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**Date:** August 25, 2010 11:07:43 PM CDT

**To:** "Cathy Blake" <[cblake50@att.net](mailto:cblake50@att.net)>

**Subject:** Re: **Smallest Witnesses lecture-text**

Dear Cathy,

I am going to write a brief text for you in this message. You may quote it, and I hereby give you my permission to do so. You may download it and print it, but you must realize that it is under international copyright and that it must not be used again without my permission nor used by anyone else nor quoted by you without citation to this message, including today's date.

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Children's Drawing under Genocide and Extreme Trauma: Comparison -- Terezin and Darfur, A Brief Text

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Children in Terezin drew under the aegis of a gifted and devoted teacher, Friedl Dicker-Brandeis. Friedl was a Bauhaus-trained artist who worked tirelessly with these children to teach and to aide them both aesthetically and psychologically. She wanted them to use their art as a way of coping with the lot they had innocently been dealt by fate, not as an escape but also not as a way just to express fear, anxiety, and loss. She believed in the power of the process of art-making itself and in its healing, wholistic aspects.

The children of Terezin were housed by the Nazis in special buildings for boys and girls respectively and on floors arranged by age, and they were cruelly separated from their parents. They were prohibited from attending school, from having lessons in any academic subjects. Art, music, and theater were not, however, considered important enough by the Nazis to prohibit. In these children's drawings, we find many images of activities, places, and objects drawn from their daily lives before they were forced into the concentration camp. One drawing shows a little black dog, for example, which must have been a child's pet, one which---we may imagine---the child was fondly missing and re-imagining. We find trees and flowers and dinners where families are gathered together. The drawings also show scenes of horror, but many of them seem to evoke pictorially the children's longing for what has gone missing in their lives.

When we turn to the drawings by children of Darfur, such positive scenes and images are stunningly absent. Here, by contrast, we do not seem to have a population of children who were suddenly wrenched from a peaceful life and plunged into a hellish world, as under the Nazis.

Here, we have a population of children who seem to have suffered longer and, in some cases, to such an extent that the horror has obliterated all happy imagery. Whereas, in the Terezin drawings, we rarely if ever observe violence, we see it graphically depicted in the art of the children of Darfur. Spears fly, dead people are shown upside down, villages burn down, attackers and fleeing people are portrayed, weapons, airplanes. Fire and mayhem ensue. The drawings are profoundly disturbing to behold.

The children of these two populations were exposed, as we know, to ghastly but different forms

of horror, and their drawings reflect those differences. In Terezin, children rarely saw anyone being murdered before their eyes; whereas, the opposite was true with the children of Darfur, who witnessed rapes and horrible forms of killing, and whose drawings stand as a mute testament to the outrages of violence and brutality. They constitute a witness in ways very different from what we find in Terezin, where art served the children also as wish fulfillment and nostalgia and gave them a chance to "get out" for a while, as their art teacher Friedl planned and hoped and arranged.

It is very important to note that in one case there was a teacher, a supremely sensitive and gifted and experienced teacher, and that, in the other case --- in Darfur ---the children drew spontaneously what came to their minds when asked by the peace workers to record their impressions. There was no teacher, and they were both freer and in a way less free. They were given a task: Tell us what happened to you and to your family and to your village. In their art, they held fast to this mission. Whereas, the Terezin children had a much broader palette of subject matter and a greater emotional range. They were guided by a teacher who wanted to draw out of them more than a record, and therefore their drawings reflect a wider range of content, form, and style.

What is supremely important in both cases is the daunting capacity of the traumatized children to express themselves so powerfully in graphic media. They were able to draw. They used pencil, pen, graphite, paint, paper, crayons, and chalk, and they allowed themselves to become absorbed in the process of trying to put down what was in their hearts and minds. In so doing, they staved off the horror. They pushed back destruction by being creative. We can imagine how supremely valuable and important this was to them. How much it helped. While drawing, each child was master or mistress of his or her own experience, and however horrible the content, it was the child now who could control it and tell it and not---in that moment---not in that sense---be a victim.

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Cathy, I hope the above is helpful to you and to your students.

With all my best and warm wishes,  
Sincerely,  
Dr. Ellen Handler Spitz

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