The Facing History Resource Center has a study guide to accompany the exhibition “Anne Frank in the World, 1929-1945” Also available from the center are videos about the Frank Family – Dear Kitty, Just a Diary, and an interview with Otto Frank from the film Avenue of the Just. A videotaped lecture entitled “The World of Anne Frank: Historical Background” by Paul Bookbinder is also available.

READING 13

The “Model” Concentration Camp

At the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, SS Chief of Security Reinhard Heydrich had discussed the idea of creating a “privileged camp.” It would be a propaganda tool to deceive Jews about the dangers of deportation and fool the world about what was really happening to the Jews. The Nazis chose Theresienstadt, a prison camp forty miles north of Prague, Czechoslovakia, for the purpose. The Nazis promoted it as a “model” camp where elderly Jews, much decorated veterans of World War I, and prominent individuals whose murder might raise awkward questions could live and work in “comfortable circumstances.” The inmates included a number of famous poets, painters, musicians, composers, and scholars.

German officials often referred to the camp as Theresienbad. (Bad is the German word for spa). They claimed that it was a “paradise ghetto” and forced inmates to create propaganda that supported that image. In real life, Terezin was no paradise. Peter Fischel, a fifteen-year-old who died at Auschwitz, wrote of the camp.

We have gotten used to getting up at 7 o’clock in the morning, standing in a long line at midday, and at 7 o’clock in the evening, holding a plate into which they pour some hot water tasting a trifle salty, or perhaps with a suggestion of coffee, or to get a small portion of potatoes. We have got used to sleeping without beds, to greeting any person wearing a uniform, to keeping off the footpaths. We have got used to have our faces slapped for no reason whatsoever, to getting hit, and to killings. We have got used to seeing people wallowing in their own excrement, to seeing coffins full of dead people, to seeing the sick lying in filth and stench and to seeing the doctors powerless. 35

In the summer of 1943, the Nazis allowed a committee from the German Red Cross to tour the camp for the first time. The group’s refusal to speak about their visit did not serve the Nazis’ purpose, however. So in 1944, they invited the Danish Red Cross, the Danish foreign minister, and
the International Red Cross to inspect the camp. This time, the Nazis were prepared. Before the visitors arrived, they ordered the prisoners to pave streets, repair housing, build a playground, and even plant twelve hundred rosebushes. The Nazis also deported seventy-five hundred young men and women to Auschwitz to make the camp seem less crowded and to substantiate their claim that it was a ghetto for old people. The visitors were suitable impressed.

Flushed with their success, the Nazis decided to create a “documentary-style” film about Terezinstadt in the summer of 1944. Kurt Gerron, an inmate who had been a well-known actor and director, was put in charge of the filming of _The Fuehrer Gives a City to the Jews_. But he was not allowed to edit the film or even view the developed footage. Two weeks after the movie was completed, he and other participants were sent to Auschwitz. Gerron was gassed soon after his arrival.

During World War II, over 150,000 Jews passed through Terezinstadt. About 33,000 died there from malnutrition, disease, and overwork. Many of the rest were shipped to death camps. Fewer than 16 percent survived. After the war, some Germans claimed that all they knew of the concentration camps was what they had heard about Theresienstadt.

**CONNECTIONS**

Why did the Nazis create a “model” concentration camp? Why did they want outsiders to see it? How important was it to deceive the Red Cross? Why?

→ The Facing History Resource Center has an educational packet on Terezinstadt which includes slides of art prepared for the Nazi propaganda as well as art prepared secretly to document camp life. The packet also includes video interviews with survivors of the camp. Of particular interest is the testimony of Helga, a young artist who tried to paint what she saw – not what she thought she saw or wanted to see.