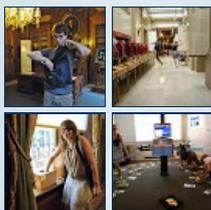
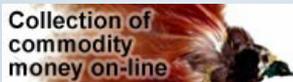


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- Teachers' Room
- Activities
- Booking
- Collections
- Catalogue
- Premises
- Media Gallery
- Games

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['Nocturnes' Africa America annual report architecture art Athens banknotes Belgian franc Belgium China coins](#)

[Home](#) » [News](#) » [Theresienstadt: notes as a disguise of sheer misery](#)

Theresienstadt: notes as a disguise of sheer misery

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By the end of the Second World War the Allied Forces gradually liberated all concentration camps. Joy and gratitude coincided with a growing awareness of the havoc and devastation caused by the war. Amongst others: the genocide of the Jewish people. In proportion to the number of Jews who entered the camps, only few witnesses left the death camps alive. However, those survivors helped to open the eyes of the outside world on the Nazi horrors. Material evidence from the camps is preserved and studied to support their testimonies. Likewise the note of 100 kronen issued in Theresienstadt as well as many other series of tokens and notes from labour camps, concentration camps and ghettos.



Note of 100 kronen, obverse

Tokens and notes in the camps

Even though one knows normal trade and business activities were not possible in concentration camps, it was not uncommon to see local notes and tokens. Different denominations circulated within the camps and ghettos. As soon as deportees arrived they had to exchange all their money, bonds and shares into "local currency". This measure was part of the security system which had to assure that inmates remained within the boundaries. And it is quite clear that without generally accepted money fleeing the camp became much more difficult. However, these tokens and notes also circulated as money within the camps. They were used to pay some workers and they could be used to buy certain goods. After all, it should not be forgotten though that working conditions, salaries and prices were not at all advantageous for the inmates.



Note of 100 kronen, reverse

If one rather prefers the term token instead of note, this is because these pieces of paper are generally of poor manufacture. The notes of Theresienstadt however are the proverbial exception to this rule. In this camp North of Prague and in the old stronghold of Terezin, the note design was well taken care of. There were notes of 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100 kronen, the krone being the currency of Czechoslovakia. All those different values had the same design, they only differed in size and colour. Their design refers to Judaism: the Star of David and Moses carrying the Tables of Law with the Ten Commandments.

The special attention given to the notes matched the general attitude in Theresienstadt where appearances were extremely important. For that matter Theresienstadt is often labelled "model camp". But this model camp was nothing more than a means of propaganda, a façade to cover up Nazi horrors.

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[literature](#) [Magritte](#) [Malta](#)

[merchandise](#) [money](#)

[museum](#)

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[Rome](#) [Second World War](#)

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A façade to hide the horror

While the Nazis organized the “Endlösung” or final solution they also became aware that people outside the camps might wonder where certain Jews had gone to. And indeed, how did they have to pass the message that elderly people or disabled veterans were put to work? How to explain the disappearance of well-known Jewish artists and intellectuals? In order to prevent a fostering of the outside world’s curiosity they decided to develop a special camp in Theresienstadt. The first inmates in this town with classic features consisted of “special categories”, such as decorated World War I veterans and invalids, prominent artists and scientists, Jews over 65 years of age and others who had paid to be admitted in hopes of better treatment than in the other camps.

On the surface the Theresienstadt ghetto would appear to be an attractive town in which daily life went on normally for the residents. It was the model camp that was shown to the press and the Red Cross as “proof” of the humane treatment of the Jews when any discussion arose regarding the fate of the Jews under Nazi control.

In their efforts to uphold a human face and to hide the horrors of their regime, the Nazis created a normal, even attractive, fake town in which daily life went on normally. They even made a film there for Nazi propaganda purposes. The existence of pubs, schools, Jewish theater, sport events, shops, banks and an ordered monetary system were all part of an effort to woo world opinion. The ghetto’s “official” governing body was the Council of Jewish Elders, inmates who administered internal affairs. The first Chief Elder, Jakob Edelstein, signed the notes.

The notes were minutely designed by one of the ghetto’s inmates, the young artist Petr Kien. His original design of Moses’ portrait was approved by the Council of Jewish Elders and the camp commandant but not by Adolf Eichmann, head of the Gestapo Department for Jewish Affairs. He considered Moses too Aryan in appearance and ordered that he should be portrayed with a prominent hooked nose and curly hair.

The notes were only one element which helped to bolster the ruse of normality within Theresienstadt. They had no real economic value but could be used to pay certain taxes, amongst others those on packages entering the camps (above the taxes already paid by the sender). Camp shops were only shop windows and, bitter irony, those windows were mostly filled with objects seized from the Jews at their arrival in the ghettos. Camp notes however did not replace the special coupons which were used to purchase these goods or a coffee in the local coffee house.

Life in the ghetto had little in common with the note’s lavish design. Almost all inmates perished or were transported to Auschwitz. More than 140.000 Jews have been transported to Theresienstadt. At the time of its liberation on May 8, 1945 only a little more than 17,000 starving and terrorized inmates were found. These notes had hardly any value for them but for us, on the contrary, they are a tool to help to understand a particularly dark period of our history. A note is always a witness of its period.

Estelle Piraux
Museum guide

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