

Interview by Evelin Frerk, hpd (humanistic press service)  
with Hannelore Brenner

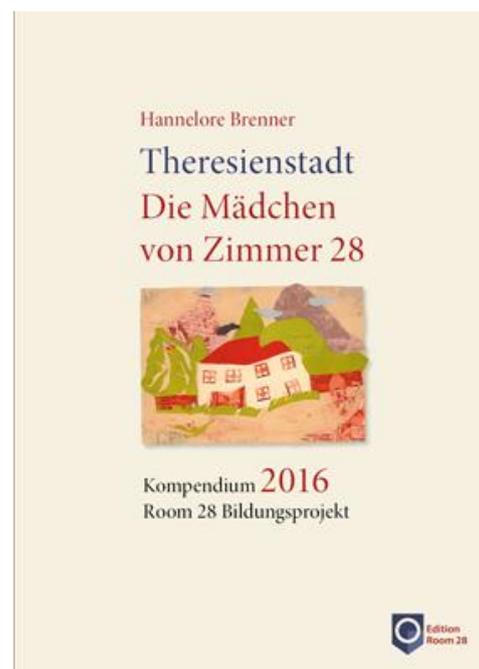
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## Room 28 – a germ cell of humanity

Translated from German into English by Nicole Gentz

**In March 2017, Edition Room 28 released its third publication, a brochure that presents the Room 28 educational project. It is entitled “Theresienstadt. Die Mädchen von Zimmer 28. Kompendium 2016. Room 28 Bildungsprojekt . The English version is in progress: “Theresienstadt. The Girls of Room 28. Compendium 2016. Room 28 Educational Project”.**

**The project is based on the story of a group of Jewish girls whose paths met in the Theresienstadt Ghetto. An English version of the Compendium is in progress.**



### Evelin Frerk

*I first saw the exhibition “The Girls of Room 28” in 2008, when it was shown at the German Bundestag, and I also experienced it at the European Commission in Brussels. Your project is European, indeed international, and the exhibition has been translated into several languages. On 6 May, the “House of European History” will be opened in Brussels. Wouldn’t this location be a suitable place for a permanent exhibition?*

Hannelore Brenner

It’s interesting that you bring up this subject. By coincidence I am one of the contributors to the *House of European History*, and actually I planned to attend the opening in Brussels, but have no time for it. I have loaned this new museum some strikingly contradictory objects: on the one hand an original Jewish star, and on the other BDM badges that I found after the death of my mother (BDM: abbreviation for “Bund Deutscher Mädchen”, the Nazi League of German Girls). She was a member of this organization and kept these badges and photos her entire life, also a tiny booklet with Nazi songs. But as for your question: the project with “The Girls of Room 28” has a very individual profile and, I believe, is not compatible with institutions of such dimensions. A permanent exhibition would need something more personal.

**Evelin Frerk**

*Does your childhood, your personal history have anything to do with your interest in the Holocaust?*

Hannelore Brenner

Certainly. It has to do with all the hypocrisy and mendacity of the post-war era, with the poisoned human atmosphere, the Nazi spirit that still prevailed: even though it had to stay under wraps, it still manifested itself in strange utterances and behaviours. I suffered a lot from this as a child. But of course it was only later on that I understood where it all came from.

**Evelin Frerk**

*And where does your strong affinity with the Jewish side come from? You worked several years for the American author Peter Wyden, who was born in Berlin in 1938 and emigrated with his family to America. You also worked for the German exile writer and Shakespeare translator Hans Rothe.*

Hannelore Brenner

Hans Rothe was not Jewish, but he too was expelled by the Nazis. I don't know where the affinity comes from. But it is there. In some of my ancestors obviously too. I have a cousin whose mother, my father's sister, was sent from Amsterdam to Ravensbrück concentration camp for "racial shame" (the Nazi term for sexual relations with so-called non-Aryans), and whose father, as I learned decades later, was murdered in Sobibor. I can only say that in the group of survivors of Room 28 I perhaps found exactly what I missed in my childhood: an open, cordial and tolerant relationship, an honest being together.

**Evelin Frerk**

*You became the public voice of the story of these "Girls of room 28". In 2004 you published the book and presented the exhibition for the first time. Your logo is: Room 28 Projects. What are these 'Room 28 Projects'?*

Hannelore Brenner

The name stands for the entirety of the writings, projects and activities that resulted from this Jewish-German alliance and which I realized, organized and developed over the years. The exhibition has meanwhile been seen at about seventy locations in Germany and at many places abroad. A Czech, a French and an English version were produced. In 2014 a newly designed exhibition came to life in Brazil. The survivors of Room 28 were often invited to openings of the exhibition, performances of the children's opera *Brundibár* – the opera by Hans Krása performed over fifty times by the children of the ghetto – and for other occasions. In all these years since 2004 there have been many events, projects, encounters and

talks with young people, and countless readings, especially with Helga Pollak-Kinsky. She is the author of a diary that made it possible to tell the story of these girls at all.

Our most recent event took place in Vienna, at the *Stadtsaal* on Mariahilferstrasse – actually the street where Helga was brought up and where her father had a very popular concert café called *Palmhof*. It was a reading in connection with the Holocaust Memorial Day. Austrian President Van der Bellen and our German Ambassador spoke, Helga read from her diary, and the outstanding Berlin ensemble *Zwackhaus* sang songs by the Theresienstadt cabaret and Ilse Weber. It was a very special event, and I am glad that ORF, the Austrian broadcasting corporation, recorded it and will soon release a CD.



29 January 2017, matinée at the Vienna Stadtsaal. Andreas Jocksch, Helga Pollak-Kinsky, Hannelore Brenner. Photo © Peter Lechner/HBF

### **Evelin Frerk**

*What exactly is this room 28?*

Hannelore Brenner

It was a room in girls' home number L 410 in the Theresienstadt ghetto where Jewish girls born in 1930 lived together between 1942 and 1944. They were looked after by teachers and carers who did their utmost to shield the children from the misery and allow them to live a normal life. Of course there was always fear, the fear of transports to the East. Again and again some of them were deported to Auschwitz. Of the 60 or so children who spent some time in Room 28, 15 survived.

### **Evelin Frerk**

*You have just published a Compendium to the Room 28 educational project. What is in it?*

Hannelore Brenner

The Compendium is an introduction to an educational project based on the story of these girls. It explains the background, the motives and the goals of the *Room 28 Projects*, and it includes articles describing the educational value of the project written by experts on the subject – Peter Gstettner, Detlef Pech, Bertram Noback, members of the advisory board of the educational project. It contains extracts of teaching materials produced as part of a German-Czech project as well as information on the status of the overall project with all its various elements and facets. The German version also includes a CD of my radio-documentary which the Südwestrundfunk (SWR Broadcasting Corporation) produced in 2004. The

Compendium is conceived as the opening brochure, and a 2017 Compendium is planned for the end of the year.

**Evelin Frerk**

*Who is the target group of the compendium? What is its actual educational value?*

Hannelore Brenner

It is intended for schools, colleges, educational institutions, educators, teachers, people active in the field of culture, and for interested readers in general. The educational value?

I would like to briefly sum it up with a quote by Professor Detlef Pech, professor of primary school education at Berlin's Humboldt University, who put it this way: "The development of personality, the humanization of individuals needs 'the other', a counterpart. And what power this can have, this becomes palpable through the story of the girls of Room 28."

**Evelin Frerk**

*A Holocaust story with strong human radiance –*

Hannelore Brenner

Yes, I think so, that's it. The Room 28 educational project is more than just a Holocaust remembrance project or a history project. It is above all a cultural project, one that sometimes generates astonishing impulses. To mention only one example: the Holocaust art project "Loss and Beauty" of photographer Keron Psillas in the US. It was inspired by the book "The Girls of Room 28" – the American edition of the book was published in 2009 by Schocken Books and is still available (unlike the German version). The catalogue to "Loss and Beauty" is dedicated to the survivors of room 28, and whenever Keron presents her exhibition and tells readers how difficult it was for her to transpose what she had seen in Auschwitz, Theresienstadt and other Holocaust locations into art, she writes:

"I was searching for a way to respond, artistically and authentically. Then I read the story of the Girls of Room 28. They showed me the way." These girls made it possible for her, she says, "to create images and foster a conversation about the uplifting, healing, and sustaining power of the creative act."



[www.keronpsillas.com/current-projects/loss-and-beauty/](http://www.keronpsillas.com/current-projects/loss-and-beauty/)

**Evelin Frerk**

*What does the exhibition consist of?*

Hannelore Brenner

The German version of the exhibition consists of 25 A0 panels, about 30 A3 panels with children's drawings created in Theresienstadt during painting lessons with Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, and the reproduction of room 28, with bunk beds, a table and two benches.



In January 2008, the German Bundestag added this replica to the exhibition and then donated it to Room 28 e.V. – a non-profit association created in 2007 to support the project. Thanks to the Berlin-based removal company *Zapf*, which generously sponsors the storage of the exhibition, the replica still exists today. But the furnishings, especially the bunk beds, need to be renewed. The entire exhibition needs renovation, modernization and expansion, and the educational project needs to be put on a solid foundation. This is one of the major goals of the Compendium: to present the educational project, to spread information about the offers, opportunities and objectives of the project, and last but not least to reach those who would support it if they knew about it. There is a vision behind the project.

We are pursuing a goal.

### **Evelin Frerk**

*What goal? What vision? Who is “we”?*

Hannelore Brenner

We – these are the women I joined forces with to create a lasting remembrance. It is the friends and allies of the *Room 28 Projects*, members of the Advisory Board of the educational project and members of Room 28 e.V. This year this association will celebrate the tenth anniversary of its foundation. It is small: we have 25 members. But now the point is to make this association stronger, to give it more life in order to reach the goal.

### **Evelin Frerk**

*I saw the exhibition at the German Bundestag in January 2008, in January 2009 at the Jewish Museum in Rendsburg and in 2013 at the European Commission in Brussels. What is special about the exhibition and the project with the “Girls of Room 28”? In other words: What is the project’s unique selling point?*

Hannelore Brenner

The European Commission put it rather aptly in its invitation to the exhibition: “This is a unique project focusing on the solidarity, compassion

Replica of room 28 at the German Bundestag, January 2008. Photo © [www.evelinfrerk.de](http://www.evelinfrerk.de)

and resilience which developed as a reaction to the abnormal situation of living in a ghetto with the constant threat of transportation to the East.”

**Evelin Frerk**

*Resilience – a word, a skill that is gaining in importance today –*

Hannelore Brenner

Yes. In the Compendium there is an article by Lisbeth Wutte: “Resilience. How challenges trigger our resistance” Lisbeth is a theatre teacher and member of StArt – an organization that provides educational and therapeutic emergency aid abroad. Her article brings us directly to the situation today. And that was the intention from the outset: future-oriented recollection, carrying a message into the future. The project is rooted in the survivors’ wish that the memory of Room 28 would perpetuate the values that took on such importance for these women: compassion, respect, solidarity, friendship, culture. It is also rooted in the hope that the story of these girls may serve as a reminder and an example of how “a new Holocaust could happen easily when good-natured people are indifferent and allow hate-filled fanatics to come to power”. This is how Handa Drori, one of the survivors of Room 28, formulated it.

**Evelin Frerk**

*What does “Room 28” mean for you – in a figurative sense? It has become programmatic: Room 28.*

Hannelore Brenner

That’s right. It is a symbol and a programme at the same time. Behind the symbol: the Ma’agal – the symbol of the “Girls of Room 28”. For me, this Room 28 is something like a germ cell of humanity. What was happening in the microcosm of Room 28 thanks to committed adult educators, teachers and artists, what has been manifested by the survivors and in the extant documents and testimonies, reveals the fundamental importance of cultural creativity, artistic achievements and ethical values. It shows the strength that art and culture can unfold in the struggle for self-assertion, for the assertion of identity and dignity.

**Evelin Frerk**

*How did the exhibition come to Brazil?*

Hannelore Brenner

In a most miraculous way. The Compendium also provides information about this moving story. By the way: the Brazilian exhibition, which is much more complex and artistic, is experiencing a surprisingly large response there. In Germany, the project is very quickly filed away in a



Flag of the “Girls of Room 28” with their symbol, the Ma’agal (Hebrew for circle, in the transcendent sense of perfection – their ideal).

cabinet drawer under the category: Holocaust project, contemporary witnesses, Nazi history. And that drawer is overflowing. But things are quite different in Brazil of course. And in addition, the Brazilian creator of the exhibition, Karen Zolko, intuitively understood the essence of the project.

**Evelin Frerk**

*In the Compendium I read in a chapter on Jewish culture, how little the girls knew about their Jewish roots in their childhood. Most of them came from assimilated families.*

Hannelore Brenner

Yes. In his article on Jewish culture, Christian Walda illuminates an aspect that we should be much more aware of today. The “Girls of Room 28”, he writes, were born around 1930; they were therefore part of a relatively secular generation. These young people had grown up in an atmosphere where general culture – music, literature etc. – had a higher social value than religion. Before the persecutions started, quite a few of the girls did not even know that their families had Jewish roots.” – And this is exactly the point. How far we have fallen behind – almost 90 years later! It would be much better for our world today if culture, art, and literature were more important than religion.

**Evelin Frerk**

*There are four different Room 28 websites. A bit irritating. How come?*

Hannelore Brenner

I know. This is a problem. It began with the *Room 28 Projects* in 2005 and with [www.room28projects.com](http://www.room28projects.com). This website presents the overall project, with focus on the exhibition, also in Brazil. Then in 2007 the association was founded, and it has its own website: [www.verein-room28.de](http://www.verein-room28.de). The publication of the book “Mein Theresienstädter Tagebuch” marked the launching of *Edition Room 28*, and with it [www.edition-room28.de](http://www.edition-room28.de). And with the German-Czech educational project the website [www.room28education.net](http://www.room28education.net) came into existence. – Unfortunately, I am still the only one doing all of this work, including the websites, and it is no wonder that all of this is quite a mix-up, also as regards the languages. It is not at all as it should be ideally, I am more than aware of this. I am striving to change it. In fact, the Compendium is also a way of bringing light into this complex project, a means to come closer to our aims. It is also intended for potential sponsors and cooperation partners. It is now the time to place the project on solid ground.

**Evelin Frerk**

*How can I get the Compendium?*

Hannelore Brenner

Very easily. It is available for a nominal charge of EUR 25 paid to the Room 28 e.V. association or for a donation. This money and all donations to the association serve the further development of the educational project.

**Evelin Frerk**

*Thank you very much, and I wish readers much pleasure in discovering this project.*

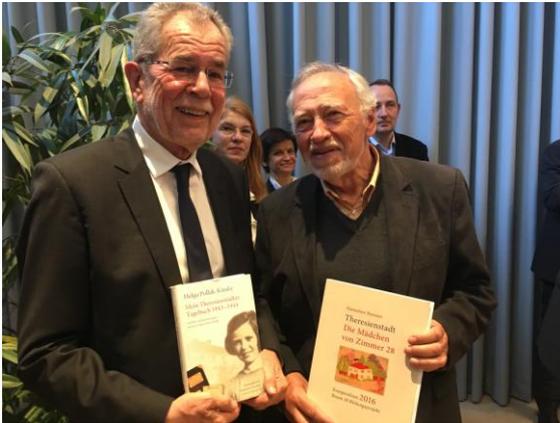
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Austrian President Van der Bellen with Professor Peter Gstettner, member of the advisory board of the educational Room 28 project.

Photo: © Peter Gstettner