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Book Reviews

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The Complete Lives of Camp People: Colonialism, Fascism, Concentrated Modernity. By Rudolf Mràzek. Duke University Press, 2020. 488+viii.

Brilliant, moving and deeply disturbing, *The Complete Lives of Camp People* takes as its starting point debates over the German philosopher Martin Heidegger's relationship with the Nazi party. Why did this man "at the pinnacle of modern thought" remain silent about the Holocaust? (p. 1). For Mràzek, it is modernity, and not Heidegger's biography per se, that begs to be interrogated. This premise grounds his sweeping study of two early twentieth-century camps. One is Theresienstadt, which for three years served as a way station for elite Czech, German, Danish and Dutch Jews on the route to the German extermination camps to the east. The other is Boven Digoel, established in New Guinea by the Netherlands Indies government to imprison Indonesian communists and nationalists far from the colony's heart. None of these prisoners knew when their sentence would end and where they would end up. It was in this state of suspension that the seemingly trivial elements of camp people's lives gained such heightened importance. In these camps, Mràzek investigates "a space of the modern crushed into sharp pieces", sharp pieces that "under a possibility of the ultimate implosion of everything" became "untimely", "beautiful", even "sublime" (pp. 2–3).

Mràzek draws on a wealth of evidence from government documents, journals, memoirs and interviews with survivors and their descendants. He uses this archive to reveal the high stakes assigned to the smallest of things: clothing, beauty, hygiene, sports, music, letters, rumours, the noises from beyond the walls, the real and imagined flow of global news. Part 3, "Light", for instance,

covers “clearing”, which describes the construction of the camps within an existing landscape; “enlightenment”, which scrutinizes the stress on education and cultivation; and “limelight”, which focuses on the astonishing amount of theatre performed in the camps (pp. 141, 143). Like Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and others, Mràzek refuses to let the finer things of the European tradition off the hook.

Were it not for the gravity of what Mràzek has to tell us, one might be tempted to find some of the stories in the book picturesque, even amusing.[1] But Mràzek does not let us forget the current of dread that courses through these tales.[2] By the final third of the book, dread takes over. In Part 4, “City”, Mràzek describes the material mechanisms of confinement—the effect is claustrophobic, even nauseating. In Part 5, “Scattering”, Mràzek describes men and women who, upon their release from the camps, discovered they had nowhere to go (p. 209).[3] Some of the Indonesian leftists released from Boven Digoel ended up in Indonesian prisons. Many survivors from Theresienstadt emigrated to Israel. With the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Arabs, the new nation “became a suburb of the camps”, with a “real closeness” to the places from which the refugees had come (p. 361). Between colonialism and fascism, the camp form had spread across the globe.[4]

Yet there were ways of escaping: madness and suicide, but also radical thought. Boven Digoel and Theresienstadt belonged to a global system that seems more totalizing than ever. They were also sites in which it became possible to reimagine the world, for those brave and crazy enough to look for a way out.[5] In the end, the internees scattered and the lives they lived in the camps faded to dust. But some dreamed a dream that gave them somewhere to run towards. I count Mràzek among the inheritors of this dream. No one else could have written this book.

Danilyn Rutherford
Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, 655 Third Avenue, 23rd Floor, New York, NY 10017; email: drutherford@wennergren.org.

NOTES

1. Some Theresienstadt survivors saw the camp "as a place to look back with longing; in a perverse, disquieting way". The book shows why this makes a certain sense. See Mràzek 2020, p. 362.
2. Theresienstadt survivors remembered a play that was cancelled abruptly when key members of the cast were transported east to be killed. See Mràzek 2020, p. 194.
3. Mràzek describes Thomas Najoan, who tried to escape from Boven Digoel three times. The first time, he was caught in the neighbouring forests. The second time, he made it as far as the Thursday Islands, north of Australia, only to be captured by the British authorities. The third time, he disappeared and presumably died. See Mràzek 2020, pp. 324–25.
4. Some of the most stirring passages in this section describe how camp people in one locale dreamed of escaping to another. In the Netherlands, Jewish families discussed escaping to Batavia, just as Sjahrir and his comrades considered escaping to Europe. Children in Theresienstadt made art depicting palm trees and sunshine. "I have no doubt about it", Mràzek comments, "the warm regions they painted and drew to escape to, in a dream, too, were the Indies, and New Guinea, and Boven Digoel" (p. 355).
5. Mràzek spent the first forty-five years of his life in Prague and remembers some of the Theresienstadt internees as people he knew or heard about during his childhood. When Mràzek was a young man, camp people helped to launch his career. Wim Wertheim, the Jewish Dutch lawyer and historian who pioneered the critical study of Dutch colonialism in the Indies, met with Mràzek in Amsterdam when Mràzek was still living in Prague. On Wertheim's introduction, Mràzek met Harry Benda, a Jewish Czech historian who had barely escaped the Nazis, and who eased Mràzek's passage to the United States. Wertheim was a good leftist, Mràzek recalls. There was "a big picture of Che Guevara on the wall" (see Mràzek 2020, p. 339)

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The King's Chinese: From Barber to Banker, the Story of Yeap Chor Ee and the Straits Chinese. By Daryl Yeap. Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: SIRD, 2019. xxiii+233.

Towards the close of Queen Victoria's reign (1837–1901), in 1900, a group of Chinese in Singapore founded the Straits Chinese British