily realities, emotional landscapes, and cultural practices of children and adolescents in the Terezín Ghetto, while also functioning as literary artifacts that resist reduction to mere historical evidence.

Nevertheless, the study has several limitations. First, the corpus was restricted to three selected texts which, although thematically diverse, cannot fully represent the breadth and stylistic range of *Vedem*’s production. Second, reliance on translated and digitized versions—while necessary for accessibility—may introduce subtle shifts in meaning due to editorial mediation. Third, the interpretive coding reflects the researcher’s own analytical framework, which would benefit from comparison with alternative readings, including more explicitly literary or hermeneutical approaches.

Future research should address these limitations by expanding the corpus to encompass a wider range of *Vedem* texts and by cross-referencing literary motifs with contemporaneous material records such as ration lists, work assignments, and mortality data. Comparative studies with other ghetto publications could further illuminate both shared and divergent thematic and stylistic patterns.

⁷ See <http://vedem-terezin.cz/>.¹⁸

Finally, interdisciplinary collaboration between historians, literary scholars, and archivists would not only refine the methodological approach but also enhance preservation strategies for these fragile yet invaluable cultural records.

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