



# Hedda Grab-Kernmayer in Theresienstadt

Emily Sheffield, UNC Charlotte  
Dr. Jay Grymes, Department of Music



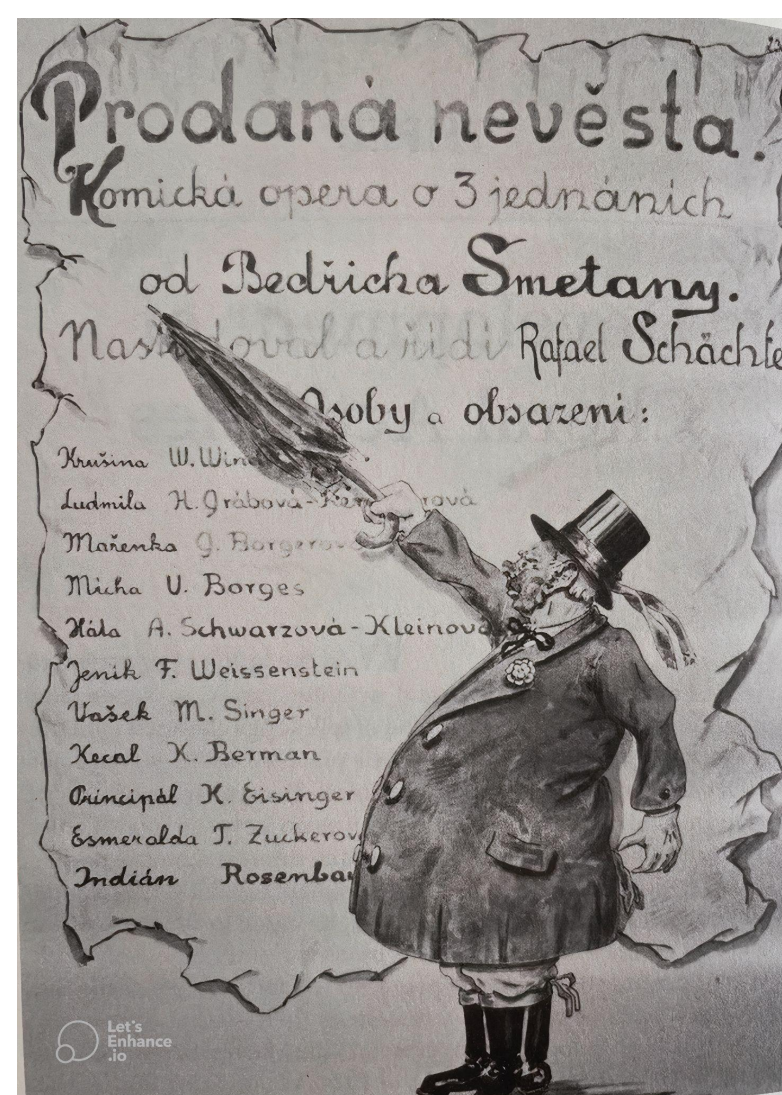
## Introduction

In the histories of the Theresienstadt ghetto, the main focus has been on the German administration, specifically men, and has undermined the efforts of the women prisoners. Not only have their experiences as women been neglected, the experiences of Czech Jews has been largely ignored in both German and English histories. One figure who is mentioned but never profiled is mezzo-soprano Hedda Grab-Kernmayer. Within Theresienstadt, Grab-Kernmayer was one of the first professional musicians present at the ghetto, arriving shortly after the Aufbaukommando in December 1941. Grab-Kernmayer survived the Holocaust, eventually moving to the U.S. in the 1950s.

Drawing on current research and often neglected interviews with Grab-Kernmayer from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, this project chronicles Grab-Kernmayer's role as one of the most important yet undervalued musicians in Theresienstadt.

## Purpose

The purpose of this project is to collect, study, and chronicle the experiences of Hedda Grab-Kernmayer by using interviews recorded by Dr. David Bloch, director and founder of Terezin Music Memorial Project, and other holocaust historians. This project is important because it sheds light on a “hidden figure” within Theresienstadt who was undermined not only in historiography but also within the ghetto itself from 1941 to 1945.



Program for the  
Freizeitgestaltung production  
of The Bartered Bride

## Background

Grab-Kernmayer was born in Prague on August 6th, 1899 to a German-speaking family that moved to Vienna in 1908. From the time she was 10 years old, she was always asked to sing for her family and friends and even directed plays with her cousins. Singing was one of the biggest aspects of Grab-Kernmayer's life, eventually taking voice lessons once she was in college. Paying for her lessons with any extra money she had from her job at a bank, Grab-Kernmayer learned all kinds of repertoire, starting with German Lieder and working her way up to arias and oratorios. Later, in Theresienstadt, she found herself marginalized by the German prisoners because she was born in Prague, and neglected by the Czechs because she did not speak their language.

## Pre- Holocaust Opera Career

Her first engagement (as she liked to call it) was in Mährisch-Ostau (Ostrava, Czechoslovakia) where she had smaller roles. She furthered her career by traveling around Europe, showcasing her dramatic mezzo-soprano voice in almost every major city. Her first major engagement with an opera house was in Teplitz-Schönau from 1930 to 1932 where she played many leading roles such as the title role in *Carmen*, The Countess in *Pique Dame*, Frederica in *Luise Miller*, and Delila in *Samson et Delila*. She also gave many performances of Lieder by various composers, later using this knowledge within the ghetto for the same types of performances. Grab-Kernmayer thrived in the 1920s and early 30's, eventually being invited to sing in Czechoslovakia at a celebration of a major public holiday with the President.



Grab-Kernmayer  
as Brangäne from  
Tristan und Isolde



Grab-Kernmayer as  
Dorabella from Così fan Tutte

## During the Holocaust

Within Theresienstadt, Grab-Kernmayer said that she was so busy with the activities of the *Freizeitgestaltung* (“Free-Time Activities” bureau) that she “sang everyday.” She also recounted that she was asked to be a leader of the performances in 1942 when the men and women were still completely separated. Grab-Kernmayer's experiences were determined by the identity markers she possessed (woman, Czech, Austrian, German-speaking, Jew). This combination of adjectives do not exist independently of each other but rather frame a specific picture of who she was and the different forms of oppression she faced.

By transcribing the recorded interviews of Grab-Kernmayer, I was able to start piecing things together with other information from books such as *Music in Terezín: 1941-1945* by Joža Karas. In my studies, I was challenged by my faculty advisor to read in-between the lines to find implicit bias.



Drawing of Grab-Kernmayer on the  
stage of the Freizeitgestaltung;  
signed by Grab-Kernmayer herself

In late 1942, more male musicians arrived at the ghetto, mostly consisting of composers and conductors. Not only did the camp shift its administrative focus to these men, previous histories written about the ghetto have only given true praise to musicians such as Viktor Ullmann and Hans Krasa, both male composers.



Program for the Freizeitgestaltung's  
production of Carmen



Hedda Grab-Kernmayer  
August 6th, 1899 - September 16th, 1990

## Conclusion

Grab-Kernmayer's experience is one of the many that were lost and neglected throughout history. I can conclude that Grab-Kernmayer had a prolific international opera career before the Holocaust, making her one of the most prominent musicians within the ghetto.

When Hitler took power in 1933, Grab-Kernmayer's career was cut short due to the anti-Semitic Nuremberg laws. This prejudice continued once Grab-Kernmayer was transported to Theresienstadt. However, this time, the prejudice she faced was seeped in misogyny and racism incited by the Nazis to create tensions between the Germans and Czechs.

My research into Grab-Kernmayer thus far has yielded a fascinating insight into her marginalization during and after the Holocaust due to the intersectionality of her gender and ambiguous cultural identity.

## References

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