



Presents

## Defiant Requiem

A Documentary Film Honoring the Prisoners of Terezín

During the oppressive days of World War II in 1942, the Nazis established a unique ghetto/concentration camp outside Prague in an old army garrison known as Terezín, which the Germans renamed Theresienstadt. Theresienstadt was unlike any other Nazi concentration camp: the Nazis used the site to perpetuate an elaborate scheme to deceive the world into believing that they were treating prisoners humanely. In fact, Jews and other “enemies” of the Nazis were rounded up throughout central Europe and sent to Terezín, which served as a brutal camp where thousands died of malnutrition and disease. If you were lucky enough to survive Terezín, your ultimate destination was Auschwitz.

***Defiant Requiem*** is a feature-length documentary film which illuminates the extraordinary, untold story of the brave acts of resistance by the Jewish prisoners at Terezín.

Terezín was a prison to thousands of scholars, performers, musicians, actors, writers and philosophers from Central Europe. Overwhelmingly Jewish, these prisoners turned to the arts and humanities as both balm and sword. They performed, created, taught, lectured and composed not merely as entertainment, but as necessity and nourishment, as critical to staying alive as eating and drinking. There were more than 2300 lectures on every conceivable subject offered by 530 prisoners, as well as theatrical performances, literary readings, artwork, nearly 1,000 concerts of chamber music, opera, cabaret, oratorio, and even concerts by the jazz band, *The Ghetto Swingers*.

***Defiant Requiem*** highlights the most dramatic example of intellectual and artistic courage: the remarkable story of Rafael Schächter, a brilliant young and passionate Czech opera-choral conductor who was arrested and sent to Terezín in 1941. He demonstrated moral leadership under the most brutal circumstance, determined to sustain courage and hope for his fellow prisoners by enriching their souls through great music. His most extraordinary act was to recruit 150 prisoners and teach them the Verdi Requiem in a dank cellar using a smuggled score, over multiple rehearsals, after grueling days of forced labor. The Requiem was performed on sixteen occasions for fellow prisoners. The last, most infamous performance occurred on June 23, 1944. With only sixty prisoner-singers remaining following massive deportations, Schächter was ordered by the Nazi camp commander to perform the Requiem

before high-ranking SS officers from Berlin and the International Red Cross to support the myth that the prisoners were well treated and flourishing.

This unique film explores, with testimony provided by surviving members of Schächter's choir, the singers' view of the Verdi music as a work of defiance and resistance to the Nazis. The text of the Requiem Mass enabled them, as Schächter told the chorus, to "sing to the Nazis what they could not say to them." These lessons have contemporary meaning for those living under oppression today by illustrating how the human spirit can triumph over brutality.

The story of Terezín travels far beyond the general perception of a Nazi concentration camp. This is a film about how a rare form of courage, hope, and survival sparked an entirely unique method of fighting Nazi oppression, enabling the prisoners to maintain their dignity and humanity while battling the worst of mankind with the best of mankind. The Nazi legacy of brutality is well established, but the Terezín legacy is virtually unknown and is told dramatically in *Defiant Requiem*.

The Defiant Requiem Foundation collaborated with Partisan Pictures in New York City to produce *Defiant Requiem*. Conceived by Murry Sidlin, a distinguished conductor, educator and artistic innovator, *Defiant Requiem* was directed by executive producer Peter Schnall, the founder of Partisan Pictures. Mr. Schnall is a six-time Emmy Award winning film-maker who specializes in creating high quality films and non-fiction programming. Ambassador Stuart E. Eizenstat, who has devoted much of his career in public service to providing justice for Holocaust survivors, and his wife Fran Eizenstat, serve as key supporters and advisors to the film. *Defiant Requiem* is scheduled to air nationwide on PBS in the spring of 2013. The film was also selected by the film festival DocuWeeks as only one of twenty documentaries nationwide to run in theaters in New York and Los Angeles for one week in August 2013. Recently, *Defiant Requiem* was named Best Feature Length Documentary at the Big Apple Film Festival in New York City and received the Audience Award in January 2013 at the Palm Springs Film Festival.

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The famous German rabbi and philosopher Leo Baeck was sent to Terezín in 1943 where he became a spiritual leader and symbol of moral courage. Immediately after the war, he wrote a short essay about his experiences at Terezín which included an inspiring personal statement about the arts community in the camp:

*In the sheltering darkness of the long evenings, they were together in the cold and gloomy attic of a barrack, close under the roof. There they stood, pressed close to each other, to hear a talk about the Bible and the Talmud, about Plato, Aristotle, Maimonides, about Descartes and Spinoza, about Locke and Hume and Kant or about days and problems of history, about poetry and art and music, about Palestine of old and today, about the Commandments, the Prophets, and the Messianic idea. All those hours were hours in which a community arose out of the mass and the narrowness grew wide. They were hours of freedom.*

This is our film.