

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Welcome to LBI Presents—a new podcast from the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. I’m Mark Oppenheimer. I’m the director of Open Learning at American Jewish University, and I’ve spent my career writing about Jewish history. On this series, we dive into LBI’s archive, with key experts as our guides, to learn about the lives of German Jews throughout history...beyond the stories you already know. Today, LBI presents... food as power.

Look, it’s hard to talk about art in a podcast. But I’m going to try. Because I want you to picture this remarkable sketch in the LBI Archive.

SFX: SKETCHING

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): It’s an image of about a dozen loosely drawn figures—people—bent over. They look like they’re picking something up. But what? We can’t see.

SFX OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Architect Norbert Troller made this sketch in 1942. At the time, he was a prisoner at Theresienstadt, a transit camp-slash-ghetto in what is now the Czech Republic. Like all ghettos, Theresienstadt was plagued by food shortages. Troller later wrote that his sketch depicts people picking up scraps of food from the floor. Scraps, like potato peels.

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: I think food is an incredibly salient part of everyday life, and if you want to understand a society, you need to look at food.

THEME

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Historian Anna Hájková is the author of *The Last Ghetto: An Everyday History of Theresienstadt*.

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Food is power. Do you have access to your food because you are cook or a butcher? Or do you have access to the food because people are kind of bringing you bribes or your job is ranked as indispensable?

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Theresienstadt is a difficult place to talk about. According to the Nazis, it was a "spa town" where elderly German Jews could "retire" instead of being deported to labor camps. But in reality, Theresienstadt was a transit stop, where Jews of all ages were kept until it was time to send them to the death camps farther east. Over the course of the war, more than 155,000 Jews were imprisoned in Theresienstadt. And almost all of them died. You may have heard of it as a place of heroic resistance. And it is true; a lot of art, music, and recipes were found there after liberation. But it's more complicated than that. The day-to-day life of Theresienstadt was run by a Jewish administration, appointed by the Nazis. They decided where other Jews worked, what they ate, where they slept, and who would be deported next. All under the rule of the Nazis. My conversation with Anna explores ideas of power, agency, and victimhood by looking at Theresienstadt as its own society, with its own hierarchies and social norms. Especially around food.

THEME OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So Theresienstadt survived to the end. It wasn't destroyed, materials survived. And that allowed you to look at the social hierarchies that developed in this prisoner society, often along lines like nationality, gender and class. Why were these social hierarchies interesting to you as a historian?

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: That's a great question. The social hierarchies are so important because I believe any given society is about hierarchies. You know? So in order to understand any given society, you need to pay attention to class. So whether in Theresienstadt, you have access to bacon and to butter or just a usual small paltry food ration, will then define if you are wealthy or if you are poor. The other thing that I would say is people often approach the Holocaust kind of looking for confirmation of what they knew. I was very source driven. And I was surprised by many things. I was surprised how important was age. I was very surprised that all these people who were nominally Jewish, yeah? Like everybody was deported to Theresienstadt because Nazis marked them to be Jewish, and they suddenly start setting themselves apart as Czech or as German or as Austrian. And therefore, I really believe, especially in a history where most people have been murdered and they cannot testify themselves as historians and also as a popular

audience, we need to pay attention to the sources rather than kind of look for confirmation of what we know well.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So this is a little bit delicate because, of course, the Holocaust is rightly treated as this rupture with history, as people living in these extreme and unimaginable circumstances. But part of what you're saying is actually a lot of the things that mark society outside of the ghetto or the camp—class, nationality, gender—are just re-inscribed inside the camp as well. It looks more like life outside than we think. Is that fair?

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: It's absolutely fair. In fact, I would even push a little bit further against what you are saying. I don't think the adjective "unimaginable" is very useful here. Our job as historians and our job as podcast makers is to make history imaginable. If I say about the Holocaust it's unimaginable, I am out of a job, right?

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Okay. So one of the ways that you help us imagine it, one of the categories that you say, "Look, this exists outside, it also exists inside," is food. And while people were hungry all the time, there was still food in the ghetto. And it was one of the things that structured their experience. So how does looking at food inside the Theresienstadt ghetto help us understand the experience there?

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: I have all this material and I was really drowning in material. I went to like 100 archives around the whole world. And I thought very deeply, what are the 5 to 10 chief topics that keep coming up in the testimonies of the people? And food and hunger was definitely on the top 5 to 6 lists. And this is how I ended up structuring the book about medicine and illness, about social structure, about cultural life, about transports to the east, and about food and hunger. And none of us would expect to think about the Holocaust and think food and hunger did not play a role. But how did it exactly play a role? So this is something you will have with any ghetto or any concentration camp, but Theresienstadt was specific because Nazis actually provided the money for which the food was bought. It was specific because in May '42, just before the elderly from Germany and Austria start arriving, the Jewish self-administration decided to introduce food rationing according to whether people are working or not working, and the elderly didn't have to work. And it also kind of shows us how people in a situation of total scarcity still can have little luxuries. What food is meaningful and beautiful to them.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Wait. I have to stop you. So how are they getting their food? My sense is, they're locked up. They're in a closed society. There are gates. There are walls. There are fences. How are they... It's not like they can go source, you know, beef from the farm 12 miles outside of town. How does this all work?

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: So most importantly, food is being purchased by the SS. So from the beginning to the end, it's the SS, it's Eichmann's office and a central office for Jewish immigration that is running the ghetto. And from the money that they have stolen from the Jews, from these funds, they purchase food and deliver it. This is also the food money that is partly being already pilfered by the SS.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So they're stealing money from the Jews, then buying food and bringing it into the ghetto and giving it to the Jews who are then able to ration it according to whatever structures they put in place.

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: And partly also whatever rations the SS puts on them. The food rations in theory are about the same like the normal gentile population of the Czechs. But in practice, there is less food and the food that is purchased is lesser quality. So the bread is bad. The meat is often scrap meat. There is very little milk. And then on top of this food that is purchased, sometimes some of the SS will take some of the meat and sell it outside on the black market to make some extra profit. On top of this food, you will have some prisoners who were able, in '44, to have their own little allotments outside of the ghetto. Constantly, people are receiving parcels from their gentile relatives and friends. That is actually quite an important surplus.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: There were parcels coming into the ghetto? You could get mail?

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Yes. Actually, one of the things I love doing with my students, because it's really important to bring it home, what does it mean to be in the ghetto? And one of the classes I really like doing with my students in the Holocaust seminar is, imagine your best friend has been deported to a concentration camp or a ghetto. It's 1943 and you can send them a 4 pound package. What are you going to pack, yeah? And then you have to imagine: what will last? This is the age before plastic. So how will you wrap it? And if you

don't have supermarkets and you know the butchers will be running very quickly on a shortage and you know, a while ago—

MARK OPPENHEIMER: And butter will go rancid. Meat can go bad.

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Yeah, exactly! Like and then there's actually onions that last long. Plus, there will be also people smuggling in food. So in that sense, the ghetto is good business for the people who can smuggle in food because food suddenly costs a lot.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: How is food used for power in the ghetto?

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Food is power. If you have access to food, especially to scarce food, you can exchange it for the job that you want. You can get better medical treatment. You can maybe exchange it for a place of your own until '44. So you have, kind of, three levels of scarcity in Theresienstadt. It's about food. It's about accommodation. And it's about protections from transports. And if you wanted to have a room of your own, maybe if you were a cook or a butcher or a baker, you're able to bargain and barter some of the food you are making on the side. So there's a lot of things you can barter food for. But when it gets to the point of being bartered out of the transport, that gets very expensive and that is not food anymore. That is, say, cigarettes. People still smoke even if they are starving. So for something like 50 cigarettes in '43, you can maybe exchange yourself for your name to be taken out from one transport. Just this one transport, not the next one. And then in fall '44, it will be the Germans and no longer the Jewish self-administration and nothing is going to save you.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So with the Jews, you could get your name pushed down the transport list by bribing them. Once it's the Germans, they don't need your cigarettes or your plums, and so the bribes don't work. Or they could just take them from you, if they wanted them.

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Exactly. And also the Nazis are in the business of constructing a genocide. And they know that. The Jews do not know that. And even though quite often they would, in theory, have the information in front of them, this is such a heartbreaking information that people kind of don't compute it. And I looked really into the fact how people in Theresienstadt could have known what is happening in the east. And they kind

of do not quite hear the information because it's too new and too upsetting. So it's only a handful of people who, in '44, eventually find out what is actually happening in Auschwitz.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So they generally think the transport is transport to another ghetto, not to the end.

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: They're thinking it's going to a concentration camp. They're thinking that the elderly and the sick will probably die soon, but they cannot really fathom the gas chambers.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: All right. So outside the camps, obviously, this is a highly class stratified society. There are Jews who are quite wealthy. There are Jews who are middle class. Not all Jews are. This is true of gentiles. Once they get inside the ghetto, how does class persist and what was the role of class in how food was distributed?

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: So the old class is, I wouldn't say completely erased, but in most cases, it's irrelevant. And the new class is reconstituted according to how old you were. When have you arrived to Theresienstadt. According to ethnicity and to your gender. And very importantly, to your job. So, say, you are a physician and you're deported to Theresienstadt relatively early with the first three transports. And let's say you have good social capital. Social capital will be also very important. Are you well networked? Are you charming? Do you know the right people? Are you conventionally attractive? And with those abilities, you will probably make a career and be a head of a unit in the hospital because, by the way, the healthcare in Theresienstadt, thanks to very kind of *macher* network of physicians, eventually becomes excellent. So, with these good jobs, you then have better access to food. But you can also swap it around and look at, say, the cooks, because who becomes the cook? And before '39, in 1935, if you are an upper middle class family and have a bright son who has just done the, you know, final exams, they are not saying "He will become a cook!"—.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: But then, inside the ghetto, the kid who maybe wasn't so good on his exams, who had to become a cook, has the status of the doctor.

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Exactly. There is actually a horrible Theresienstadt joke about a young woman has been seduced and is weeping in front of the ghetto court because the guy who

seduced her, having promised her marriage, promised to be a cook. But it turns out he works in the ghetto bank.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: *[laughter]* She got a banker and not a cook!

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Yes!

MARK OPPENHEIMER: In some ways, some of the traditional honored Jewish professions, like being an intellectual, being a writer, being a rabbi, would have been totally useless. There'd be no class attached to being just a *luftmensch* who, you know, had lots of great ideas, but no capitalizable skill. It's a bleak picture. Was there anything that surprised you most? When you look back on your discoveries about how food was used in the ghetto, is there something that leaps out as the most surprising new thing you learned?

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Well, yes, it does. And I mean, I'm also aware that we sit here and we tell the stories and we are laughing and it's good to laugh, but we are talking about a moment in genocide. And I guess, a particularly heartbreaking moment for me was to realize that you have a very high mortality of elderly in Theresienstadt. You have quite a lot of old people who are sent to Theresienstadt. And then I figured out that it is probably no accident. I mean, okay, that's my speculation, but I think it's a strong speculation. One or two weeks before the first old people from Germany start arriving to Theresienstadt, it's the Jewish self-administration, they decided that there would be this triage of food rations. And people who don't work, which are the people above 60 years of age if they're women and 65 if they are men, but majority of the elderly are women, right? And the non-workers get hands down the smallest food rations. And then what happens is that from the people above 60 years of age, almost everybody dies in Theresienstadt. So if you are 55 or 50 or 20, sure, sometimes you will be hungry and the bedbugs will be biting you. And you are have constant panic attacks about transports. But you will not die. You will die once you are sent further to the east, because in the end, almost everybody in Theresienstadt dies. But it's only the elderly who are on these starvation rations and that was apparently the decision of the Jewish self-administration because they felt like there is not enough food for everyone. So they do these tough calls about access to medical care, about access to food and access to medication and to accommodation, so—

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So the Jewish administration had to make the decision to...

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: They didn't have to. They did.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Do you think it was the right decision?

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: So I thought very carefully how to phrase it, um...

MARK OPPENHEIMER: They decided, we're going to starve old ladies, women over 60, and men, but mostly women over 60, to death.

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: They decide exactly for this. They do not put it in these words because these are very ugly words. And as you said, Mark, when we started, these are very, very delicate topics because the Holocaust is the foundational genocide of 20th century, and it should be the foundational genocide. And there is too little food in Theresienstadt and that the people are in the ghetto, that is the decision of the Nazis. And then the Jewish self-administration does this tough call. And the point that I was trying to make about good or right, it's not that the decision was bad or right, but that it has been erased from history. And I think we should give the old people the dignity of telling the whole story, warts and all.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: You write in your book about sexual barter. What was that?

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Sexual barter is quite a frequent approach with which men and women navigate moments of extreme, you know, scarcity and they exchange romantic and social and sexual favors, sometimes lasting and sometimes one-off, for resources and for protection. So, particularly in Theresienstadt, you will have women who will go to the baker say, at the end of the shift, and they, say, suggest intercourse in exchange for food. But you will also have women who will start a relationship with members of the Jewish self-administration because they hope they will be put on the so-called protection list. Sexual barter, importantly, is very frequently an aspect of sexual violence, but the people still have a moment of choice. And I think we need to recognize that people have agency and that the women who would, you know, go on holidays to Croatia or to Riviera kind of arrive at the bottom and they decide that they will sell sex in order to help their fathers, their husbands and their sons make ends meet.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So you mentioned that word "agency." I'm always a little bit troubled by that word. It seems very important to historians often to try to establish agency. And then, of course, there's a counter argument that none of us in this world really has agency, right? So it may be that agency is just a conceit. Why is it important to say, oh, these women had agency? I mean, they were in this extreme situation. I think I would be the first to give up all of my autonomy just to get a scrap of bread or to protect my child or my mother or, you know, what is the interest in saying, well, they had agency. They could have walked away.

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Hmm. Agency does not necessarily mean that by having agency you would change things. But by having agency, you endeavor to change things. So the cooks could use the agency and decide to give the bread away or to give it to their starving grandparents, or to say, okay, I will donate it to one of the homes for elderly people. Because there are such donations. And it's their agency to decide to barter the bread in exchange for intercourse.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: But is part of this discussion of agency about kind of arriving at a decision that some of these people made good choices and were better somehow and others could have...well, they, look, these guys found a better way to share food! You could have done that.

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: No, it's absolutely not about what is the better or worse way or facing the Holocaust. Agency here will help us understand what people do when they're facing these horrible situations and the question, in order for us as historians and as publishers to understand how people tick, we need to see how we really are oppressed by structure. And we still choose to develop certain strategies how to live our lives. Like, I totally agree with you. We have so little choice. It's rather a quest to understand what people do independently, whether they're successful or not, to navigate said shitty conditions.

MUSIC

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Tell me about your own ethnic background. Your mother's side of the family is Jewish and not your father's?

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Yeah. So my paternal grandparents were political resistance fighters who were eventually caught and sent to the camps or sentenced to being executed. And my maternal grandfather was a Jew, and his father was in Theresienstadt and eventually sent to Auschwitz and killed.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So you had a family connection to this?

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Yes. But none of the people from my family who were in Terezin came back, which is one of the reasons why, when I wrote the book, I really wanted to focus, like, on the people who didn't make it.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: On your father's side of the family, there's a particularly interesting and somewhat funny story about food. Your father's mother was in a camp and did survive. It wasn't Theresienstadt. And gained weight, right?

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Yes. So my late grandmother, Alana, who after the war became a historian, was in various satellite camps of Buchenwald. And like we spoke, it was possible to send people parcels. And her family figured out that what would particularly be lasting is bread. And, of course, if you eat lots of carbohydrates, you put on weight. And she came back to Prague having gained weight, but please don't tell, Anna, anyone. And here I am telling you!

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Because, she didn't want you to tell anyone because it would make it look as if she didn't suffer or as if people didn't suffer in the camps. It was too discordant to comprehend?

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Exactly, like these are the stories that we are not supposed to tell. And this is something that really is a problem, that it falsifies all histories of the Holocaust for a certain expectation of how suffering looks like. And I think that kind of really, you know, flattens the history of what it meant to be in the camps, of the fear, and of the fact that you can also be starving even when you are a little bit chubby.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: And yet, ironically, when people who know a little bit about the Holocaust think about Theresienstadt today, they often think about the cookbook that came out of Theresienstadt. In 1996, there was a famous cookbook called *In Memory's*

Kitchen, which was an edited version of a cookbook that a group of women put together in Theresienstadt. And I find this a little bit troubling. I mean, I'll just be honest. I'll put this out there, that there is a way in which some people talk about this camp experience as this time of solidarity and sisterhood and fruitfulness and ingenuity. In a way that can help us overlook or permit us to overlook the fact that, of course, then they all went to die. There's nothing happy about this story. How do you feel about this story? About the central story of food in Theresienstadt, which is this wonderful cookbook that was somehow salvaged from it.

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Hmm. I mean, I think we are here kind of getting to your really good critique of agency that I don't have beef with the cookbooks. And Mina Pachter's cookbook that is on the background of *In Memory's Kitchen* is just one of the many, many cookbooks. I guess the one discomfort I have is the introduction by Michael Berenbaum, who is my esteemed colleague and an amazing Holocaust historian who has been very good to me. But maybe because the books came out in the '90s, there is this framing as cookbook writing as spiritual resistance. And now let me explain what is spiritual resistance and where the concept comes from. People like Sybil Milton came with the concept of that we should enhance our understanding of resistance. And it's not only, you know, sitting somewhere with a hand grenade waiting to murder the Nazis, but putting on education for children, writing cookbooks, putting on theater bits, playing opera, maintaining the dignity could, so people argued, be an expression of spiritual resistance. Because they kind of felt looking at just these kind of these hardcore acts of resistance can be a little bit narrowing. And I think at some point spiritual resistance became a little bit like solution for all, and did good everywhere. As if, if you do not participate in resistance, you are a bad Holocaust victim. So here's my take at writing cookbooks. When you are really, really starving and in a difficult situation and all the things that are so meaningful to you are gone, you can commemorate them in a way. And it's also a way of holding on to something positive. You know, I would be careful about widening the concept of resistance too wide. Because in order to have resistance, I think you need to have a deliberate intention of hurting the Nazis. And by, you know, writing down the recipe for a *sacher-torte*, you are not trying to hurt Nazis. You're trying to stay alive and not to go crazy.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So you worry that by calling everything resistance, that concept loses all meaning.

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Yes.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: I would go a little bit further and I would say that's true of a lot of the words we use to talk about the Holocaust. "Dignity." You know, we talk about how some people maintain their dignity. Who doesn't maintain their dignity? You know, in Jewish teaching, everyone is created in the image of God. Everyone has this inherent spark of dignity. The idea that some people maintain it and hold on to it also implies that some people jettison it or lose it, maybe because they took part in some sexual barter that seems unseemly, but was utterly necessary to them inside the camp or, you know, stole food from someone because all they could think about was keeping their own child alive. These were people who were about to be murdered.

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: And also like, why do we expect them to die and be dignified? They die! Like, sometimes we are dignified, sometimes we are less dignified. But that's kind of a very 19th century notion of how you have to live.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Maybe it's enough just to be human, maybe dignity's too high a bar.

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Yes.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Anna Hájková. Thank you.

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ: Thank you, Mark.

THEME

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): That was Anna Hájková. I'm Mark Oppenheimer. And this is LBI Presents. 'Til next time.

PRODUCER: For more information and to visit LBI's digitized archive, go to lbi.org.

On the next episode of LBI Presents...In the early 1500s, a scholar named Johannes Reuchlin wrote a book called Augenspiegel to stop the empire from burning all Jewish books. What followed is a tale of political power grabs, bribery, and public feuds.

ERIKA RUMMEL: He begs the Jewish community to collect money and send him the money because he has to bribe people at the Imperial Court. And he says, and I quote, this is a wonderful line, he says, "The outcome of this affair depends on God and our wallets!"

PRODUCER: A sixteenth century flame war. Coming up on LBI Presents.

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