



## Jiří Weil: a scientist and initiator of exhibitions of children's drawings from Terezín

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*History knows many prisoners and many children who draw,  
but this is the first time that prisoners drawing are children.*

*Tristan Tzara*

Jiří Weil's name is associated mainly with literary and journalistic work. Few people know that he was also a researcher in the Jewish Museum in Prague. The scientific work of this prominent person of cultural events is closely connected with world famous children's drawings from Terezín. It was Jiří Weil, who initiated the first exhibitions of children's drawings from Terezín in 1950s in Prague and then abroad. He was significantly involved in creation of the book named *Dětské kresby na zastávce k smrti (Children's Drawings and Poems. Terezín 1942–1945)* and film called *Motýli tady nežijí (The Butterflies Do Not Live Here)* as well.

Weil's work at the Jewish Museum can be dated from 1943 until 1959<sup>1</sup>. From July 1943 until the beginning of February 1945 he was employed here within the so-called *Central Jewish Museum*<sup>2</sup> as a member of one of the expert commissions cataloguing selected artifacts which had been shipped to the museum mainly from synagogues and Jewish Religious Communities and partly from Treuhandstelle storehouses. Weil was accepted into the museum thanks<sup>3</sup> to Hana Volavková<sup>4</sup>.

As we all know, in January 1945 so-called mixed marriages were declared non-protected. Both Jiří Weil and Hana Volavková lived in a so-called mixed marriage. Volavková was

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<sup>1</sup> The cataloging cards dictated by J. Weil are marked "Dr. W." The catalog has been preserved and is deposited in the Jewish Museum in Prague.

<sup>2</sup> During World War II the Jewish Museum in Prague was re-named by the Nazis as the Central Jewish Museum (1942–1945). Its activities commenced at the beginning of August 1942 under the auspices of the so-called Cultural Department of the Jewish Religious Community.

<sup>3</sup> LA PNP, 32/C/15 (A letter for J. Stanczak, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> Hana Volavková (1904–1985) was an art historian. She was accepted into the Central Jewish Museum on 15<sup>th</sup> of April 1943. (AJMP, the Jewish Museum, 1945–1946, IIb).



transported to Terezín on 11<sup>th</sup> of February 1945.<sup>5</sup> Weil chose a different path – with the help of his friends, as we all know, he faked his own suicide on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 1945.<sup>6</sup> He was in hiding till the end of the war in May 1945.

The Jewish Museum in Prague resumed its activities immediately after the war. Both Jiří Weil and Hana Volavková returned to the museum. Hana Volavková (1966, p. 222)<sup>7</sup> remembers this time in the following words: “While in 1945 there was a grand celebration of the liberation, the time of some home-comers came. ... Some submerged into past events, withdrew into themselves, and others sought compensation in whipped up activities. ... And this included those, who returned to the museum. As if history was repeating itself. This was not a normal collection of relics. Again, items were collected from all the corners of Bohemia and Moravia.”

“The main objective of museum was reinstalling war exhibitions and making them available to the public. Another necessity was to deal with the accumulated items that were shipped into the museum during the war.”(Bušek, 2007, p. 46)<sup>8</sup> And the last problem that had to be solved was to take care of lots of books. “Overall, more than 190 000 volumes were sent to the museum” (Bušek, 2007, p. 49)<sup>9</sup> shortly after the war ended.

Although Weil – as his wife Olga stated in her memoirs (Nový, 1991, p. 11)<sup>10</sup> – weighed after the war barely 44 kilograms, he immediately began working in the museum again. Several documents about his postwar activities were preserved in the Archive of the Jewish Museum in Prague.

Just 10 days after the end of the war, Weil was asked to solve the problem with books from the former Jewish Religious Community that were in the auditorium of the Faculty of Natural Science. The Nazis didn't have time to destroy them, so they threw them off the shelves onto one big pile in the auditorium at least. The books had to be moved immediately, and Weil

<sup>5</sup> ANM, fond Hana Volavková, K1.

<sup>6</sup> NA, fond Policejní ředitelství Praha, n. 12186.

<sup>7</sup> Volavková, H.: Příběh Židovského muzea, p. 222. Prague 1966.

<sup>8</sup> Bušek, M. and others: Naděje je na další stránce, p. 46. Prague 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Bušek, M. and others: Naděje je na další stránce, p. 49. Prague 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Nový, P.: Člověk: Jiří Weil. In: Weil, J.: Moskva-hranice, ed. J. Víšková. Praha 1991, p. 11.



only had one moving vehicle with two workmen. So he gave the order to ship the books to archival store in the former Maisel Synagogue in the same condition in which they were found. The books were stored, but not categorized. Weil hoped they would be stored properly in the museum library, as soon as enough space was released.<sup>11</sup>

In late May Weil arrived for the first time in the liberated Terezín concentration camp. As he wrote later, “Terezín was breathing its last breaths in the agony of typhoid barracks, and the last residents from foreign countries, who were waiting to return home”<sup>12</sup>.

Weil embodied his memories of Terezín, and the memories of former Terezín prisoners, into his not yet published short story about the Terezín concentration camp and in a number of his other works.

In his report for the National Administration, Weil stated that one of Terezín’s libraries, the so-called Hebrew library, a particularly valuable library, is in danger of being stolen, and it is therefore necessary to move it quickly.<sup>13</sup> In July 1945 a specialist committee was sent to Terezín to “professionally pack all the Judaic and Hebraic books for transport to Prague”<sup>14</sup>. The members of the “committee” that went to get the books from Terezín were also Jiří Weil and Hana Volavková.

In August 1945 Weil visited the Golden Crown Monastery, where a part of the library of Prague Jewish Community was deposited. Weil wrote about it the following: “From what I found, these books are the most valuable of the library of the former Jewish Community. At a conservative estimate, a train wagon would be needed to transport the books.”<sup>15</sup> Weil, therefore, proposes to leave the books where they are, until they can ensure their transport, because the books were constantly under the surveillance of university library official.

It is not known when exactly Jiří Weil left the postwar Jewish Museum. However, in the records stored in the Archive of the Jewish Museum in Prague, Weil’s name is found on a list

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<sup>11</sup> AJMP, the State Jewish Museum, 1950–1959, K31.

<sup>12</sup> LA PNP 32/C/29; a newspaper article *Našemu milému jubilantu k šedesátinám*.

<sup>13</sup> AJMP, the State Jewish Museum, 1950–1959, K31.

<sup>14</sup> ANM, fond Hana Volavková, K1.

<sup>15</sup> AJMP, the State Jewish Museum, 1950–1959, K31.



of workers of the museum dated of December 1945.<sup>16</sup> Jiří Weil probably left the museum as an employee at the end of the year, because in January 1946 he started working for the publishing house ELK.

Shortly after the war, the drawings and paintings of children – Terezín prisoners, were found in Terezín. All these artifacts were made in drawing lessons organized by Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, the painter that was in Terezín concentration camp as an adult prisoner.<sup>17</sup> Hana Volavková remembers their discovery in the following way: “In Terezín, only books, books and papers – remnants of the complex Terezín administration – were found. And drawings of children – prisoners were scattered as spoilage amongst them. On these pictures the hunger was a cook, and the war was an execution, delight was a fruit stand, and an ideal was a hospital bed, and return was a router, pointing to Prague.” (Volavková, 1966, p. 222)<sup>18</sup>

Weil came across the children's drawings just after the war. It is possible that it was during one of the mentioned post-war trips to Terezín. It is certain, however, that when in 1946 Jiří Weil went to Geneva, where an international congress was held, he knew about these paintings and drawings.

Weil was allowed to go to Geneva by a recommendation from Ministry of Education and Public Awareness. As stated in the recommendation, the purpose of this trip was “both literary study, and recovery, which is to be given to participants in the Swiss relief events for cultural workers.”<sup>19</sup>

It was in Geneva where Weil met Vlasta Drozdová, with whom he spoke about the children's drawings. Vlasta Drozdová, who was in Geneva on a stipend sojourn and dealt with the reorganization of children's pedagogical education, was very interested in the drawings, and she began to actively prepare an exhibition of them in Switzerland.<sup>20</sup> But Weil's and

<sup>16</sup> AJMP, the Jewish Museum, 1945–1946, 2b.

<sup>17</sup> For more information please see Pařík, A.: Friedl Dicker Brandeisová. Prague 1988.

<sup>18</sup> Volavková, H.: Příběh Židovského muzea, p. 222. Prague 1966.

<sup>19</sup> NA, fond Policejní ředitelství Praha, n. 12186.

<sup>20</sup> LA PNP, 32/C/14.



Drozdová's initiative eventually came to nothing. The exhibition did not take place. At that time the Jewish Community in Prague was apparently not prepared to cooperate in organizing international exhibitions.

In 1949 Weil's novel *Život s hvězdou* (*Life With a Star*) was published. There is certainly no need to analyze the well-known events that followed shortly afterwards. Weil was expelled from the Writer's Union, and the publishing house ELK was also closed down. Weil's editorial work was finished, as well as his journalistic work.

Hana Volavková<sup>21</sup> helped Weil to get a job in the museum again.<sup>22</sup> One of Weil's first achievements in the State Jewish Museum was the preservation of the archive records and books of Jewish Communities from abroad, stored in an unsuitable environment in an unworkable chapel at the Houska Castle.<sup>23</sup> This rescue operation followed Weil's activities at the museum in 1945.

His other professional and scientific work at the museum, however, was much broader than the issue of moving and storing the books. He was creating plans and librettos for exhibitions, arranging the archive, studying the Jewish history and culture, inventorying items etc.<sup>24</sup> And he combined his work in the museum with his own literary work. Almost all of his literary work was inspired by the museum material.

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<sup>21</sup> In 1950 Hana Volavková became the director of the State Jewish Museum in Prague.

<sup>22</sup> Based on the materials stored in archives, we can map Weil's scientific activities in the museum. He worked for museum from 1949. In 1956 he became a senior researcher. Weil worked at the museum till December 1958. However, according to his literary work, he kept in touch with the museum till his death in 1959.

<sup>23</sup> AJMP, fond Jiří Weil, estate.

<sup>24</sup> Weil's pivotal work at the museum: Creation of the plan for the permanent exhibition called *Persecution of Jews in Terezín*, for the exhibition of *children's drawings from Terezín* and other librettos for exhibitions and other librettos. Collaboration on the preparation of the exhibition *Terezín 1941–45*. Arranging the archive of the Jewish community from the occupation. Arranging the materials from the Terezín ghetto stored in the Prague. Management of *the depository of documentation of persecution*. Inventorying items, guided tours in collections, lecturing and discussions, staff training, preparing some annual reports of the activities of the museum and proposals plans, arranging of consultations. Studying of the history of Jews and Jewish communities. Collaboration on the scientific publications. As is evident, Weil's work at the museum was indeed quite varied, and if we were to make a full list it would take several pages of typescript. (AJMP, the State Jewish Museum, 1950–1959.)



In the same time, when Weil started working in the museum again, the war in Korea broke out. Weil, sensitively perceived and responded to the ongoing conflict in Korea, began to intensively work with the topic of Terezín children's creative work once again.

As a writer Adolf Branald stated in his memoirs, “defenseless, Jiří Weil sat in the office of the Jewish Museum and when the shooting started in Korea, Jiří said desperately: ‘They are murdering children again! Not anymore!’” (Nový, 1991, p. 13)<sup>25</sup>

Weil eventually managed to make the Prague Jewish Community organize an exhibition of the drawings and poems of the children prisoners from Terezín. The exhibition was organized as a part of the “Spartakiad” in 1955. (Vondráčková, p. 91)<sup>26</sup> It was the historically first postwar exhibition of drawings. (From the accounts of eyewitnesses, another well-known exhibition of childrens' drawings was the one in 1943 in Terezín. It was the first childrens' exhibition of drawings, carvings, models and other artifacts. This exhibiton was organized on July 1943 in the cellar by the painter Friedl Dicker-Brandeis. (Kasperová, 2010, p. 173)<sup>27</sup>)

Weil wrote the following about finding the children's drawings: “Written material from the Terezín ghetto was saved shortly after the town was liberated. ... Among the written documents – papers, statistical reports, medical library list, books, correspondence – layed also large covers from coarse paper. They were marked C. III., B. IV., L 417. ... The marks symbolized the different ‘children facilities’. There was 4 000 drawings. The fate of the children artists was easy to discover from the transport documents, because most of paintings were signed.”<sup>28</sup>

Then Weil continues about this theme: “I noticed the childrens' drawings, at the time still uncatalogued, when I started organizing the archive of documentation of persecution. The drawings were previously in the hands of many people, ... but nobody considered them as valuable material. Perhaps I also wouldn't have fully understood their meaning, if I hadn't found other material as well: the children's from Terezín. ... Childrens' poems and rhymes

<sup>25</sup> Nový, P.: Člověk: Jiří Weil. In: Weil, J.: Moskva-hranice, ed. J. Víšková. Praha 1991, p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> Vondráčková, J.: Mrazilo-tálo, p. 91. LA PNP, 32/C/26.

<sup>27</sup> Kasperová, D.: Výchova a vzdělávání židovských dětí v protektorátu a v ghettu Terezín, s. 173. Prague 2010.

<sup>28</sup> LA PNP, 32/C/23.



were only discovered on November 1952. A. Flachová handed them over to the State Jewish Museum; they came from the property of her husband, who was an educator in the ‘children facility’ L 417. There are 42 manuscripts, and 24 typewritten copies. The package in which they were handed over says ‘Terezín 1941–1945’. ... Only in connection with the childrens' poems did the enormous value of the material stand out. While the drawings are full of colours, and escape into a dreamland, ... the childrens' poems tell about the suffering, about the hunger, hardships and violence. Only in this contrast and unity there is the strength of this unique document, because with both the poems and the drawings, in the midst of these horrors and violence, the children were trying to maintain what is most valuable – humanity. The archive also contained the teacher's notes, from which it is clear that the children were purposefully led to draw and paint. The learning program was systematic; the children first learned to draw waves, circles, and lines, and later objects that they saw around them. ... They were also shown reproductions of works of art. ... The most interesting were the free topics, where the children could draw whatever they wanted. The richness of the children's drawings is explained by the fact that teaching was forbidden and harshly prosecuted, while children's drawings and paintings escaped the attention of the Nazis, who didn't consider them ‘dangerous’. However, even though the children tried to escape the horrible reality in their drawings, life in Terezín still penetrated them. They drew and painted scenes of life in Terezín, which even today, after so many years, have an even more horrifying effect than the paintings of adult painters /Fleischman, Ungar, Fritta, Haas and others/.”<sup>29</sup>

The exhibition in 1955 was a great success. About 10 000 people saw the drawings and poems, including Tristan Tzara. When Tristan Tzara saw them, he said: “History knows many prisoners and many children who draw, but this is the first time that prisoners drawing are children...”<sup>30</sup>

In 1956 the exhibition travelled abroad. The children's drawings were exhibited in Paris in October 1956. The exhibition was held by a French Jewish Community. It was not only Hana Volavková, who travelled to Paris; even Jiří Weil received a passport. Thus, after many years, Weil visited the West.

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<sup>29</sup> LA PNP, 32/C/23.

<sup>30</sup> LA PNP, 32/C/23.



They travelled together with 2 external collaborators of the museum. When they arrived at the place where the exhibition was supposed to be installed, they found that exhibition area was only being finished and that five boxes of their shipment are lying in an unkempt side yard. One box was opened, and Fritta's drawings were stored in the unfinished boiler room. Furthermore, the remaining boxes with the packaged items and other parts did not arrive that day at all. Luckily the exhibition area was finished in the end and they managed to install the exhibition on time.<sup>31</sup>

The exhibition in Paris was very successful. Then the drawing exhibition was transferred to the House of Arts in Brno. Almost 20 000 people went to see it.<sup>32</sup> Subsequently, the museum was invited to organize an exhibition in Geneva, Leipzig, Vienna and other foreign cities.<sup>33</sup>

Weil and his colleague R. Herrmann were supposed to travel to Leipzig. However, as the report in the archive of the Jewish museum in Prague states, “due to the delay in passport matters by the representatives of the State Jewish Museum, the opening of the exhibiton was postponed, and R. Hermann finally travelled to Leipzig alone, because the second representative, Dr. Jiří Weil, was sick with the flu.”<sup>34</sup> It’s probable, that the authorities prevented Jiří Weil from travelling abroad again.

Weil wrote the following about the exhibition: “From the entries in the guestbook it is clear that in Germany ... the exhibition had the biggest response. When the survivors of the Thousand Year Reich are trying to turn Nazism into an innocent lamb, ... the exhibition of children's drawings has become proof that must have convinced even those, who doubted most.”<sup>35</sup>

The exhibition then travelled to Amsterdam, and other cities. It was finally installed at the Olympic Games in Tokio – in 1964<sup>36</sup>. The drawings are exhibited throughout the world to this day. The exhibition of the drawings eventually became a permanent part of museum

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<sup>31</sup> AJMP, the State Jewish Museum, 1950–1959, K38.

<sup>32</sup> AJMP, the State Jewish Museum, 1950–1959, K40.

<sup>33</sup> ANM, the State Jewish Museum, 1950–1959, K44.

<sup>34</sup> AJMP, the State Jewish Museum, 1950–1959, K28.

<sup>35</sup> LA PNP, 32/C/23.

<sup>36</sup> LA PNP, 32/C/29.





exhibitions in Prague and other cities. The Education and Culture Centre in Prague also provides a so-called travelling exhibition about children's drawings.

In the following years the drawings became a part of other artistic creations – for example the oratorios, suit or play.<sup>37</sup>

The success of the exhibition inspired museum researches Jiří Weil, Hana Volavková and Olga Herbenová to create a publication about drawings and poems. Olga Herbenová, a historian and a researcher in the collections department, who worked in the museum with Weil, states the following:

“The publication displays twenty-two poems written by children. It is illustrated with forty-seven children's drawings, made by thirty-nine children in Terezín from year 1942 till 1944. ... The selection of the visual material was made from a large number of drawings, pastel drawings, watercolor paintings, and glued cutouts, which are in the collections of the State Jewish Museum. ... From the diverse material we tried to choose pictures for our publication, which is one percent of the whole set. The selection was first inspired by the children's poems lyrics, which we had to illustrate appropriately. ... We then selected drawings in terms of artistic value. The subject and form of these drawings are artistically interesting expressions. However, they maintain the childlike directness and charm.” (Herbenová, p. 4)<sup>38</sup>

The book consisting of poems, drawings and an excerpt from a diary includes an epilogue by Jiří Weil, several words about children's poems and drawings, a catalogue of drawings and a catalog of poems.<sup>39</sup> At the end of the book we can find the “dates of the most important

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<sup>37</sup> Some artistic creations inspired by the drawings: 1963 – the Oratorio *The Butterflies Do Not Live Here* composed by Gustav Křivinka. 1964–5 – the Oratorio *The Song of Terezín* was composed in the USA by Franz Waxman. It was played in 2004 in the Czech republic, on the day of the victims of Shoah; 200 singers participated. 1967 – the one-act play written by Celeste Raspanti. The main character of the play is Raja, one of the children who survived in Terezín, and her family and friends. 1972 – the Suit *The Butterflies Do Not Live Here* composed by Karel Reiner. 2001 – the literary-musical programme *What for Exists the Sun if there is no Day?* composed by Daniel Dobiáš. 2003 – the Oratorio *Terezín* was composed by Ruth Emmet Fazal. She combined the poems with verses from the *Bible*, especially Psalms. In 2007 the New York Carnegie Hall introduced the oratorio. The composition was then heard all around the world.

<sup>38</sup> Herbenová, O.: Kresby židovských dětí z Terezína. In: *Věstník ŽNO*, 1959, č. 5/XXI, p.4.

<sup>39</sup> Author of catalog of drawings and preface to the catalog of drawings is Olga Herbenová. Author of preface to the catalogue of poems is Jiří Weil.



events” and data available about the number of children, who were sent to Terezín Concentration Camp.

Weil's epilogue from the book was printed later as a separate article with some slight modifications, in three versions (Czech, English and French) in the magazine, and it was used for an exhibition prospectus.<sup>40</sup>

The first edition of the book was published in 1959 in four languages (Czech, English, German, and French). The book was called *Dětské kresby na zastávce k smrti (Children's Drawings and Poems. Terezín 1942–1945)* with the motto: „... *only I never saw another butterfly...*“. The second edition was published in 1971 in five languages: English, German, Swedish, Spanish and Yiddish with new title: *I never saw another butterfly*, and with a new subtitle *Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezín Concentration Camp 1942–1944*. The new title of the book was probably caused by the success of the film with almost same name<sup>41</sup>.

The new title of the book remained even in the following Czech editions of the book. There is just a small difference in the latest edition first published after the revolution. The title is *Motýla jsem tu neviděl (I have not seen a butterfly around here: children's drawings and poems from Terezín)*. This new edition, with extensively altered graphic design and with the new selection of drawings and poems, was first published in 1993. It included an epilogue by Anita Franková, the head of the holocaust department in the Jewish Museum in Prague, who was transported to Terezín Concentration Camp as a child.

In 1957 editor Kosinová, who “wrote several reportages on children's drawings and poems, ... drew director Miro Bernat to this valuable material.”<sup>42</sup> This well-known documentarist contacted the State Jewish Museum.

Hana Volavková and Jiří Weil worked out<sup>43</sup> an outline of the screenplay of the film;<sup>44</sup> Weil's epilogue in the book became the central pillar of the script, composed with children's poems,

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<sup>40</sup> LA PNP, 32/C/23.

<sup>41</sup> *Motýli tady nežijí (The Butterflies Do Not Live Here)*.

<sup>42</sup> LA PNP, 32/C/23.

<sup>43</sup> They chose children's drawings for film with Olga Herbenová as well.



of which many were also printed in this book. Apart from the authors mentioned above, a painter Helga Hošková also participated in making the film.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, in co-operation of all researches and the director Bernat, the script was made. Miro Bernat later consulted the final script with Jiří Weil. It was also read by Hana Volavková. After the script was finished, Miro Bernat started directing.

The fifteen-minute color documentary film called *Motýli tady nežijí* (*The Butterflies Do Not Live Here*)<sup>46</sup> is based on authentic images of children's drawings and children's poems. The drawings are accompanied by shots of Terezín. Documentary film is narrated by Václav Voska, the author of the musical accompaniment is Karel Reiner.<sup>47</sup>

Film documentalist Antonín Navrátil in his deeper analysis of the film wrote: "Bernat does not see the drawings of the Jewish children from Terezín as a static matter that must be shown, but as dramatic phraseology; he reveals their inner conflict ... We see the children's drawings, but we feel their lives in them. ... The factual contents of the drawings, and their emotional speech are intricately interconnected, creating a new specific value. Reiner's music plays a substantial role in this." (Navrátil, p. 149)<sup>48</sup>

The film was presented in the Jewish museum in Prague on January 1959. Jiří Weil wrote the following about the film: "Only in the film directed by Bernat did the murdered Terezín children speak to the entire world community. Only then everyone heard their voice, everyone got to know their dreams, hopes, and their bitter end. Now the Terezín children will fight all

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<sup>44</sup> AJMP, the State Jewish Museum, 1950–1959, K27. I would like to thank prof. Miroslav Kryl, for co-operation in researching in the Archive of the Jewish Museum in Prague and for providing the copies of materials from the National Archive in Prague. I would also like to thank the staff of all archives who allowed me to study the archive materials and also the staff of Terezín Memorial, who kindly lent me a copy of the film *Butterflies Do Not Live Here*.

<sup>45</sup> Helga Weisová-Hošková (born 1929), academic painter, former child prisoner in Terezín concentration camp. Her uncle saved all her paintings and her diary by hiding them in the Terezín's walls.

<sup>46</sup> M. Bernat was inspired by the most famous poem *Motýl* (*The Butterfly*), 1942.

<sup>47</sup> The recitation of the work of the imprisoned children: Luděk Munzar, Jiřina Jirásková and Olga Sluníčková.

<sup>48</sup> Navrátil, A.: *Cesta Miro Bernata, Film a doba*. X/March, 1964, p. 149.



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over the whole world for peace, and against the resurrection of fascism. The fifteen thousand children did not die in vain.”<sup>49</sup>

This extremely impressive documentary received several awards, including the Golden Palm at the International Film Festival in Cannes (1959).

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<sup>49</sup> LA PNP, 32/C/23.