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Mark Ludwig, director and founder of the Terezin Chamber Music Foundation, plays the viola as artist Jim Schantz draws inspiration from the music to paint during an afternoon of art at the KANEKO in Omaha on Tuesday, Oct. 23, 2012. The students learned about music written by composers who perished in the Holocaust as well as the healing powers of painting.

## Art's beauty teaches kids about ugly history

By [Erin Grace](#)  
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

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She paused, first, to listen. Then 11-year-old Marie Powers dipped her paintbrush into blue tempera and dragged a diagonal line across a white canvas.

Across the room sat four men from the Boston Symphony, who earlier had filled this

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downtown Omaha warehouse with haunting, mournful music. Now they were playing a fast, frightening piece about a tarantula, and Marie and her paintbrush tried to keep up.

It was near the end of a series of lessons on the Holocaust this fall for children from the Boys and Girls Clubs. They had toured a Holocaust photography exhibit at the Strategic Air and Space Museum in Ashland, Neb. They had learned about conditions at the Terezín concentration camp in the former Czechoslovakia. They had made camp scenes with torn construction paper and glue. They had kept journals and asked questions.

Now, on a Tuesday afternoon at Kaneko, the converted warehouse and arts center at 1111 Jones St. named for Omaha sculptor Jun Kaneko, Marie and 35 other children from the clubs in Carter Lake, Council Bluffs and Westside Community Schools were trying to replicate what they had just viewed. The string quartet had played a piece written in the Theresienstadt concentration camp by a composer who later was gassed at Auschwitz. As they played, landscape artist Jim Schantz quickly painted a canvas to mirror the dizzying, melancholic music.

The children watched this unfold, then settled onto blue tarps and, using paper plates for palettes, began to do the same.

“You are all catching onto this very quickly,” Schantz told them. “You're somehow capturing the moment of that music with the paint.”

In this act of listening, of painting, Marie experienced for herself what viola player and founder of the Boston-based Terezín Music Foundation had said on Tuesday: Victims of modern history's worst slaughter defied their oppressors. They created.

In the almost discordant pieces of music composed inside the Terezín camp or the dark artistic renderings of camp life, the imprisoned people reflected the horror and the hope they had lived, said Mark Ludwig, who runs the nonprofit foundation dedicated to preserving and continuing that art.

It was an unusual and effective approach with the sensitive, heavy material. The fifth- and sixth-graders were riveted throughout the three-hour lesson.

“They're going to learn about the Holocaust throughout their studies,” said Beth Seldin Dotan, who heads the Institute for Holocaust Education in Nebraska, the group that spearheaded this project. “I wanted them to have a personal story.”

Dotan said she wants the Holocaust to become profound, meaningful and “something more than a paragraph in a history book” for the children.

Awareness of the Holocaust for school children generally comes around junior high, when many encounter it through “Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl,” the story of a family that hid in an Amsterdam apartment until the Nazis discovered and imprisoned them. Anne died at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp at age 15.

It was hard on Tuesday not to think of Anne, who went into hiding at age 13, when her diary begins. Here, some 70 years later, were other children grappling, too, with the awkwardness of their in-between age.

Ludwig, Schantz and Dotan have not shied away from the Holocaust horrors in these lessons.

At the museum in September, the children saw graphic black-and-white photographs,



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including one that stuck with Marie of a soldier pointing a gun at the head of a woman trying to shield her baby.

On Tuesday, the children saw artwork from Terezín, and it was no less haunting. One rendering of a hospital shows the sick and dying trapped in a theater. Another artist depicts an audience of gaunt and vacant-eyed people listening to a grim musical performance.

Yet the point of Tuesday's lesson was to show a hopeful side to these works: that in communicating hardship, they also represented resiliency, defiance and hope. And the proof of that was in their very existence, that they were shown these many years later to schoolchildren who could learn something about history and about themselves.

Ludwig, a Fulbright scholar, did nothing to dumb down the lesson that's normally aimed at a slightly older audience, and the children stayed right with him, riveted to slides showing Nazi propaganda and pieces of art from Terezín, listening intently as he picked up his viola and joined the other members of the Hawthorne String Quartet to play compositions of those who died in the Holocaust.

The quartet has been in town for a week of public concerts that started Oct. 21 and culminate on Sunday with the Omaha Symphony Chamber Orchestra.

Ludwig and the rest of the quartet played the first selection by Viktor Ullmann.

"Does that sound bright and cheerful to you?"

Marie had fiddled with her pink flamingo earrings. Then she raised her hand.

"It sounded grief-like," she said. "Like someone had died."

After a faster, furious selection, Ludwig likened the racing violins to "a voice, screaming."

"It's resistance," he told the children. "It's energy. It's a not-succumbing. He takes you on a journey that says, 'This is my world.' If you have an oppressor who is trying to kill your voice, what is one of the greatest acts of defiance? That's creating. That's giving back to future generations."

Generations like Marie's. She sat next to two friends from Westbrook Elementary School: Jordan Bowen, wearing a pink hoodie and turquoise Converse sneakers, and Brandon McMiller, who wore his hair in tight braids. As Marie was painting her blue tree branch, Jordan used yellow and red to create Rothko-like color blocks. And Brandon quickly swirled all colors.

"Red, in anger on the side there," Brandon explained later. "I did sadness for that part of the song. And pink. Pink represents hope. Yellow is like, curious. At the end, I made it. You can see the hope. A mixture of curiosity and sadness."

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
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