

# Basic element of the Room 28 Educational Project

## III. The Diary of Helga Pollak

### German edition

*Mein Theresienstädter Tagebuch 1943-1944  
und die Aufzeichnungen meines Vaters Otto Pollak  
My Theresienstadt Diary 1943-1944  
and the notes of my father Otto Pollak*

Edition Room 28, Berlin 2014

ISBN: 978-3-00-043804-2

Ebook: 978-3-00-04890-6



## Important information about Helga's Diary

The lasting echo of Helga Pollak's Theresienstadt diary is closely linked to the book *Die Mädchen von Zimmer 28*, published in German in 2004 and in English as *The Girls of Room 28* in 2009. Without Helga's diary – the heart and thread of the story – this documentary narrative could not have been written. Since then, Helga's diary has often been described as being as important as the diary of Anne Frank. When, in 2014, the unabridged diary was published by *Edition Room 28*, Peter Gstettner wrote in the afterword: *The story of young Helga Pollak is a model case of remembrance and commemoration of the fate of European Jewish children. Her autobiographical notes are comparable to the Diary of Anne Frank.*

It is absolutely necessary in this context to draw attention to the existence of a book by Helga Weiss, which was published in 2013 by Penguin Books with the title *Helga's Diary* and has meanwhile been translated into numerous languages.<sup>1</sup> Since then Helga Pollak's diary has, again and again, been confused with Helga Weiss's diary. This already happened a year before in Madeleine Albright's autobiography, *Prague Winter*, published in 2012.<sup>2</sup> In a chapter of this basically excellent book she describes, for special reasons, everyday life in Girls' Home L 410 by making reference to the book *The Girls of Room 28* and quoting from it. Unfortunately, she attributes two quotes to Helga Weiss instead to Helga Pollak-Kinsky, who is not mentioned at all. Thus, Albright's description gives the impression that the book *The Girls of Room 28* is based on Helga Weiss's diary.<sup>3</sup>

One statement quoted by Albright at length can be found in chapter 6.5 of the present *Compendium*, in the section about Friedl Dicker Brandeis. To attribute these words by "our Helga" to Helga Weiss is – as everyone who knows the subject would see – a



*Publishers for an English  
edition and other foreign  
language editions of  
Helga Pollak-Kinsky's  
Theresienstadt diary are  
welcome.*

page 104

major mistake. Helga Weiss would never have said this. She did not paint in the spirit of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, in the contrary. Actually this is an issue worth creating a worksheet about, and I am sure this will be done soon as part of our educational project.

The errors remained uncorrected and have been reproduced in the German edition of *Prague Winter (Winter in Prag)*<sup>4</sup>, and, I am sure, in all other foreign language editions too.

Albright's autobiography is only the most prominent example of the fact that the two diaries are often mixed up. Therefore, to avoid any further confusion and prevent further harm, it is necessary to point out this error very clearly.

Helga Weiss belongs to the circle of friends of the "Girls of Room 28". I have known her as long as I have known Helga Pollak-Kinsky and Anna Hanusová. I have great esteem for her and her artistic work. Helga Weiss became known for her Theresienstadt drawings and for the exhibition *Draw what you see*. In the Theresienstadt Ghetto, she lived in Room 24 of Girls' Home L 410 and also kept a diary.

And yet, what Penguin Books has published under the title *Helga's Diary* is not an authentic "diary". As already clear from the first lines of the "translator's notes", it is not an original.<sup>5</sup> The subtitle comes closer to reality: *A Young Girl's Account of Life in a Concentration Camp*. But even this wording is misleading. Strictly speaking, the book is based on a number of extant original diary entries reworked by the author after the war and on memories written down years later in the form of diary entries. Or, in other words: the book offers an authentic personal report written in the genre of a diary. But it is not an authentic diary like Helga Pollak's.



Bookstore Livraria Cultura in São Paulo, May 2014.  
*As Meninas do Quarto 28* by Hannelore Brenner (middle) and *O Diário de Helga* by Helga Weiss (right)

The German edition – probably the only exception – has a more neutral title: *Und doch ein ganzes Leben. Ein Mädchen, das Auschwitz überlebt hat*. (And yet a whole life. A girl who survived Auschwitz.)<sup>6</sup> All other foreign-language editions are entitled "Helga's Diary". In Brazil: *O Diário de Helga*.

How important it is to distinguish these two "Helgas" also became eminently obvious in 2016, when Brazil's largest magazine *Veja* conducted a telephone interview with Helga Pollak-Kinsky, devoting an entire page to her but with a photo of Helga Weiss taking up a third of a page above the text. A correction in the next edition in form of a mini marginal note could not make up for the error.<sup>7</sup>

In spring 2016, the Brazilian translator of the book *The Girls of Room 28*, Renate Müller – to whom I am very grateful for her careful translation of the book and of the exhibition – discovered the following essay online: *Lembrar para esquecer: diários e memórias do Holocausto./ Remembering in order to forget. Diaries and memories of*

*the Holocaust*.<sup>8</sup> The authors are Priscilla Ferreira Perazzo, professor at Universidade Municipal de São Caetano do Sul, and Barbara Heller, professor at Universidade Paulista in São Paulo. Their reflections focus on *O Diário de Helga* by Helga Weiss and *As Meninas do Quarto 28* by Hannelore Brenner. Their comparison and critical analysis of these two publications marked the beginning of an exciting German-Brazilian dialogue on the subject of history, memory and communication. Today, Barbara Heller and Priscila F. Perazzo are among the “Room 28 Bridge Builders”.

page 117

To make a long story short: It is the authentic diary of young Helga Pollak from Vienna, that is the central document of the *Room 28 Projects* and the *Room 28 Educational Project*. And Helga Pollak-Kinsky is the project’s strongest ally. She is 87 years old and lives in Vienna.

After the publication of Helga Pollak’s diary in 2014, Austrian writer Erich Hackl wrote: *My dream would be that “Mein Theresienstädter Tagebuch” would be read more than Anne Frank’s diary. It would have all the prerequisites for this.*

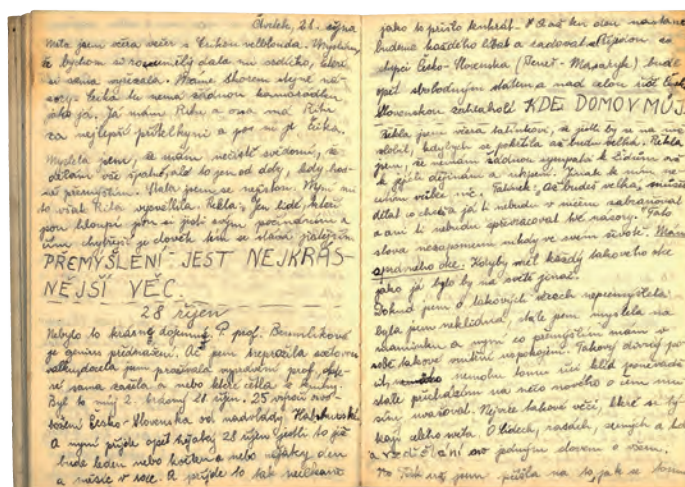
Certainly, the diaries of Anne Frank and Helga Pollak are both important historical and personal documents. And a comparison – especially in the context of this project – is certainly worthwhile. A first step in this direction has been taken. It is not a question of playing one document against the other – on the contrary. Both diaries and both stories are, in the words of Peter Gstettner, *a model case of remembrance and commemoration of the fate of European Jewish children.*

pages 87–88

## Also important to know: The diary of Helga Pollak is written in Czech

Pages from the diary of Helga Pollak:  
28 October 1943  
(...) THINKING IS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THING

On 3 July 1938, when Helga was eight years old, her parents sent her for protection to stay with her father’s relatives in the South Moravian town of Kyjov in Czechoslovakia. This is when she started to learn Czech. When she arrived in Theresienstadt in January 1943, she was assigned to the Girls’ Home L 410, which was for Czech girls. She hardly ever mentioned that she originally came from Vienna. She spoke and wrote mostly Czech, and she wrote her diary in Czech. Ultimately this was also a form of protection against the Germans: German was the official language of the Ghetto, the language of the enemy.



- 1 *Helga's Diary*, Penguin Books, London 2013. Translated by Neil Bermel.
- 2 Madeleine Albright, *Prague Winter. A personal Story of Remembrance and War, 1937–1948*. © 2012, Madeleine Albright, with Bill Woodward. HarperCollins Publishers, New York
- 3 *Ibid*, pages 250–251 from the chapter “Terezin”
- 4 Madeleine Albright, *Winter in Prag*, Siedler Verlag 2013
- 5 Helga Weiss, *Helga's Diary*. Penguin Books, London 2013. The following quotes are from the “Translator’s note”, page ix-xvi: “Helga’s surviving manuscripts consist of two stapled school notebooks and a stack of paper that she used once the notebooks ran out. Over the years she worked on them several times, writing over and into her original scripts in pencil and making several revised versions of them, one an early typescript that survives as well. (...) This editing has been retained at Helga’s express wishes, so what readers have in front of them is the post-war version, rather than the text of the original notebooks.”
- 6 The German edition was published in 2013 by Bastei Lübbe.
- 7 This marginal note appeared in the following issue of *Veja*: “CORREÇÃO: a foto que ilustra a reportagem “Pintando, eu era livre” (4 de maio), não é da entrevistada Helga Pollak-Kinsky, sobrevivente do campo de concentração de Terezin, na antiga Checoslováquia, e sim de uma outra senhora que também conseguiu escapar do horror nazista. Helga Pollak-Kinsky aparece na imagem a lado.”/ “Correction: The photo printed with the article “When I painted, I felt free” (4 May) is not a photo of interviewee Helga Pollak-Kinsky, survivor of Terezin concentration camp in the former Czechoslovakia, but of another woman who survived the Nazi terror. The photo of Helga Pollak-Kinsky is shown on the left.”
- 8 HELLER, Barbara; PERAZZO, Priscila. Lembrar para esquecer: diários e memórias do Holocausto. *Contracampo*, Niterói, v. 35, no. 1, 2016, p. 106-124.

More information on the websites:

[www.room28projects.com/compendium-2017/](http://www.room28projects.com/compendium-2017/)  
[www.room28projects.com](http://www.room28projects.com)  
[www.edition-room28.de](http://www.edition-room28.de)  
[www.room28education.net/helgas-tagebuch/important-information/](http://www.room28education.net/helgas-tagebuch/important-information/)