The Prisoners of Paradise
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Los Prisioneros del Paraíso is based on the story of Jewish musicians and other artists who were held at the Theresienstadt ghetto and concentration camp in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia in the early-to mid-1940s. Among its prisoners were accomplished musicians and composers, including Viktor Ullmann, Hans Krasa, Pavel Haas, and Gideon Klein. Theresienstadt, which largely served as a waystation to Auschwitz and other extermination camps, was also used by the Nazis in a propaganda campaign to portray to Germans and the international community the "humane" treatment of the Jewish prisoners there. A central part of this campaign was a rich cultural life, including plays, symphonies and other musical performances.

In the novel, Ullmann and Krasa are approached by Otto Zucker, a member of the Theresienstadt Council of Jewish Elders, who wants them to prepare a children's opera as part of a new recreation program called "Freizeitgestaltung." Zucker passionately describes to them his vision of improving living conditions at the camp through this program, reigniting life and creativity through the arts, and most importantly, educating the children. While Ullmann and Krasa initially view Freizeitgestaltung and Zucker's lofty aims as a pipe dream, Zucker soon convinces them to sign on. He argues that the Nazis will be persuaded to use the program and Theresienstadt to improve the image of concentration camps and conceal their true function, allowing them to dismiss the spreading news of the horrors and exterminations as mere rumors.

The first task would be to convince Theresienstadt Commandant Siegfried Seidl to propose the Freizeitgestaltung program to his superiors. It is at a meeting in Seidl's office that the three men meet Seidl's wife Elisabeth, who walks in upon arriving from Berlin, where she works as a scientist conducting genetic research.

A fictional character in the novel, Elisabeth serves as the link between the inside world of Theresienstadt, the Nazi government and society. As a researcher on a team headed by Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer, she works with Josef Mengele, with whom she also had an extramarital affair. Her father, a baron and prominent owner pharmaceutical company, confesses that he provided significant funding directly to Hitler in exchange for a monopoly in the pharmaceutical industry.

At the encounter at Seidl's office, Elisabeth forms an immediate connection with Hans Krasa and arranges a private meeting with him. She confesses that she has attended many of his performances,

and even met him briefly after one in Prague. They soon fall in love, and Elisabeth becomes intent on rescuing Hans from the camp.

Author Xavier Güell began as an orchestra conductor and music producer at a young age. Elisabeth had studied at the music academy before choosing a career in medicine. She, her husband and her father all play piano, and the dialogue often includes discussions of musical arrangements. Through these characters, and the composers and musical performances at Theresienstadt, the theme of music is present throughout the novel and seamlessly connects them. The plotlines bend together well.

The impossible position of the Council of Elders at the camp is also very well developed, as are the internal and external conflicts of the members with one another as life and death decisions are made. As the conflicts inside of Elisabeth resolve, the Nazi's façade is also crumbling.

I found the approach to this story to be unique and original. The story of the life of the musicians at Theresienstadt collaborating and creating art as prisoners in the grimmest of circumstances is told beautifully. As they navigate the tragic realities of the loss of their past lives, including separation from their families, illness, death, and not knowing how much time they themselves have, there is a vivid sense of immediacy and connection to their work, and the life-sustaining power of art and music in the community. Though it was due to the propaganda campaign that Nazis allowed the prisoners to have an artistic life, they embraced it fully as their only form of resistance, injecting messages of the struggles of their reality into the performances and using the time afforded to them to live through their work.

I believe this novel is suitable for translation and will find a receptive audience in the US. As historical fiction, the novel offers a unique plot connecting the inner world of the Theresienstadt ghetto with high levels of the Nazi regime, providing a moving glimpse into how the prisoners may have found strength through their art.

Xavier Güell is also the author of La Música de la Memoria, Yo, Gaudí, and Cuarteto de la guerra. I. Si no puedes, yo respiraré por ti.