

# THE GHETTO SWINGER

RON SIMPSON looks into the background of the book, *The Ghetto Swinger*, to be published by the DoppelHouse Press of Los Angeles in January.



The sub-title of the book, *A Berlin Jazz Legend Remembers*, points us towards its subject, the memoirs of Heinz 'Coco' Schumann, several times voted Germany's top jazz guitarist in the 1950s and still playing jazz at the time of the book's initial publication in Germany in 1997. Now, with John Howard's English translation about to be published, the nonagenarian Schumann can write in his preface, 'I am a musician who spent time in concentration camps, not someone in a concentration camp who also played a little music.' In other words, Schumann defines himself by his music, not his suffering, but for all that the main title focuses on a few months in 1944.

Now normally referred to by its Czech name, Terezin, Theresienstadt (as Schumann calls it) has increasingly been the subject of historical interest in recent years, as proved by the string of documentary films of the last 30 years featuring Coco Schumann and listed in an appendix. It may not have been the scene of wholesale slaughter that death camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau were, but it reveals a peculiarly perverted and cynical aspect of the evil of the Holocaust and also the Nazis' success for so long in fooling a willingly credulous world.

Terezin was a fortress town in North West Bohemia that was converted into a ghetto/concentration camp after

1940. Its occupants were for the most part from Czechoslovakia and from the beginning contained a large number of academics and artists. A vibrant intellectual life developed there, not, at first, encouraged by the authorities, before gradually they saw the possibilities for a propaganda coup. An inspection visit by the International Red Cross in 1944 brought about a cleaning up operation, with the more sickly elements transferred to death camps and more room for the healthy; programmes of self-government, self-improvement and cultured relaxation made their phoney appearance. Most brazenly of all a film was made of the beautified ghetto, long thought to have the amazing title, *The Führer Gives a City to the Jews*, though now it's believed that the official title was more formal. The Red Cross was suitably impressed by the visit, but the propaganda value of the film proved to be nil: the war ended before it had been edited and much of it was destroyed, though there are plenty of fragments to be found on Youtube.

In the film a string orchestra led by Karel Ancerl, later probably the greatest conductor of the Czech Philharmonic, plays; a children's opera, *Brundibar*, written by Hans Krasa shortly before his confinement, is staged, as indeed it was many times in Terezin; and a jazz band, the Ghetto Swingers, led by famous pianist Martin Roman, includes Coco Schumann on drums – when he arrived, the band already had a guitarist, and Coco was nothing if not resourceful, as the book proves time and again.

Survivors from Terezin included Ancerl, Schumann, Roman and the boy who became a major Czech novelist, Ivan Klima, but many more died, often after being transferred to Auschwitz or another death camp. Krasa was one of the victims, as was Victor Ullman whose satirical opera, *The Emperor of Atlantis*, written in Terezin, rehearsed but never staged, is now performed with some frequency. Schumann's

friend, clarinettist Fritz Weiss ('our Benny Goodman'), died in Auschwitz and, most ironically, Kurt Geron found collaboration had no power to save his life. Geron was an actor and singer who had achieved fame in 1928 in Brecht and Weill's *Threepenny Opera* and was now engaged to direct the film depicting the comfortable life of Jews in Theresienstadt. Before the film had been edited he received his reward in the gas chambers.

The story of Terezin arouses so much interest because of its strange mixture of cynical cruelty and the inspiring survival of the human spirit. The beautification of Terezin may have been phoney, but there was nothing spurious about the dedicated writing, composing, educating and performing that went on among people who had only transport to a death camp to look forward to. Coco Schumann exemplifies this spirit. He claims that music saved his life – forming a band in Auschwitz certainly kept him alive – but so did his decisive and opportunistic temperament, refusing to be out-faced even by Josef Mengele. He also refers several times to his guardian angel and certainly his luck in meeting old friends at times when they could help him verged on the miraculous!

Schumann begins his memoir with the recollection of the time he realised he was not, as he had always thought, a German, but a Jew. In fact he was a half-Jew, his father Aryan, his mother a German Jew – it was enough to get him excluded from joining the Hitler Youth with the rest of his class. Clearly young Heinz was not of a particularly religious temperament and it was only the sufferings he endured for his race that made him feel Jewish. His identification as a German also was fairly ambiguous in the post-war years. He considered emigration to the States, even (briefly) to Israel, and spent a few years in Australia in the 1950s, but settled back in Berlin. Later in life he claimed he did not know how to handle his concentration

camp memories: 'it cannot be forgotten, ignored or suppressed, but the remainder of your life should not be determined solely by the horrors that happened decades ago.' The book ends tellingly with his response – calm, polite, but acid – to young people in the 1990s who claimed that the tales of Auschwitz were 'one big lie'.

This is clearly a serious and important book, but also more entertaining to read than I may have suggested. Heinz was very much a city boy and his youth was spent roaming Berlin in search of hot music and other diversions. At 12 he claims that he and his mates had 'the coolest latest records': as well as German jazzers he lists the likes of Duke Ellington, Chick Webb with Ella, and Nat Gonella. In defiance of the race laws he continued playing jazz and anything else that he could in the bars of Berlin until arrested in 1943.

After Terezin and Auschwitz he was ultimately freed at Wolfratshausen and set about rebuilding his life: his parents had survived, in his mother's case thanks to a piece of quick thinking by his father worthy of Coco himself. Making some sort of a living playing music in the Occupation years again relied on Coco's ingenuity.

His first big successes came with violinist Helmut Zacharias, then follows a vivid and fairly brief account of an up-and-down career, swayed by the changes in musical fashion. At its best he jammed with Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald and Lennie Niehaus, but he adjusted to pretty much every style, working on cruise ships or turning out novelty songs when necessary, teaching classical guitar, before finally deciding that it was jazz or nothing.

*The Ghetto Swinger*, co-written with Max Christian Graeff and Michaela Haas, gets a clear and unfussy translation from John Howard and is illustrated by a fascinating range of photographs.