Seasons in Hell

H. G. Adler's firsthand record of Holocaust internment

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THERESIENSTADT 1941–1945: THE FACE OF A COERCED COMMUNITY BY H. G. ADLER, TRANSLATED FROM GERMAN BY BELINDA COOPER
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A certain condition intuited by Franz Kafka, H. G. Adler lived—and lived to describe.

As if in a dream and for no rational reason, Hans Günther Adler (1910–1988), Kafka's younger countryman and coreligionist, was transformed from a pedagogue into the powerless subject of an arbitrary regime under which untruth was ubiquitous and criminal behavior elevated to absolute law. One's past and possessions were confiscated. Terror was the natural state. In that realm, Adler later wrote, "it was a fatal error to behave as if the world still was normal" rather than "a bottomless abyss of coercion" in which normality was a grotesque sham.

Adler's *Theresienstadt 1941–1945*, completed in London and first published in German in 1955, is monograph as monument. A text of some six hundred pages, with another two hundred devoted to highly readable notes, sources, and appendices, it provides a detailed account of daily existence in the Nazi concentration camp Theresienstadt, known in Czech as Terezín. The "model" Nazi camp, created in an eighteenth-century garrison town thirty-nine miles from Prague, Theresienstadt was established in 1941 as a holding place for Jews, including those that the SS, which administered the camp, classified as "notables"—musicians, artists, scholars, decorated army officers, and Jewish community leaders of various political persuasions. Adler was himself held prisoner there for two years and eight months before being deported first to Auschwitz and then to a satellite camp of Buchenwald, from which he was liberated in April 1945—a progression he would describe with passionate opacity in his phantasmagoric novel *The Journey* (1962).

Adler's portrait of what he called a "coerced community" is not easily classified. *The Journey*, belatedly published in English in 2008 and as Faulknerian as it is Kafkaesque, was deemed "Holocaust modernism" by its *New York Times* reviewer, Richard Lourie. *Theresienstadt 1941–1945* is another sort of improbable modernism—a meticulous chronicle that is at once a sober and self-aware sociology of the absurd, a memoir in which the writer does not appear, and a penetrating ethnographic study. (Adler was influenced by anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski's notion of the "participant-observer.")

Theresienstadt 1941–1945 is sui generis, as is its subject. Precise yet metaphoric, dispassionate but anguished, Adler's account of the Theresienstadt world, organized in chapters devoted to everything from housing and nutrition to legal conditions and cultural life, incorporates documents, oral testimony, and ultimately the author's philosophy of history. Both a masterpiece of scholarship and a literary event, the book—which Adler began writing while a prisoner in Theresienstadt—is prefaced by the last lines of Kafka's enigmatic story "A Country Doctor": "Once one responds to a false alarm on the night bell, there's no making it right—not ever." Its final words are a cryptic warning from a doomed Theresienstadt inmate (who, although Adler does not say so, was the mother of his second wife): "One must be careful not to attach too much importance to oneself. All of us are more or less on the front lines."

Some more than others. To oversee their prisoners, the SS appointed a "Jewish Elder," a faux Führer who held the life of his Jewish subjects in his hands yet, as Adler points out, was "powerless against even the lowliest SS man." The continual deportations to Auschwitz and other death camps in the east were ordered by the SS. The German forces stipulated the number and sometimes the ages of those to be deported, but for the most part the actual selection of deportees was made, under conditions of great secrecy, by the Elder, whose minions were also charged with the psychologically brutal implementation.

Thus the Elder presided over a bizarre social hierarchy: "Cliques, gossip, pleasure seeking, social events, and invitations to aesthetic and culinary enjoyments created a make-believe world. . . . People competed to be or become socially accepted, and a kind of royal household formed, complete with toadies." Solidarity, which in some ways the camp fostered among the prisoners, was compromised: Adler writes that the Jewish administration could almost be compared to "the rationally incomprehensible authorities in Kafka's novels" and notes that some did refer to their headquarters as "the Castle." (Benjamin Murmelstein, the only Elder to survive the war, was the subject of Claude Lanzmann's flawed but fascinating 2013 documentary, *The Last of the Unjust*.)

Between November 1941 and May 1945, approximately 154,000 Jews passed through Theresienstadt, which at times held six times as many inhabitants as the seven thousand the town was built to house. Approximately 33,000 died there, mainly from hunger and disease; another 88,000 were deported to extermination camps, including 84 percent of the ten thousand interned children. Largely uncomprehending, these young victims were

Alice Neel, ***Call Me Joe*, 1955,** oil on canvas, 34 x 22".

ALICE NEEL, UPTOWN

BY HILTON ALS; FOREWORD BY JEREMY LEWISON

NEW YORK: DAVID ZWIRNER BOOKS. 136 PAGES. $55.

WHEN ALICE NEEL PAINTED a portrait of Harold Cruse in 1950, seventeen years before he published *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, she depicted him thoughtfully grazing his cheek with his fingers, his eyes meeting the painter's gaze with weathered endurance. Part practicality, part protection, this proximity of hand to face—the standby pose of the untested model—recurs frequently in the paintings collected in *Alice Neel, Uptown*, the catalogue for a recent survey, curated by Hilton Als, culling paintings from the five decades the artist spent in Spanish Harlem and on the Upper West Side. While Neel's portraits radiate an undeniable erotic intensity, her subjects don't always seem to enjoy her attention, yielding instead to the wariness of people accustomed to being watched but not necessarily seen.

Neel was a painter with a voracious visual appetite. Born in 1900 to a white middle-class family in Pennsylvania, the artist settled in the late 1930s in Spanish Harlem, where she spent more than forty years chronicling the community around her through portraits of figures such as civil-rights activist James Farmer, playwright Alice Childress, and Carmen, a Haitian cleaning lady. Other subjects go unnamed entirely, or are reduced to their respective ethnicities: *Two Puerto Rican Boys*, *The Arab*, *The Spanish Family*. Although, as Jeremy Lewison reports in the catalogue's introduction, Als's working title for the show was "Colored People," Als reads Neel's interest in representing diversity not as a fetishization of other flesh tones but rather as an "ethos of inclusion." Above all, Neel advocated for what she called "honesty": depictions stripped of sentimentality or pathos, even when her allegiances lay "with those people who didn't have the means to speak for themselves."

In lieu of a single essay, Als intervenes between the paintings with ruminations on individual images. He fixates on the young man in *Call Me Joe*, 1955 (left), with his eyes set to a soft simmer, a cigarette slipped between the slender fingers of an El Greco–esque hand. Als interprets the boy's expression as the silent advertisement of an unspeakable longing. He reads a similar loneliness into the crush of a resolute left knuckle against a thin, denimed thigh in Neel's 1971 portrait of designer Ron Kajiwara. Later, Als marvels at the cocksure swagger of recurring sitter Georgie Arse, "a kid from the neighborhood" with "eyes that give masculinity the stage it requires to wreck and build homes, almost simultaneously." He lingers on the exquisite watchfulness of the sallow-skinned, blue-frocked girl clutching a blonde baby doll in *Julie and the Doll*, 1943. As Als observes, subjects like this "remain stalwart in their determination to be, and to hold on to what they have . . . even if the world would rather not know them or anything about them." With their immediate, unrelenting intimacy, Neel's portraits don't give the viewer that option. —KATE SUTTON