

# Theresienstadt ghetto currency

What does Moses really point to? (or: repeat something often enough and it becomes fact!) by Tony James

**T**HE banknotes of the Theresienstadt ghetto are probably the best known and most available of all camp money of World War Two. Considering the prices that collectors are sometimes asked to pay for camp notes of WWII, this is a good thing: at least these representative notes are obtainable without too much pain on the pocket.

The Theresienstadt ghetto was situated in the town of Terezin 60 kilometres north of Prague in what is now the Czech Republic.

In 1940 the Gestapo in Prague ordered a total evacuation of Terezin and then proceeded to turn the town into a show-case ghetto and concentration camp, ostensibly where the authorities could send disabled war veterans and heroes, scientists, artists and other prominent identities, in other words people whom the Nazis needed to keep an eye on and also, if necessary, could be paraded to the world. The camp was also advertised as a home for the elderly (it was simply never stated that these elderly were Jews who were on their way to Auschwitz). There was also the Terezin "Small Fortress" which was used as a prison within the camp to detain those who "broke" anti-Jewish laws or for resistance to authorities.

## Model camp for Red Cross inspection

When the International Red Cross representatives came to inspect the camp on July 23 1944 a completely sham performance was staged for their benefit.

Total number of notes printed				
Denomination	Colour	Number printed	Measurements	Series letters
1 kronen	green	2,242,000	98 x 49mm	A& plate number
2 kronen	red	1,019,000	107 x 53	A & plate number
5 kronen	brown	530,000	113 x 57	A & plate number
10 kronen	blue	456,000	124 x 62	A & plate number
20 kronen	green	319,000	130 x 67	A-R & serial number
50 kronen	blue	159,000	139 x 7	A-H & serial number
100 kronen	tan	279,000	148 x 79	A-O & serial number

Shops full of goods, were open and phoney art studios, cafes and a school were seen to be in operation. The currency was in place, there were queues at the bank to make deposits, and special souvenir stamps were given to the visitors. Special rations were served on the day of the visit.

## Bank accounts

The Nazis took elaborate steps to create the impression of a ghetto bank. They called it the Jewish Self-Government Bank (Bank of Jewish Autonomy) and the deception went as far as creating over 50,000 personal accounts, complete with monthly statements of deposits and charges in the worthless camp currency. The bank even had mechanised book-keeping and 50 to 60 people to keep the

accounts. A Dr Desider Friedmann was installed as the head of the bank, which was housed in the former town hall.

## Design of Camp/Ghetto Currency

When the authorities decided to institute this phoney internal monetary system for the ghetto, they demanded that the notes portray Moses holding the tablets of the Ten Commandments.

The notes were duly designed in 1942 by Czech artist, poet and inmate Peter Kien (who died in Auschwitz in 1944).

The primary design was a vignette of a dignified Moses holding the Ten Commandments and it was approved in the first instance by Jacob Edelstein, the Chief of Theresienstadt's Council of Elders. From here, stories differ as to the next stage. Some accounts say that the



10 Kronen Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia Pick 8, 8 July 1942. The normal banknotes of the occupation





At left: the first sketch of Moses' head, designed by Kien and submitted to Heydrich. At right: the second version with hooked nose and more ringlets of the hair to make Moses look less Aryan and more Jewish. This was the one engraved by Jindra Schmidt and used for the final accepted design.

Camp Commandant Siegfried Seidle approved the designs and submitted them to Adolf Eichmann, head of the

Gestapo Department of Jewish Affairs, who immediately rejected them saying Moses was too Aryan and should instead

be portrayed with a prominent hooked nose and curly hair. Eichmann also required that Moses' hand obscure the commandment "Thou shalt not kill," and that the denominations be changed from "Ghetto Kronen" to just "Kronen."

Another account has Kien initially submitting his designs to the camp commandant, who then submitted them to the SS second in command, Reinhard Heydrich, (SS Reichsprotektor of Bohemia and Moravia), who rejected them. Heydrich also is recorded as saying that he thought that Moses looked too Aryan, and lacked the strongly stereotyped Semitic features that conformed to the Nazi vision of Jewish appearance. Whichever version is correct, the result was that the designs went back to Kien to be changed. Jindra Schmidt, a distinguished engraver of Czech banknotes postage stamps and fiscal papers of the time, did the engraving and the fact that a large number of notes were found in the vaults of the Czech National Bank in Prague years after the war would seem to confirm that it was this bank that organised the printing at the State Printing Works.

Each denomination has the same design but is printed in different colours. Other differences lie in the size of each denomination, text relating to value, plate numbers on the 1, 2, 5 and 10 kr and serial numbers on the 20, 50 and 100 kr denominations. The paper used for the 20, 50 and 100 kr notes have a faint geometric watermark.

The front of the notes has a vignette of Moses holding the tablets of the Ten Commandments at left. In the centre are the words "Quittung Über" (Receipt for), the denomination in words then the denomination in numerals and a warning



Back, Theresienstadt 100 Kronen C4117, F&F CZ656, S&B 707.



Front, Theresienstadt 100 Kronen C4117, F&F CZ656, S&B 707.



## Reference numbers from available catalogues

Denomination	Colour	Campbell	Feller & Feller	Schwan & Boling
1 kronen	green	4111	CZ-650	701
2 kronen	red	4112	CZ-651	702
5 kronen	brown	4113	CZ-652	703
10 kronen	blue	4114	CZ-653	704
20 kronen	green	4115	CZ-654	705
50 kronen	blue	4116	CZ-655	706
100 kronen	tan	4117	CZ-656	707

against counterfeiting. At the lower right is the denomination in numerals and a six pointed Star of David. The back of the notes includes the same "Quittung über" followed by the denomination. The place and date at lower left and the title - the first Elder of the Jews in Theresienstadt - and signature of Jakob Edelstein are at lower right. At left is the denomination in figures and Star of David and upper left the serial number (20, 50, 100 kr) or plate letter and number (1, 2, 5, 10 kr).

As the Axis powers took special interest in the design and manufacture of this currency the records remain fairly complete. The notes were dated 1<sup>st</sup> January 1943 but the first distribution was not made until May 12 1943.

While the numbers of notes remaining after the war are open to conjecture, the

original estimation of 250-350 sets has now been significantly increased; 941 sets of 1-100 kr as well as another 9,000 notes of mixed denominations 1-50 kr were sold at one auction alone in 1973. Just after the war a large number of 20 kronen notes (described as "more than a suitcase full") were discovered in the remains of a ghetto building.

### Uses for the banknotes

While the main purpose of the currency was to fool the Red Cross inspectors, the notes were also useful in giving a sense of normality to the inmates, to the extent that a rate of exchange of 10 kr to the mark was established. Everyone who worked in the ghetto or held a prominent position was paid a monthly salary depending upon job, sex and status. Men

105-295 kr, women 95-205 kr, part-time 80 kr, caretakers 70 kr, war wounded 105 kr, and "prominente" 145 kr. However all inmates had to pay a special "free time tax" of 50 kr to sit in a café which also cost 5 kr to enter and another 2 kr for a cup of ersatz coffee. The shops stocked the prisoners' own belongings, confiscated when they entered the ghetto. By far the most common use of the currency was to pay the 50 kr deposit required to borrow "special books" from the library. The books were so precious that borrowers usually did not bother to get their deposit back, and the scrupulous record keeping reveals that by the end of the war the library had accumulated 225,000 kr. The other common uses for the currency were to pay the receipt tax when receiving a parcel, as well as the 1,000 kr for the Theresienstadt parcel post tax, before an inmate could lay hands on the parcel, even if the contents had already been pillaged by the guards.

### What does Moses really point to?

For years, collectors of Theresienstadt notes have taken for granted that whichever reference book they used for information about the vignette of Moses and the tablets of the Ten Commandments, is correct.

Simon Holloway, a new collector, and a Biblical and Hebrew scholar, has taken a closer look at these notes, revealing some fascinating differences in what many authors have stated about the details of the notes.

Holloway has found a range of sources that list the same basic details regarding the assertion that both Heydrich and Eichmann demanded two things of Peter Kien: that he should make the Moses on his Theresienstadt banknote look "more Semitic", and that Moses' hand should obscure the commandment "Thou shalt not kill."

From the web, for example, the October 2005 issue of *Zachor* an online magazine Holloway found the picture of Kien's Moses, alongside the assertion that his hand is covering this commandment "Thou shalt not kill."

In an article "The Use of Banknotes as an Instrument of Propaganda" on - "The Currency Collector." website, John Sandrock, does not include a photograph, but notes that Moses' hand is obscuring the same commandment.

The Tauber Holocaust Library makes this claim as well, providing yet another source, a book entitled, *Life in the Ghettos during the Holocaust*, edited by Eric Sterling contains an article titled "Art and Imagery of the Ghetto - during and after the Holocaust" by Stephen Feinstein.

As Holloway says, "This provides a photo but makes a slightly more circum-



Theresienstadt 1 Kronen C4111, F&F CZ650, S&B 701.





Theresienstadt 2 Kronen C4112, F&F CZ651, S&B 702.



Theresienstadt 5 Kronen C4113, F&F CZ652, S&B 703.

spect claim than do those who quote him: for a start, he notes that the commandment not to murder is the *sixth* commandment, and he also makes no reference as to *how* the commandment is being obscured. The article by Feinstein refers to a paper "Holocaust Numismatics" by Joel Forman which states that the vignette was changed due to Heydrich's order: that Moses look more Semitic and that his hand cover up the commandment that stated, "Thou shalt not kill."

Unfortunately, this is where Holloway's search ends, as Forman provides no sources whatsoever for his claim. He also finds it astonishing that nobody (not the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, which is hosting Forman's article, nor Stephen Feinstein, who quoted it from him, nor the Tauber Holocaust Library, who referenced Feinstein's article, nor even Zachor, which took it as truth) has questioned this. This is particularly so he says, since anybody with even a basic familiarity with Hebrew and with Jewish tradition can see that Moses' hand is obscuring the *fifth* commandment, that is, to honour one's parents.

#### Language and order

Holloway, using his knowledge of the Bible and Hebrew, elaborates on the details of the vignette and shows that only the first two letters, לא ("Do not") of the sixth commandment, which is obscured by the boundary of the picture, can be seen at the top left. In fact, לא runs down the whole left side ("Do not [murder]", "Do not [commit adultery]", "Do not [steal]", "Do not [bear false witness]", "Do not [covet]") and demonstrates that the artist did not break with tradition by presenting the commandments in any fashion other than the one in which they are usually depicted.

The first three commandments on the right hand tablet are clearly visible: אנכי ה' (I am the Lord), לא יהיה (There shall not be [another god, etc]), and לא תשא (Do not raise [the name of God falsely]). The fourth is partially obscured by Moses' fingers, revealing only the letters כו of the word זכור ("Remember [the day of rest to sanctify it]") - meaning that the version we are looking at is from Exodus 20 and not Deuteronomy 5. So Holloway says one way or another, the commandment that is covered by his hand would have said כבוד את (Honour [your father and your mother]), and has nothing to do with murder at all.

#### Some answers?

If nothing else, the discrepancies certainly involved some detailed research and I have attempted to come up with some possible explanations. Some such explanations can be found in Ray and Steve Feller's book "Silent Witnesses." Feller, while looking at the symbolism





Theresienstadt 10 Kronen C4114, F&F CZ653, S&B 704.



Theresienstadt 20 Kronen C4115, F&F CZ 654, S&B 705.

of the “Moses Crowns” (the name given to the portrait of Moses holding the tablets of the Ten Commandments), says that the Nazis, while not so much interested in the symbolism of Moses, were concerned there might be secret anti-Nazi propaganda hidden in the Hebrew on the notes and therefore sent the draft to the University Library of Prague to have an expert determine if the Hebrew really was the Ten Commandments. This confirmation would put a stop to any secret propaganda, but might leave open the opportunity to avoid obeying the instruction to hide the commandment “Thou shalt not kill.” The positioning of this commandment on the tablets means that Moses’ hand at the bottom of the right hand tablet covers the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment and the size and shape of the vignette obscure the 6<sup>th</sup>.

#### 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment

Adding to the complexity of this issue is the fact that “Thou shalt not kill” is the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment for Jews and Protestants, but the Catholics list it as the 5<sup>th</sup>! If the instruction to the designer was given by a person brought up in the Catholic faith then the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment is covered and the instructions have been followed. Alternatively if “Thou shalt not kill” was considered by the authorities to be the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment and it was that which had to be obscured, the designer achieved this objective by the positioning of the border of the vignette, and the obscuring of the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment in this case, “Honour thy father and mother” is incidental. Ostensibly, the designer obeyed instructions but did he really? Any small victory is a triumph in adversity.

Another point that I would like to make is that when the details are copied from one text to another, mistakes often creep in and are perpetuated if reference is not made to the original source. I have to admit that there are some sources that I am unable to access. Early periodicals from the 1980s such as *The Shekel* and the *ANA Journal* are not readily available. The world library of numismatics has fortunately become too large to keep copies of everything on line, and in enough paper libraries, to give access to all researchers. So I guess collectors will have to continue buying back copies and old catalogues!

#### Model camp hid atrocities

Approximately 140,000 Jews were interned in Theresienstadt during the war. Of these 34,000 died in the ghetto and 87,000 were transported to death camps. Of 15,000 children deported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz, only 240 survived, none under the age of fifteen. The Soviet Army liberated Theresienstadt on May 8 1945.





*Theresienstadt 50 Kronen C4116, F&F CZ 655, S&B 706.*

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