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Art, Music, and Poetry: Artistic Documentation During the Holocaust

by Lauren Beauregard

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Tetraazamacrocycles, cyclic molecules with four nitrogen atoms, have long been known to produce highly stable transition metal complexes. Cross-bridging such molecules with 2-carbon chains has been shown to enhance the stability of these complexes even further, providing enough stability to use the resulting compounds in applications as diverse and demanding as aqueous, green oxidation catalysis all the way to drug molecules injected into humans. Although the stability of these compounds is believed to result from the increased rigidity and topological complexity imparted by the cross-bridge, there is insufficient experimental data to exclude other causes. In this study, standard organic and inorganic synthetic methods were used to produce unbridged dibenzyl tetraazamacrocycle analogues of known cross-bridged tetraazamacrocycles and their transition metal complexes to allow direct comparison of molecules identical except for the cross-bridge. The syntheses of the known tetraazamacrocycles and the novel transition metal complexes were successful with high yields and purity. Initial chemical characterization of the complexes by UV-Visible spectroscopy and cyclic voltammetry shows little difference in electronic properties from bridged versions. Direct comparison studies of the unbridged and bridged compounds' stabilities remain to be carried out and will shed light on the importance of the cross-bridge to complex robustness.

According to Theodor Adorno, “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”¹ Of course, poetry was written during the Holocaust as well as after. More accurately, Nina Apfelbaum argued that “read-

¹Theodor Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” *Prisms* 1949, 34.

ing the memoirs, diaries and works of fiction written by Holocaust survivors provides another dimension to an understanding of the Holocaust.”² During the Holocaust, Jewish artists used their abilities to create works as a way to both document their everyday lives as well as to reclaim humanity in the German concentration camps.

After Germany lost the Great War, Adolf Hitler declared the Jewish people were the reason for the loss and claimed that their “whole existence is based on one single great lie, to wit, that they are a religious community while actually they are a race.”³ Without recognizing this lie, one would never be able to achieve victory. In Hitler’s opinion, the Jewish “race” was looking to take over the world through their financial knowledge and used this to stir the buried hatred and distrust the German population held against Jewry.⁴ With his constant and brutal propaganda against Jews, they never stood a chance against Hitler and his regime. He used phrases such as “Jewish disease” or “incurables” in order for the German people to fear associating with Jews.⁵ This would be his immovable stance on Jews throughout his reign as Chancellor, an ominous sign for those of Jewish descent.

A date that will live in infamy, November 9, 1938, *Kristallnacht* was a night of destruction and turmoil. Brought about by the assassination of the third secretary of the German embassy in Paris, Ernst vom Rath, *Kristallnacht* was the retaliation of the Nazis, removing as many as 30,000 German Jews from the streets and incarcerating them in various concentration camps throughout the country, showing the turn to violent measures taken to rid Europe of all Jewry. The “Night of Broken Glass” was given its name due to the broken windows that littered the streets from homes, shops and synagogues that were looted and burned during pogroms throughout Germany, Austria and Bohemia. However, the worst loss of the night was that of the 96 Jewish lives. Previous to this, Nazi Germany adopted the usual European policy for Jews until 1941, when they faced total war and all Jewish emigration plans

2 Nina Apfelbaum, “Bearing Witness: A Resource Guide to Literature, Poetry, Art, Music, and Videos by Holocaust Victims and Survivors,” 1.

3 Adolf Hitler, “Mein Kampf,” 232.

4 For many, Anti-Semitism dates back to the death of Jesus.

5 Hitler, 252.

fell through.⁶ After plans fell through, the “Jewish problem” had to be dealt with in a different manner: the European Jews had to die.⁷

Among the first to suggest the “final solution” was Heinrich Himmler, one of Germany’s officials in charge of the entire Nazi police force as well as the death camps in East Germany, who declared that Jews had to “vanish from the face of the earth.”⁸ Another who wanted to see the Jewish people vanish completely was Hermann Goering, Plenipotentiary of the Four Year Plan. Goering agreed with Himmler and believed since the problem in Germany was that of an “economic nature,” it must be dealt with economically. The theory given was that the economy needed to be strictly Aryan, as it was the “superior” race. While the first center created specifically to eliminate the Jews began to fulfill its purpose in December 1941, the official order for the “final solution” came with the Wannsee Conference in January 1942 between the SS and German political officials. During the conference, they estimated the death of almost 11 million European Jews, including those that were not in occupied countries such as Ireland or Great Britain.⁹ Thus began the extermination camps, in which Nazis murdered nearly two thirds of European Jewry by acts of terror, gassings, shootings, disease and starvation.

There were many extermination camps in Europe, although the most infamous were those of Dachau, Auschwitz, Treblinka,

6 Emigration consisted of taking Jewish German citizens from their homes, stripping them of citizenship and essentially dumping them at border points between Germany and Poland. Because of this policy, one son of an unfortunate Jewish German citizen, Herschel Grynszpan, assassinated Ernst vom Rath, later causing *Kristallnacht*. When Poland closed its borders and no longer allowed Germany to leave Jews in their country, Germany turned to a more sinister solution to their “Jewish problem”.

7 Anti-Semitism began in Europe long before the Holocaust. Policies against Jews began in Rome shortly after Christ. Christians pushed Jews to abandon their faith and accept Christianity. When those policies failed, the Catholic Church viewed the Jewish faith as dangerous to the Christian faith. Amongst his many writings, Martin Luther declared that if he were a Jew, he would have converted long ago. Luther’s book was published during an increasingly Anti-Semitic time, only adding to the hatred previously felt towards the Jewish people. This hatred led to the policy stating that Jews could either convert to Christianity or face expulsion.

8 Omer Bartov, *Holocaust: Origins, Implementation, Aftermath*, 93.

9 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “The “Final Solution”” <http://www.ushmm.org/outreach/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007704>.

and Theresienstadt.¹⁰ The practices used in these camps were often vicious and inhumane. In one instance reminisced by Treblinka survivor Jankiel Wiernik, a young mother had her infant stripped from her arms as she went to the gas chambers. The SS member who took the child tore it in half and threw it against a nearby building simply because he enjoyed watching others suffer.¹¹ According to Wiernik, this was not an unusual occurrence. Many SS members were vicious and enjoyed behaving as such, although it must be said that there were rare instances where soldiers were sympathetic to the camp inhabitants. For example, Wiernik also mentioned an officer who would sneak portions of his meals to prisoners he felt needed the extra nourishment.

The mass killings began with shootings by firing squads, but because ammunition became more necessary for the war effort and the grounds were filled to capacity with previously murdered Jews, Germans turned to gas chambers and crematoriums. They quickly had the Jewish prisoners dig up the mass graves filled with decomposing corpses and had the prisoners pile the bodies to burn, never allowing the fires to burn out. Germans became quick and efficient with the mass execution of European Jews. With the use of either carbon monoxide or Zyklon B, Jews were checked for any valuables, prosthetics, gold teeth, etc. and then taken to either large furnaces or pyres and gassed. The fires burned hot constantly, and between ten and twelve thousand bodies turned to ash a day.¹² The ash filled the sky, suffocating those who had to put the bodies into the fires. As more Jews were sent to the camps, the need for more gas chambers and crematoriums rose, and the Jews were the ones who built them. Essentially, they were forced to build their own death chambers and dig their own graves before they were gassed. The outlook on life was bleak for those who lived in the camps, and occasionally one would commit suicide, unable to cope with the trials looming around every corner.

SS members did not want their operations in the camp to

10 Theresienstadt is well known for its tolerance toward the arts in the camp, whether sanctioned by Nazi Germany or not.

11 Wiernik, "A Year in Treblinka," 19.

12 Female bodies were used as tinder for the rest of the bodies to burn as it was found they burned better than men.

leak out to the general public. On one occasion, a German woman and her children mistakenly took the train to a death camp. Rather than let her out of the camp (as she was a German citizen and not a Jew), the SS members sent her to the gassing chambers with the Jews.¹³ She had seen too much and they feared she would speak of the things she saw during her short stay in Treblinka. Due to such tragic events as these witnessed by all in the camps, very few desired to document the events. Documentation of any kind was a hard task, for if one was caught, punishment was severe and could even result in death.

However, art and literature were not uncommon in camps throughout the Holocaust period, as Germans used them as a means of punishment for some Jews.¹⁴ In Treblinka, to make fun of the Jewish God, Germans would have the prisoners sing songs of worship as they were sent to the gas chambers. Occasionally, Jews would be forced to sing songs of German origin as new SS members arrived at camps. Other times, Germans expected Jewish artists to spend their time in camps recreating copies of popular paintings, drawings or sculptures. This was a means for some prisoners to acquire the proper tools needed to make their own documentation of life in the camps at the risk of their own lives. If SS members found materials, the prisoners paid with either transportation or their lives. Gerty Spies, a prisoner in Theresienstadt, stated that no hiding place was safe while away from the huts. Instead of hiding her materials, Spies would put them in a large travel bag she took with her to work. That way, her poetry could be close by and not found by the SS members tasked with searching the prisoner huts.¹⁵

The most tolerant camp toward the arts was Theresienstadt and its ghetto, Terezin. Terezin gave the façade of a “normal” life by allowing prisoners to roam without barbed wire as well as to hold art shows, theatre performances, poetry readings or musical

13 Wiernik, 22.

14 Prisoners were forced to use their talents or expertise as a way of punishment to further the German “cause”. In some cases this meant they built the means of their own deaths, like gas chambers or crematoriums. Artistic talent was not excluded.

15 Sandra Alfors, “Poetry from the Theresienstadt Camp, 1941-1945,” *Rocky Mountain Review*, Vol. 64, 51.

concerts. This made Terezin a small cultural hub for the Jewish prisoners, easing their despair ever so slightly. Undoubtedly, the Nazis allowed this to happen as a way to deceive the Red Cross into thinking they treated their prisoners well. As the Red Cross was invited into the camp to view the way “The Fuehrer Donated a City to the Jews,” hundreds were dying within its walls and thousands deported to death camps located across Germany.¹⁶

One example of documentation with arts was through Aleksander Kulisiewicz and his many compositions. Arrested by the Gestapo for denouncing the fascist movement, Kulisiewicz was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. There he wrote fifty-four songs about his six-year stay in the camp. Not only did he write songs about his own experience, but he also wrote songs about other prisoners’ experiences. An example of one such song is that of *Kołysanka dla synka w krematorium*, or *Lullaby for My Little Son in the Crematorium*, a song about a friend’s young son who was sent to the gas chambers. An excerpt of the composition goes as such:

Oh you sun, you watched in silence,
While you shined and smiled above
Saw them smash my baby’s skull
On the cold stone wall
Now little eyes look calmly at the sky
Cold tears, I hear them crying
Oh my boy, your blood is everywhere
Three years old – your golden hair¹⁷

This song depicts how away from the camp, everything might be beautiful and calm, but out of sight from the general public, horror and despair awaited all those inside the camp, no matter what the age.

On the opposite spectrum, Kulisiewicz also composed songs of hope that one day their time in the camps would come to an end and life could return to “normal.” A few verses of his composition

16 This is the title of Hitler’s now lost propaganda film, showing his “generosity” toward the Jews.

17 Aleksander Kulisiewicz, “Songs from the Depths of Hell,” 3.

Hymne are as follows:

Heh! Treblinka, Auschwitz, Gusen!
 Hearts held high, and high the fist!
 Barbed wire death the coward chooses
 Live! Now live, death is no rest
 And though we are but poor slaves
 The same sun shines above us
 Each day
 Bergen-Belsen, Ebensee,
 Head held high, and high the fist!
 Liberty, oh sweet liberty
 We'll soon go home I swear, oh yes!
 In camps of our despairing
 Love will be there again
 Tomorrow!¹⁸

These words were his way of urging others to keep the will to live as a way to prove the Nazis had not destroyed their resilient human spirit. Although Kulisiewicz never wrote his compositions down in the camp due to limited materials as well as the danger of using those materials, he did commit them to memory, dictating the text to his nurse after his imprisonment.

Some used art or literature as a means to fight the dehumanization happening in the camps and ghettos. By writing, painting or composing, the artist could keep their identity both as a human being as well as a Jew. As previously stated, materials were hard to come by, but one poet discovered a way to create poetry without actually writing anything much like the way Kulisiewicz composed music without writing. Ruth Klüger would dictate each line to herself until she remembered it, then would continue the rest of the poem in the same manner.¹⁹ In her words, Klüger's poems kept her company rather than other people. In prison camps, people disappeared, but her poems could stay with her. Poetry filled different voids for different people at different times. For one person, such as Klüger, it might have been an escape from the monotony of a tragic life, but for another it might have been just a way to docu-

¹⁸ Kulisiewicz, 9.

¹⁹ Alfes, 51.

ment the world around them in a condensed form.

Prison camp poetry covered “everyday” life, such as housing, sickness, physical labor, fear and reflections of past life events. Occasionally, religious topics were covered, but at such a time when many felt their God had left them, religion was not always popular. Peter Kien, another prisoner in Theresienstadt, wrote poems in form of Psalms, yet by the end of his writings, they proved to be critiques of God rather than praise. In the poem “*Ein Psalm aus Babylon, zu klagen*,” Kien compared his time in the camp to the Babylonian captivity written in Jewish scripture. He wrote of how the Jewish people missed home, but in reality there no longer was a place to call “home.” The beginning of each stanza represented the thoughts Kien had about the past, present and uncertain future:

Under the walls of Babylon
We sat and cried
Whenever we remembered of home...
Under the walls of Babylon
We sat and cried
Whenever we looked around us...
Under the walls of Babylon
We sat and cried
Whenever we thought of the future.²⁰

This shows how Kien felt about thinking of his past home, the horror of his current life in the prison camps and the uncertainty of his future, if he would have a future at all.

Miklos Radnoti, a Jewish man from Budapest, was taken as a slave laborer to Yugoslavia to build roads for the Nazi soldiers even though he had previously converted to Catholicism.²¹ By 1944, he was too weak to make the march from Yugoslavia to Hungary as the Nazis had ordered the laborers to do. After digging a ditch, he and others in the same state were shot and killed, then

²⁰ Alferts, 49.

²¹ Due to the Nuremberg Laws, even those who converted to other religions or did not practice Judaism were considered Jewish if they had two or three Jewish grandparents.

burned in the same ditch. When the bodies were later exhumed and buried by their families, Radnoti's remains were discovered with the last poems he had written in one of his shirt pockets. They were mainly descriptive of his time of Nazi slave labor, marching and military activity. One poem reads as follows:

From Bulgaria the huge wild pulse of artillery.
It beats on the mountain ridge, then hesitates and falls.
Men, animals, wagons and thoughts. They are swelling.
The road whinnies and rears up. The sky gallops.²²

One prisoner with a vast amount of artwork created during his incarceration as well as a well-documented experience was Alfred Kantor. Another prisoner in Theresienstadt, Kantor was a young art student sent to the camps in 1941. Upon entering Terezin, a ghetto connected to Theresienstadt, Kantor sought out pencils, paper and whatever other materials he could find as soon as he arrived. He began sketching his crowded life with the other Jewish prisoners, determined to keep a continuous record of their new and oppressive life. Kantor claimed he did not want to document his life so much but rather to capture the extraordinary experiences in the camps to show them to the world after his liberation.²³

One instance stood out in his mind when, against Nazi wishes, prisoners tried to smuggle letters to the outside world. An SS officer intercepted the letters and told the prisoners if the writers stepped forward, they would not be punished. After a time, nine men stepped forward. The next week, all were hanged. According to Kantor, this was just another display of Nazi treachery. Although it was shocking and awful, life in the camp eventually went on as if it never happened. It was because of these instances Kantor stated, "life gradually returned to normal, and I suppose this was the paradox of Terezin – that life could go on after such brutalities, and that the human spirit found a way to fulfill itself again and even to flourish, at least temporarily."²⁴ By recording events like these, Kantor revealed that the human spirit was stronger than the Nazis

²² Miklos Radnotti, "Postcard 1," 1944.

²³ Alfred Kantor, "The Book of Alfred Kantor," 6.

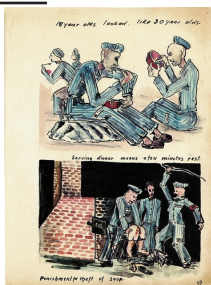
²⁴ Kantor, 6.

assumed in their attempt to dehumanize their prisoners.

When finding himself on the transfer list to Auschwitz, Kantor left his sketches with a close friend in the camp who was brave enough to hide them and return them to Kantor after the camps were liberated. Kantor states that he knew his records would not leave Auschwitz if he took them, as security was much harsher in Auschwitz than in Theresienstadt. By his third camp transfer, Kantor had little chance to use his artistic ability to document his life as he had previously wished. The few drawings he did manage were burned quickly after creation to avoid discovery.

In some aspects, Kantor's work could be viewed as self-portraiture. One work in particular has the inscription "18 year olds looked like 80 year olds."²⁵ As he was eighteen at the beginning of his imprisonment, this could have been how he saw himself, but Kantor describes his artistic documentation as a mission that served a broader purpose: that his commitment to drawing was actually part of his instinct to self-preserve and "undoubtedly helped me to deny the unimaginable horrors of life at that time ... to hold together the threads of sanity,"²⁶ as many others could not in such a trying time.

After his imprisonment in Auschwitz in 1943-44, Kantor was sent to Schwarzheide to rebuild a plant that created synthetic fuels for the German Air Force. While there, he spent his spare time on Sunday afternoons sketching, and then destroying, the world around him: the barracks, air raid shelters and gasoline factory. In Schwarzheide, Kantor discovered that while the prisoners wanted an Allied victory, they would only be free if they could survive the many Allied air raids. German soldiers were allowed to



25 Kantor, 49.

26 Kantor, 10.

take shelter, but prisoners were not. Within a short amount of time, the Allies demolished the gasoline factory and the prisoners were sent back to Terezin on April 18, 1945, which had been turned over to the International Red Cross to become the P.O.W. camp it was always supposed to be. By May of 1945, the prisoners were once again free, although many spent time in displaced persons camps trying to adjust to life after such a traumatic experience.

Kantor wanted to make sure the world knew of the Nazis' cruelty toward their prisoners. After imprisonment, he quickly filled a one hundred twenty-seven page book with drawings and watercolors of his experiences. This ensured they were fresh in his memory and would be as accurate as possible. Upon finishing his works, Kantor resumed his life by attending art school once again in America rather than Prague. In later years, he even joined the U.S. military, proving one could move on, reclaiming his humanity from such a traumatic experience.

Yet another example of a courageous prisoner is Bertolan Gondor. Originally imprisoned in Hungary, he was sent to Auschwitz. In March, April and May of 1944 he drew cartoons to depict his time in the prison camps. Gondor embedded messages in his drawings that he sent via postcards to his wife, knowing they had to make their way through Nazi screenings. His postcards depicted the tasks given to prisoners, cramped barracks and forced labor. Unfortunately, like many others, he did not survive the Holocaust. His works, however, made their way to light, telling his tale of courage and warning others of the dangers in the prison camps.

Post Holocaust, artistic works describing the experiences of survivors and prisoners came in abundance. Many works are dedicated to victims, such as Janusz Korczak. A pediatrician and director of an orphanage in Warsaw, Korczak would not abandon the children he had in his care. He dedicated his last days to improving the children's welfare, always fighting for their rights even as they traveled to the extermination camp. Some two hundred orphaned children looked to Korczak for courage as they made their way to Treblinka to die. He told them they were going on a "school outing," prudently preparing them, as he knew they were all being sent to die. Korczak's last words were written that he "did not exist

to be loved and admired, but to love and act.”²⁷ An artist, Israel Bernbaum, who weathered the Holocaust in Siberia, later created the painting “Janusz Korczak and his children on the way to the train” in Korczak’s honor.²⁸ His show of courage and love toward his orphans proved that humanity was not lost in a time where hope was seldom found.

Mia Fendler-Immerman, a child survivor of the Holocaust, created portraits of her family as a way to keep them alive. Labeled Jews merely by the redefinition of Jewish descent through the Nuremberg Laws, the Fendler family tried to escape Belgium by fleeing to France. Mia’s father was taken from their train and detained in Belgium. Upon arriving in France, Mia’s mother realized what had happened and decided to travel back to Belgium in an attempt to free him. Realizing her mistake, Frau Fendler told Mia that if the Nazis came for her, to pretend she was not Mia’s mother. They did come and they did take her away. Mia made her way back to her family’s previous landlady, never sure what happened to her parents. Spending the rest of the Holocaust period hiding in various homes, streets and alleys, she starved as she waited to come out of hiding. Today, Mia surrounds herself with her paintings, always remembering the short time she had with her parents and remembering the hardships she endured as a child without them due to the Nazi regime.

Even after the Holocaust, poetry was a way to continue expressing suppressed feelings of despair, trauma and loss. Displaced by the traumatic event as well as the pain of losing her mother in

27 Nelly Toll, “When Memory Speaks: The Holocaust in Art,” 42.



28 Ibid.

1947, Rose Ausländer gave up writing in her native German tongue and only wrote in English until her return to Germany in 1956.²⁹ She made a commitment to herself to preserve the memories that came with the catastrophe and not to forget the pain she experienced in the ghetto of Czernowitz. Ausländer's poems are characterized by wordplay and metaphors, but they are most recognizable by the voice given to the past and hope that shapes the future. One topic that she often touched upon was that of a religious nature felt by many, yet feared to put in writing. Ausländer made God an abstraction, a revered name, but one absent from the issues of the world and that of her people. Often, her works are almost a parody of Christian prayer, as they called out the Divine Father for abandoning his people, a commonality found in the writings of many survivors.

Many times the idea of a memorial for those who both survived or lost their lives had been discussed, and after fifteen years of work, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was erected and opened in April of 1993. In the dedication, President Bill Clinton recognized the tragedy by stating "it is our obligation to remember this nightmare and struggle against all injustice."³⁰ Presently, the Holocaust Museum holds the largest collection of Holocaust art in the Western world, both from the camps and post Holocaust era for all to see. The reasoning behind the Museum is to assure the survivors and victims that they would not be forgotten and to be a reminder that such a tragedy must never happen again. By looking back at the victims' stories, art and other works, one can understand the tragedy experienced by the Jewish people in full. Humanity was not lost in such a dark time, and poetry was most certainly not dead.

29 Ausländer emigrated to the United States after World War II and inexplicably desired to return to Germany in 1956.

30 Toll, 112.

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