



NORTH CALDWELL

Playwright reclaims artistry and doomed lives from Holocaust

Reconstructed comedy to air on television, with the power to out-'Last' Nazi torment of creator, cast and audience.

Amy Kuperinsky For The Star-Ledger

The Terezín ghetto was a prison. More than 141,000 Jews were forced to live in the walled-off Nazi work camp in what is now the Czech Republic during the Holocaust, enduring cramped spaces, a scarce diet and dismal conditions.

Terezín, also known as Theresienstadt, slept 60 people to a dorm in bunks for women, men and children — families were not allowed to stay together. They lined up for rations: thin soup made from turnips and cabbage with potatoes and stale bread. Dysentery was rampant as hundreds of people used a single toilet.

There was no recourse, no breaking free. A transport usually meant prisoners were sent to one of the Nazi death camps in Poland, like Auschwitz or Treblinka.

Just 15% of Terezín's population made it through the war.

Still, its prisoners — including many writers, actors, composers and conductors — managed to write and stage hundreds of

plays, cabarets, operas and musical performances there between 1941 and 1945.

This weekend, one of those plays, lost when its creator was killed, will have its TV premiere more than 78 years after the production was banned in Terezín. New Jersey playwright Naomi Patz was instrumental in reviving it.

Karel Švenk's "The Last Cyclist," an absurdist comedy with a clear message that defied the Nazis, speaks through time to an audience long gone: concentration camp prisoners who were overwhelmingly in their last days and months of life.

Sharing a laugh at such a time "was a gift beyond imagining," says Patz, a North
SEE PLAY, A5



A scene from "The Last Cyclist." The 1944 absurdist comedy was banned in the Terezín ghetto, where Jews were forced to live before being transported to death camps. Alexander Jorgensen

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Caldwell resident.

Today's audiences can only try.

Instead of captives on the edge of death, the people of 2022 will hear the story, reconstructed by Patz, who originally staged the show more than a decade ago. She says the time is right to revisit the story.

"From the time that I first began working on this until now, the political situation in the country, in the world, the rise of antisemitism, all of these things are so much more extreme that it is so very much more relevant now than it was in 2010," Patz says.

Švenk's 1944 dark, slapstick comedy takes a well-worn refrain — Jews as bicyclists — and uses it to dress down the Nazis and the culture of scapegoating that enabled their rise before World War II. In his telling, the "cyclists," aka the Jews, are targeted as the cause of everything that's wrong with the world.

"Because 'The Last Cyclist' is a comedy, I think it's easier for people to see and absorb and be moved by and maybe even be disarmed by," says Patz, 81.

She launched her efforts to revive Švenk's play in the 1990s. Her work was staged in 2013 at New York's West End Theater in a production directed by Edward Einhorn.

In 2017, Patz and Einhorn filmed the play, with music by composer Stephen Feigenbaum, in front of a live audience at La MaMa experimental theater in New York. The broadcast TV premiere is Sunday on Thirteen/PBS. (Note: An earlier scheduled premiere was rescheduled from Tuesday due to technical difficulties.)



Karel Švenk's play uses an allegory that has bicyclists stand in for Jews. It was a common way of illustrating scapegoating in Europe. Alexander Jorgensen



Naomi Patz reconstructed "The Last Cyclist" using the memories of a surviving cast member and descriptions from other survivors. Norman Patz



Švenk wrote and rehearsed "The Last Cyclist" in 1944. He died at 28 years old, just weeks before the end of the war in Europe. Found photo

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THEATER OF DEFIANCE

Patz says "The Last Cyclist" stands as a strong rejoinder to the notion that Jews did not boldly resist the Nazis — and not just through planned escapes and armed retaliation.

The script may have been lost, but the memory of Švenk and his ideas survived him, allowing Patz to sketch out the shape of the story.

Her mission to revive the play began with Jana Šedová, who appeared to be the only surviving member of the cast.

While Patz never got to meet Šedová, the Holocaust survivor had already reconstructed the play from memory in the 1960s, and it was performed in Prague, about 40 miles from Terezín. In the '90s, Patz read about Šedová and the play in a chapter she had written on theater and cabaret for a 1965 book about Terezín published by the Jewish communities of Bohemia and Moravia.

So when Patz set out to write a playlet in 1995, it was actually a reconstruction of a reconstruction. In trying to make informed choices about the nature of the story and look of the show, she consulted accounts from other survivors of the camp who wrote memoirs. They may not have seen "The Last Cyclist" performed, but just possessing knowledge of its existence seemed to be an important kind of currency.

Patz believes actors in the cast may have gone from barracks to barracks spreading the story.

"By learning about it, it in effect became an act of defiance," she says.

To translate the play for a modern-day American audience, Patz used a framing device — she put the prisoners in the show itself. So "The Last Cyclist" is the story of actors performing an absurdist comedy in a concentration camp.

The character of Šedová introduces the dress rehearsal with narration that identifies her as the lone survivor. As she speaks across the decades, she simultaneously collapses time.

"It was as if we lived outside time with no past and no future," she says. "Only the present, only Terezín."

They were starving, but maybe the story could feed them in a different way — as if the act of creation could itself sustain them.

The Jews in the ghetto may not have had much reason for hope, but they also didn't know if their fate was sealed, Patz says. They didn't know this was the Holocaust — an unprecedented event — nor did they know the specific nature of the death camps awaiting them.

"They were sure that if they held out, if they maintained their courage, if they kept up their energy, if they kept up their emotional stamina, that they would be going home and that they could resume their lives," Patz says.

She points to ways the Jews of Terezín made light of their punishing circumstances — joking about how "svelte" they had become or talking about pet fleas.

"Things like that, it helped them maintain their sanity in what was an increasingly insane situation," Patz says. "And for those who really survived, maybe it did. Who knows? But most of them died."

'WHY THE CYCLISTS?'

A hard-won moment can serve as a satisfying dramatic payoff, especially when the underdog sees the Big Bad crumble.

But when the good guys pull out a rare win in "The Last Cyclist," that doesn't help any of the actors from the show.

For one, the play never made it past rehearsal.

The show was banned by the Jewish Council of Elders — set up by the SS to act as an authority in Terezín — because they were afraid the SS would retaliate if it was performed. (It was one of only two productions to be banned in the ghetto.)

In Patz's reworking, after the play's triumphant end, the actors — many of them wearing white face paint and dark, exaggerated eye makeup — snap back to cold reality. Word arrives that prisoners should soon be receiving details on transport to other camps.

Švenk, a Czech writer, songwriter and comedian noted for his contributions to avant-garde theater in Prague and cabaret in Terezín, did not live to see the end of the war, like most of his cast and fellow prisoners. He was transported to Auschwitz, then Meuselwitz, a labor camp, before being sent on a death march as the Red Army approached. He died only weeks before the Germans surrendered in 1945. Švenk was 28.

Through Patz's and Šedová's efforts, his work survives.

"We'll never really know the degree to how close I came to the original," Patz says. "But it is very much in the spirit of the original."

In Patz's version, a Hitler character holds a comb up to his nose to stand in for the infamous mustache and introduce the central allegory, which is a joke that predates the Holocaust. Here, it both starts and ends the narrative:

"The Jews and the cyclists are to blame for all of our misfortunes."

"Why the cyclists??"

"Why the Jews?"

Patz says that while she was not familiar with this refrain in America, friends who grew up in the former Czechoslovakia were accustomed to hearing it, and it would have been well known among the Jews in the camp — usually in the simplified form "and the cyclists."

Playwright Bertolt Brecht and writer-philosopher Hannah Arendt made references to the idea.

In Švenk's play, a group of inmates at a mental institution, led by a goose-stepping Hitler surrogate, decide that because they loathe their head physician, who rides a bicycle, they will persecute and destroy all cyclists everywhere. To this end, they easily whip up hysteria among the masses.

It isn't long before absolutely everyone is chanting "Death to cyclists!"

Buses and trains have signs that say "no cyclists allowed." Anyone who talks to cyclists will be punched. Anyone who wants to ride a bike needs a permit (but why would you want to, at this point?). Cyclists have to wear a "C" at all times on their clothing.

Ultimately, all cyclists are exiled to Horror Island, where they will be starved to death and "slave for the greater glory."

But in a nod to the reality of Nazi laws against Jews, which applied to secular Jews and converted Jews as much as they did to religious Jews, these rules don't concern only the cyclists. They apply to anyone who helped them fix their bikes, inflate their tires or sold them biking gear ... for the last 200 years — and their relatives.

'TOTAL SHOCKED SILENCE'

Patz came to the project while writing a

short play based on Švenk's concept.

She used the story for a local chapter of the National Federation of Temple Youth, a Reform Jewish group, as part of a creative arts weekend for teenagers at Temple Shalom of West Essex in Cedar Grove, where her husband, Norman Patz, is rabbi emeritus.

"It stayed with me," she says. "It was very powerful. I couldn't get it out of my head."

Patz was determined to learn whatever she could about Švenk's original work through Šedová's reconstruction, aided by a friend in Prague. The Czech Holocaust survivor had mined her memories to rewrite the play in 1961 to honor the 40th anniversary of the Czech Communist Party. That was quite an achievement, since talk of Jews and the Holocaust was generally forbidden under communist rule.

"It was very brave of them," Patz says of Šedová and the theater director who mounted the play.

To reconstruct the story, Patz omitted references to communist talking points, bridged the gap to American English and removed some camp in-jokes. But real details of Terezín history can be seen within the allegory, like when the Swiss Red Cross pays the camp a visit.

In 1944, the Nazis staged a tour of lies for Red Cross envoys at the request of Denmark, showcasing carefully planned camp entertainment and spruced up accommodations where there was conveniently no overcrowding. They painted Terezín as a civilized place where cultural activities could flourish. The tactics worked. Šedová remembered the event in her telling of the play.

"I can't imagine that it wouldn't have been at least mocked," Patz says, noting that Švenk rehearsed the play the same year.

The first production of Patz's "The Last Cyclist" was in Minneapolis-St. Paul in 2009, then at Temple Shalom in Cedar Grove a few months later.

Audiences sat in "total shocked silence" at the end, Patz says.

Over the years, "The Last Cyclist" has been performed by or at New Jersey high schools through the state Commission on Holocaust Education and staged at colleges and communities across the country.

The story skewers the fury of the Nazis' hatred, depicting the cyclist-chasers maniacally raging against innocent targets or enthusiastically performing this destructive rage to please their supreme leader.

"You know that cyclists have always made the best scapegoats," one of the ring-leader's trusted men says. "If there are no more cyclists, who will people blame? You! Me!"

The strength of Patz's additions to the play, which position Švenk's dark slapstick in the context it was performed, is that they connect the audience with individual cast members. In this way, the emphasis isn't solely on the Nazis and how society caved to their brand of terror. The real lives of victims come into focus — not just as victims, but as people, artists and performers.

Like most of Terezín's population, the actors in "The Last Cyclist" were transported to Auschwitz and other death camps.

One of the most moving parts of the play arrives at the show's conclusion. Each cast member in Patz and Einhorn's show takes off their hats or parts of their costume and puts them down, looks into the camera in a closeup and announces which real-life cast member they played, including Švenk.

Patz remembers a comment from an actor in the Cedar Grove production after she praised her performance.

"She said, 'We didn't do it for ourselves. We didn't do it for you. We did it for them. We did it to give life to the people who had acted in it in Terezín,'" Patz says.

The emotional threads connecting the performers, and linking audiences — one living, one dead — do their part to restore humanity to the oft-cited figure "6 million," which Patz says can lose its meaning over time.

It's something others have tried to do in spotlighting individual names and faces.

The Auschwitz Memorial Twitter account regularly shares black-and-white photos of Jews and other prisoners who died in concentration camps, noting their birth and death dates — babies, toddlers, parents, sisters, friends and factory workers. They stare out through retweets, not clamoring for attention like any number of videos, memes and GIFs so much as quietly bringing us into their space for a moment.

Švenk's strong tribute to survival cuts through the bleak end of his own life, insisting to be heard.

One part of the play that Patz added comes directly from a song he wrote, "Terezín March," considered to be an anthem for prisoners of the camp.

"Where there's a will there's a way," he begins. "We'll survive another day."

"Don't despair, still believe," he continues. "That the sun will shine again / And we'll live to turn our backs on Terezín."

Švenk is not just speaking of carrying on, but embracing true freedom.

And what is freedom without humor?

"On the ruins of the ghetto," he promises, "we will laugh!"

"The Last Cyclist" premieres Sunday at 11 p.m. with an encore presentation 10 p.m. Monday; see schedule at thirteenth.org. For more: thelastcyclist.com.

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