

# Fred Terna

## Survivor and Master of His Art



*Qualified Modulation, 2007, 30" x 40", acrylic on canvas*

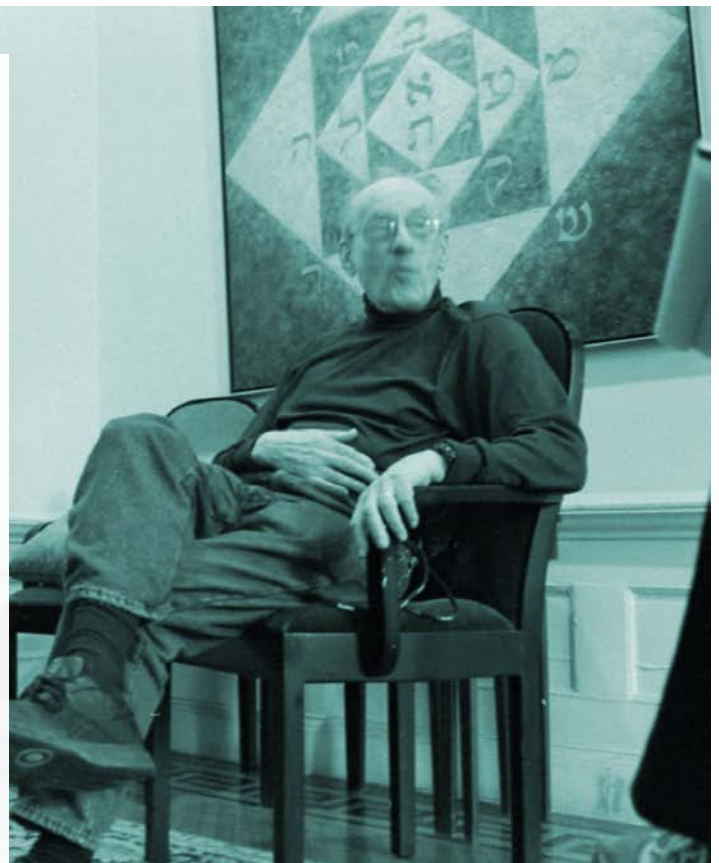


*The High Place, 1984, 18" x 24", acrylic on canvas*

**F**red Terna recalls the moment in which he became an artist. In 1943, when he was twenty years old, Terna was laboring with his fellow inmates at the concentration camp Theresienstadt when their work of digging a ditch was interrupted by a sudden and violent rainstorm.

“I was waiting for a downpour to end. We were standing under an overhang seeking shelter. I found a scrap of paper and a pencil stub in my pocket, and started drawing trees in the rain. From then on, with only a few interruptions, I kept drawing, and eventually, after the war, I started to paint.”

The circumstances that had brought Fred Terna from a comfortable middle-class life in Prague to Theresienstadt tied his fate to the fates of millions of others who fell under the shadow of Nazi persecution. Born in Vienna, Fred Terna had lived in Prague from early childhood. Prague’s Jewish community was one of the oldest in Europe, rich in folklore and dedicated to the spirited debates that characterize Jewish intellectual life. “Prague Jews had a long and illustrious history, and we were well aware of it,” writes Mr. Terna. Despite alternating periods of persecution and acceptance, the Jews of Prague continued to build a culture celebrated for the arts, the sciences, economics, and philanthropy. It was in Prague that the revered philosopher and scholar Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel was said to have created the Golem, a fearsome but protective clay figure who comes to life in times of peril for the Jews. An assimilated community that contributed to every aspect



*photo by Emma Karasz '07*

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of Prague's economic and cultural life, the Jews of Prague had assumed full citizenship when the Emperor Josef II issued the Edict of Tolerance in the 1870's, an edict that abolished the Jewish ghetto.

"If you want to know my family," says Mr. Terna, "read Kafka." The German-speaking Jewish community of Prague that nurtured Terna's lively intellect also had produced such internationally recognized artists and intellectuals as Franz Kafka, Max Brod, and Franz Werfel. Mr. Terna's father, whom Terna describes as a "typical Prague intellectual," is the primary influence on Terna's intellectual and ethical life. Born Jochanan Taussig in Prague in 1893, Mr. Terna's father earned a Doctor of Law degree from Charles University. In 1914, Jochanan Taussig was drafted in Austro-Hungarian army as a lieutenant. For a short time after the end of World War I he worked and lived in Vienna, where he married Lona Herzog and had two sons, Fred and Tomas. "The family soon moved back to Prague," writes Mr. Terna, "where my father worked in the insurance business. While the business provided for the family, my father's focus was on philosophy and sociology. My most vivid memory of that time is that of my father sitting in his study surrounded by heavy volumes, underlining text, and taking notes." Despite the loss of his mother in 1932, Fred Terna recalls a happy childhood. Fred and his younger brother Tomas walked to school through streets considered safe and welcoming, played at twilight in fields near their home, enjoyed unimpeded access to their father's extensive library, and marveled at technological innovations such as the brightly colored "Silly Symphonies" produced by Walt Disney. His grandmother Jenny Taussig instilled in her grandson a lifelong love of music by hosting music nights in her home each Wednesday. "Friends would meet in her home, carrying their instruments, violins, oboes, flutes, or clarinets," recalls Mr. Terna. "They would spell each other playing chamber music, talk, have coffee and cake, argue about phrasing and interpretation, talk some more, have more cake, and play some more. When someone would object to the way a passage was performed, that person would be asked to go and play it along his or her guidelines. I remember those evenings with much joy."

On March 15, 1939, the lives of the Terna family changed irrevocably. Accompanied by a triumphant Adolph Hitler, Nazi troops marched into Prague. The Nazi occupation of the fabled city of Prague represented not a military defeat but a diplomatic one. The borders of the Czechoslovakia of 1939 were created as a result of the Treaty of Versailles, a treaty that the Nazi regime planned to dismantle. Claiming that German speaking nationals were being persecuted in the Sudetenland, Hitler demanded the right to enter Czechoslovakia to defend these citizens. After meeting with British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and French Premier Edouard Daladier, Hitler won assurances that neither England nor France

would honor the obligation to defend the Czech borders to which their countries had agreed in 1918. All parties signed the now infamous Munich Agreement. Chamberlain returned to England a hero, announcing to his countrymen that he had negotiated a "peace with honor." Hitler's plans to dominate Europe continued.

Terna remembers the immediate impact of Nazi policies on the Jewish community. "After the occupation of Prague by German troops," he recalls, "Jewish children were expelled from school. My formal education came to an end early in 1939 at age fifteen. Levels of oppression were added from day to day. Marketing was restricted to fewer and fewer hours. Food rations were reduced. We had to wear a yellow star at all times. There was a curfew at 8 o'clock. Several families were forced to move together into one apartment. Anything of value, radios, jewelry, bank accounts, art, were confiscated. Random brutality and terror accompanied each one of these steps; including even physical attacks against old people and children."



*Fred Terna in Prague in 1946, approximately eighteen months after his liberation from Kaufering, a subcamp of Dachau.*

"Between the fall of 1938 and the seizure of the 'Sudetenland', and the eventual Nazi occupation of the rest of Bohemia and Prague in 1939, the educational system fell under the influence of Nazi political power and ideology. Jewish teachers were dismissed, and replaced by Nazi sympathizers. Jewish students had to sit in the back of the classroom, the "Judenbankerl", the Jew's bench. I was then a student of a "Staatsrealgymnasium", the equivalent of a lower high school. We were nine Jews in a class of about 35. We made it our task to excel in our studies, to know more than the rest of the class. It did not make us too popular with our new teachers, but made us feel good."

Education, a cherished pursuit in Mr. Terna's family and in the entire Jewish community, became a challenge after the Nazi occupation. The responsibility of teaching Jewish children fell to the adults, who persevered despite the perils of living under Nazi surveillance. "Since even informal classes proved to be too dangerous," writes Mr. Terna, "my father found friends of his to talk to me. It was the most thorough teaching I ever experienced. Jewish adults had been dismissed from their jobs, were not allowed to continue in their profession, or had had their businesses confiscated. Informal teaching was a welcome distraction from their gnawing worries of how to cope with a steadily worsening oppression. Thus I continued learning mathematics from a structural engineer, who gave me practical problems to solve, learned French from a translator, chemistry and biology from pharmacist; I learned bookkeeping and commercial law. My father's hobby was sociology and philosophy. I had always enjoyed reading about history and far-away places. This became a rigorous study of history and geography."

In an effort to save his family, Jochanan Taussig acquired false papers, the family name was changed to Terna, and Fred Terna temporarily found refuge in the Czech countryside. In 1941, when his identity was discovered, Fred Terna, not quite eighteen, was taken to his first camp, Linden bei Deutsch-Brod, or Lipa, a

labor camp in which young men worked at farming, forestry, and construction. At Lipa, Terna and his fellow inmates resumed their interrupted education by teaching each other. “A system developed rather spontaneously,” Terna remembers, “Teach me what you know, and I’ll teach you what I know’. There were no books to learn from, and we had to depend on memory. We knew that there had been civilizations that functioned on oral history alone, without a written record. We managed to acquire paper and writing utensils. I learned, e.g., differential calculus, some basic English, and music theory. I in turn taught geography, history, and sociology.” Of these clandestine sessions, Mr. Terna writes, “We were hungry, tired, and dirty, but our minds were soaring.”

From Lipa the inmates were shipped to Theresienstadt, where Terna and his father were reunited. Jochanan Terna had been shipped from Prague to Kladno, where he had labored in a coal mine. Because of the harsh living conditions at the mine, Mr. Terna’s father had developed tuberculosis. From Kladno, he was shipped to Theresienstadt, where he was confined to a tuberculosis ward. Mr. Terna and his fellow patients, all of them men of letters, transformed the grim tuberculosis ward into a haven for the continuing pursuit of knowledge. Whenever he could, young Fred Terna stole into the hospital to observe this remarkable and unceasing conversation, the triumph of the intellect and spirit over illness, fleas, lice, and the constant threat of death. “No subject was out of limits,” Mr. Terna recalls, “though politics and the war often were the focus. There were heated arguments about philosophy, ethics and aesthetics, history and the arts. I was aware of listening to an unusual gathering of sages.” This remarkable assembly, over which Jochanan Terna presided as “arbiter and chair,” debated the fate of Germany after the war. Convinced that the defeat of the Third Reich was inevitable, the wise men of the tuberculosis ward at Ghetto Theresienstadt assigned to each man the role of one the allied nations and conducted a debate that resembled those held in the future General Assembly of the United Nations.

In 1944, these thoughtful men were put into a transport bound for Auschwitz. Upon arrival they were led to the gas chambers. Jochanan Terna perished at the age of fifty-two. Of his father, Mr. Terna writes, “In my mind he is still the wise old man.”

Jochanan Terna’s legacy is the spirit he imparted to his son. “He talked a lot to me when I was kicked out of school, gave me a basic grounding in ethics, allowed me to look through a sociologist’s eye. When something happened to me I saw that there was a system

at work, even as I was a victim. I owe it to my father that I came through the war emotionally whole. Yes, I was clobbered, but not destroyed.”

Fred Terna was also shipped from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz in 1944. Upon arrival at Auschwitz, inmates were sorted by SS officers into two groups—those immediately sent to the gas chambers and those judged suitable for labor. Young and comparatively strong, Fred Terna joined the labor force. Trapped in a system as irrational as it was brutal—survivor and author Primo Levi recalls the words of a Nazi guard, “There is no why

here”—Fred Terna and his fellow inmates found ways to maintain their humanity despite the horror of their circumstances. “It did not take long to understand,” recalls Mr. Terna, “that group cohesion was a survival mechanism. There was hardly any violence between inmates; systems of mutual protection arose without planning. While we were all nameless inmates each one of us had been a functioning person before, and remained so in the camps. A teacher remained a teacher, a baker a baker, a physician a physician. The Nazis tried to demoralize us, but they failed. There was no soap, and barely enough water to drink. We became smelly, lice-infested, and dirt-encrusted, ghostly apparitions the Nazis felt they had every right to murder. They killed teachers, bakers, and physicians. We lived, and died upholding the values of our communities.”

From Auschwitz Mr. Terna was taken to Kaufering, a subcamp of Dachau. He was liberated on April 27, 1945. “Our families, our community had perished,” he writes. “I am the only survivor in the Taussig/Terna family.”

After liberation Mr. Terna returned to Prague, where he met his first wife, Stella, also a survivor. The young couple journeyed to Paris, where Fred Terna studied at the famed Academie Julien and soon began receiving awards such as the Francois Roy. Having been encouraged to learn English by his father, who was an admirer of Abraham Lincoln, Mr. Terna worked at the American Joint Distribution Committee, where he helped fellow survivors to move to the then British Mandate of Palestine.

It became apparent to Fred Terna after the war that his painting would become a significant fulfillment of his vow to remember. “While hospitalized after liberation I drew from memory images of Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, and the Kaufering camps, people walking inside barbed wire compounds towards a dark chimney,



*Fred Terna, then seventeen, walks with his grandmother Jenny Taussig down a Prague street. The date is March 25, 1939, ten days after Nazi troops marched into the city.*

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people at the edge of a shooting pit. This was just a short phase. I had realized that in my mind I was still in the camps, and I stopped transcribing visual memory. I started on semiabstract paintings. It did not take me long to see how many walls there were in my paintings. I came to accept the idea that the experience of the Shoah was going to be a part of my painting.”

“When dealing with the memory of the Shoah I do not, indeed cannot, illustrate events of the past. I try to render feelings, moods, attitudes, commenting rather than reporting. Composition, color, line, surface, and the traditional ingredients of painting aim to communicate on the Shoah where words seem to be wanting. Some of the symbols I used years ago are now commonplace: fire, the chimney, and barbed wire, bloody walls. I too use them, though much less so today.”

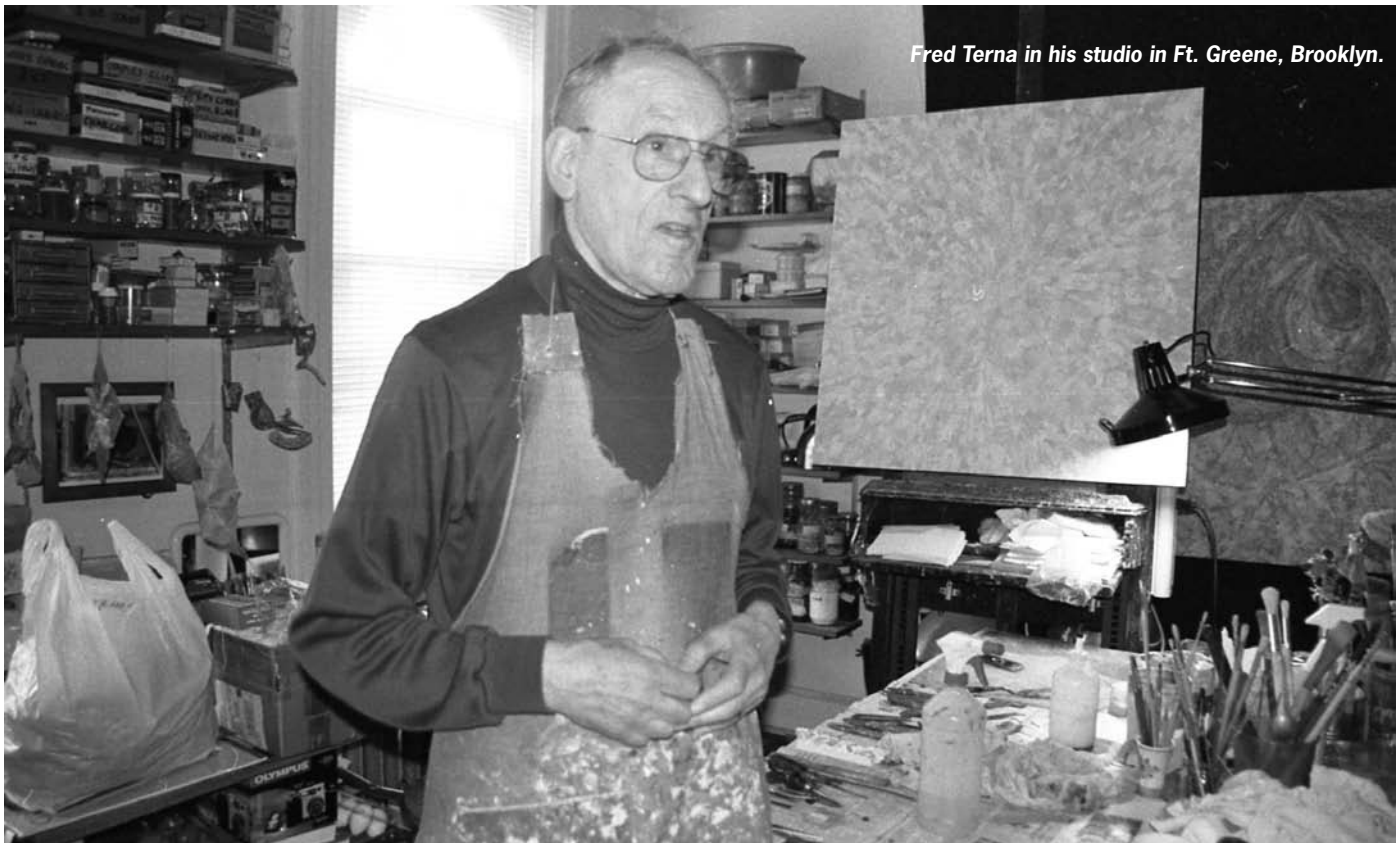
“Paintings, which have the Shoah as an explicit theme, are only a small part of my work,” explains Mr. Terna. “Some of the themes, such as the Binding of Isaac led me to an inquiry about my pictorial antecedents, and a search for Jewish Art within our tradition. This allowed me to explore the many facets of pictorial tradition, translating them into a personal and contemporary mode.”

One of Mr. Terna’s biographers states, “Frequently his memories of the war years find their expression in symbolic forms. He has used the medium of Jewish history and heritage embedded in quasi-abstract art to express profound meditations on the sanctity and quality of human life.”

Today Fred Terna is internationally recognized as an artist and a scholar. Terna’s work appears in many private collections, as well as in permanent collections of a number of churches and synagogues. His work also may be found in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.; the Albertina Collection in Vienna; Yad Vashem, and the Ghetto Fighters Museum of Kibbutz Lohamei Hagetaot. A stained glass window designed by Mr. Terna graces a synagogue in Panama. He has lectured at the New School in Manhattan and to audiences throughout the United States on such topics as religion, art history, and the Shoah.

A resident of Brooklyn since 1952, Mr. Terna lives with his wife, Rebecca Shiffman, a daughter of survivors, whom he married in 1982, and his son Daniel, a 2005 Packer graduate. Reflecting on his father’s remarkable life, Daniel writes, “My father’s family perished in the camps. My mother and I are a testament to his will to move on, to put a new life together, to look death in the face and prove that life can flourish.”

In the years since the war, Mr. Terna has honored his pledge to remember and to tell the story of those who perished. In addition to preserving the memory of those who shared his experience, Mr. Terna’s work reflects the persistence of his own memories. “The Shoah is like a crazy bass that is playing all the time. I have learned to play the fiddle above it so that there should be some harmony to my life. There is not a second, however, that I’m not aware of it. Painting is one of my fiddles.”



*Fred Terna in his studio in Ft. Greene, Brooklyn.*

*photo by Emma Karasz '07*