

## MUSIC AS HISTORICAL SOURCE: SOCIAL HISTORY AND MUSICAL TEXTS<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract — Résumé*

Situated at the intersection between social history and musicology, this article is concerned with the distinctive ways in which music (broadly defined) can enrich and illuminate our understanding of particular historical contexts. Drawing on the example of songs created in the Nazi ghettos and concentration camps during World War II, it argues that music — taken alongside other historical sources relating to the period — can offer insight into how individuals and communities imprisoned under Nazism responded to and interpreted what was happening to them. The value of these songs is twofold: first, in a subject area where many sources originate from the post-war period, they are a significant body of texts originating from the

time itself. In addition, they are distinctive among these contemporary sources as oral texts, disseminated — and, ultimately, preserved — within group frameworks. They convey to us not the retrospective understanding of individuals that survived the war (as do post-war testimonies), but the uncertain and shifting perspectives of prisoner communities facing daily reality over an extended time period. As an overview, the article is intended not only to shed light on this particular historical context, but also to stimulate discussion about other contexts in which the value of music as a historical resource might be similarly applicable.

**Key Words:** Nazi; Holocaust; Warsaw; Vilna; Sachsenhausen; Auschwitz.

Situated at the intersection between social history and historical musicology, this article is concerned with the distinctive ways in which musical texts can enrich and illuminate our understanding of particular historical contexts. It explores

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Zosia Sochańska and Michal George for Polish translations used in this article, and to Gundula Kreuzer and Helen Beer for advice on translations from German and Yiddish. Apart from the Polish, all translations cited here are my own.

how music functions as a historical source, its potential value in reconstructing and representing historical events, and the insight it can offer into how people experienced and responded to those events. With the term 'musical texts' I refer broadly to songs and pieces that were composed and in some cases written down, as well as more generally to music as a practice and an activity. The article also touches briefly on the relationship between music and memory, and the ways in which music used retrospectively, particularly at commemorations, can help to promote particular understandings of a given past.

Unlike many of the papers that were presented at the Critical Theories Symposium featured in this special edition, my article is not concerned with how theories that developed outside musicology might be applied to music, nor is it concerned with one particular 'critical theory'. Rather, it is concerned with how music can be used in an interdisciplinary framework, and it focuses on some of the key methodological issues underlying music's potential value as historical source material. For illustrative examples, I have drawn on my long-standing research on the subject of music in the context of Nazi Germany, specifically the vast network of ghettos and concentration camps that housed a diverse range of social, political, religious, and other 'enemies' of the Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945.<sup>2</sup> The issues surrounding source material in this subject area make this an illuminating case study into the distinctive insight that music can offer. On one level, of course, the specificity of this period means that the ideas raised here will not necessarily be easily applicable elsewhere; this is not to endorse the 'uniqueness' label often attached to the Nazi genocide, but is rather necessary and inevitable of any historical event. Nonetheless, many of the issues discussed can find relevance in a wide range of contexts, particularly where oral musical traditions are concerned.

#### *Source Material and the Role of Music*

An enormous scope of musical activities existed amongst prisoner communities under Nazi internment. Most of the larger Eastern European Jewish ghettos established orchestras, choirs, chamber groups, and other musical ensembles, which existed for periods of months and even years. Official orchestras established on the initiative of the SS were also a feature of many camps; the Auschwitz camp complex, for example, boasted at least five working ensembles, including a 120-piece orchestra in the main camp. Aside from these institutionalized activities, a wide range of informal and spontaneous music-making took place; repertoire ranged from popular pre-war songs to opera and operetta, folk music, standard

<sup>2</sup>The discussion below is supported with brief examples; for a detailed empirical account see my book, *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps*, (Oxford, 2005).

classical repertoire, choral music, and dance melodies. In addition, many new songs were created, in the ghettos as well as the camps.

The article takes as its primary focus these songs, and, by extension, the activity of singing, which constituted perhaps the most important and widespread of musical activities at that time. Singing was (theoretically, at least) accessible to everyone, including those with no musical training; it did not require instruments, could be conducted in any location, and was easily hidden. Apart from these material factors, however, songs were valuable to inmates for a variety of emotional and historical reasons, as will be explored below. The article is concerned with voluntary, informal music-making as a communicative, participatory activity that involved larger prisoner communities; consequently, individual songs are approached not only as self-contained musical objects, but also for what they reveal about the contexts within which they existed.

In order to consider music's potential importance as a historical resource, a brief overview is necessary of the range of available source material relating to life under Nazi internment.<sup>3</sup> To begin with, structural remnants from the time, such as sites of ghettos or camps, are relatively few. The buildings of the Warsaw ghetto, for example, were destroyed by the Nazis after the 1943 uprising; the death camps Belżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka were demolished before the arrival of the Red Army; various mass graves in Eastern Europe were systematically burned by a special SS-commando. Some sites or parts thereof remain relatively intact, such as Majdanek and Birkenau, but the extent to which they can help us to understand daily life in those places is necessarily limited.<sup>4</sup>

Although 'official' documentary evidence produced by the Nazi bureaucracy — such as laws, decrees, reports, regulations, policies, lists, census data, and so on — survives in modest quantities, some of the most sensitive and incriminating material relating to the genocide was deliberately destroyed towards the end of the war. In addition, as the war progressed there was an increasing preference — not least on the part of Hitler — for oral rather than written orders, particularly as far as the killing process was concerned.<sup>5</sup> Testimonial evidence from individual SS members or other Nazi officials relating specifically to internment centres is scant: some accounts were published after the war, but most of those who gave testimony did so in the context of war crimes trials, which had clear implications for the kind of evidence they were likely to produce. Some private letters between

<sup>3</sup> The source material outlined here relates specifically to inmates' experiences of daily life in the ghettos and camps. For a recent survey of sources relating more generally to the Holocaust and the implementation of the genocide, see Raul Hilberg, *Sources of Holocaust Research: An Analysis*, (Chicago, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Raul HILBERG, *Sources*, 13-14.

<sup>5</sup> Yitzhak ARAD, Yisrael GUTMAN, and Abraham MARGALIT, *Documents on the Holocaust: Selected Sources on the Destruction of the Jews of Germany and Austria, Poland, and the Soviet Union*, (Jerusalem, 1981), 2; Raul HILBERG, *Sources*, 21-2, 34-8.

Nazi officials also exist in fragmentary form.<sup>6</sup> Visual sources remaining from the time, of which photographs constitute the most substantial part, are able to give us some idea of the physical circumstances of internment. These are also scarce, however, and in some cases were produced with distinctly propagandistic motives.<sup>7</sup>

Material of the kind mentioned thus far gives limited insight into the experiences of those interned in the ghettos and camps. In seeking to document and understand these experiences, historians have turned primarily to testimonial material produced by the witnesses themselves. The earliest of these accounts were diaries and chronicles produced in the camps and ghettos; although many of these were lost, a small number were hidden and carefully preserved or fortuitously discovered after the war. Also extant are short postcards from Jews in internment and concentration camps, although these were necessarily mild and vague in content.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the diaries, the most extensive and helpful of the contemporary sources include an underground archive from the Warsaw ghetto known by the code name *Oneg Shabbos*,<sup>9</sup> and the *Łódź Chronicle*, an extensive and officially-sanctioned record of daily life in the ghetto. These contemporary accounts are particularly useful for their descriptions of life as it was understood and interpreted at the time. They also often reveal an explicit urge on the part of their creators to document and bear witness; several make direct reference to the significance their writings will have for future historians.<sup>10</sup> Once again, few of these contemporary sources survived, and our understanding of life under internment has for the most part relied on interviews, memoirs, and other types of individual testimony given retrospectively by victims who survived the war. Many of these accounts have been published, while a vast number remain unpublished in archives across Europe, Israel, the United States, and elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Raul HILBERG, *Sources*, 40. For testimonies of Nazi officials see Rudolf HÖSS, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, (London, 1959); the reminiscences of Pery Broad, and the camp diary of Johann Paul Kremer in: Rudolf HÖSS, Pery BROAD and Johann Paul KREMER, *KL Auschwitz seen by the SS*, (Oświęcim, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Raul HILBERG, *Sources*, 15-16. Sources for photographs include the Yad Vashem archives and United States Holocaust Memorial Museum archives; photographs have also been printed in collections such as Joe J. HEYDECKER and George A. VIGOR, *Where is Thy Brother Abel?: Documentary Photographs of the Warsaw Ghetto* (Sao Paulo, 1981); Mendel GROSSMAN, *With a Camera in the Ghetto* (New York, 1978); and Ulrich KELLER, *The Warsaw Ghetto in Photographs* (New York, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> Raul HILBERG *Sources*, 40.

<sup>9</sup> A traditional Friday evening gathering in honour of the Sabbath.

<sup>10</sup> Ghetto diaries include those of Adam Czerniaków, Michael Zylberberg, and Chaim Kaplan in Warsaw, of Yitzkhok Rudashevski, Zelig Kalmanovitch, and Herman Kruk in Vilna, and of Dawid Sierakowiak in Łódź. Similar sources from the camps are scarcer, but include the diary of the Norwegian prisoner Odd Nansen from Sachsenhausen.

<sup>11</sup> Primary archival repositories of testimony include, among many others, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., the sites of former camps in central and eastern Europe, and several repositories of video testimony, including the recently-established Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation in Los Angeles, and the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University.

This testimonial material is probably the largest and most important body of sources available, and is of enormous value. Its use as a source nonetheless brings with it a host of potential pitfalls and difficulties, which have been the subject of vigorous debate in the field. These difficulties relate primarily to the nature of testimony likely to be produced by individuals in the aftermath of traumatic experience. In the first place, surviving victims are generally unable to describe much beyond their immediate experiences: most chronicle their personal ordeals, selectively emphasizing some events while consciously or unconsciously misrepresenting or omitting others. Few attempt to provide an overarching analysis of events.<sup>12</sup> Further, since victims were limited in their ability to apprehend the larger context within which their experiences were situated, the discrepancies and inconsistencies sometimes manifest in their accounts are also not surprising. Their attempts to talk about traumatic events long after they have occurred mean that problems generally associated with conveying and dealing with memory are magnified.<sup>13</sup>

Addressing the issue of survivors' accounts in his *The Drowned and the Saved*, the Italian writer and former Auschwitz inmate Primo Levi wrote:

We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are [...] the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception.<sup>14</sup>

According to Levi, in other words, survivors giving testimony after the events were an unrepresentative minority amongst the victims of Nazism; their accounts, by implication, should be taken in this light. In addition to these concerns, several critics have dealt at length with how the complex process of re-adapting to society in the post-war period inevitably affected survivors' retrospective constructions of events. Michael André Bernstein, for example, identifies several factors that in-

<sup>12</sup> Some testimonies given in the immediate post-war years did in fact attempt to provide wider historical perspectives, particularly because professional studies had not yet begun to appear. Nonetheless, since most witnesses were not professional historians, the value of their accounts still lies primarily in the personal events and experiences they describe.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the complexities of memory and testimony, see for example Mark ROSEMAN, 'Surviving Memory: Truth and Inaccuracy in Holocaust Testimony' in *Journal of Holocaust Education* 8:1 (1999), 1-20; Geoffrey H. HARTMAN (ed.), *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, (Oxford, 1994); Lawrence L. LANGER, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, (London, 1991); James E. YOUNG, 'Between History and Memory: The Uncanny Voices of Historian and Survivor' in *History and Memory* 9:1 (1997), 47-58.

<sup>14</sup> Primo LEVI, *The Drowned and the Saved*, (London, 1988), 83-4.

form victims' retrospective narratives: guilt about survival; shame for acts committed that may have been essential to survival but which in hindsight violate the ethics of 'civilized' existence; or a trauma so severe that crucial aspects of experience could not be recalled.<sup>15</sup>

Historians, working to compile a body of verifiable evidence about a past event, are justifiably wary of reports whose content is even partially inaccurate. To some extent, this principle accounts for the fact that survivors' testimonies were sometimes marginalized, particularly in historical studies produced in the immediate post-war decades. If the emphasis on consistency has sometimes led to the conclusion that testimonies have little to contribute to the historical enterprise, however, several critics have in recent years challenged earlier reservations and emphasized the possible ways in which the voices of historian and victim might more successfully be integrated. James Young, for example, has argued that the value of the victim's memory has less to do with factual accuracy than with the possibility of obtaining an insight into how events have been understood and perceived — a value that can acquire much of its significance in precisely those misapprehensions and omissions that have justified the neglect of testimony elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> Fuller discussion of this issue lies beyond the scope of this article; the point to stress here is that testimony is a complex source, and needs to be approached — as any historical source — with caution and discretion.

It is against this background that the importance of musical sources from the ghettos and camps can begin to be understood. Existing sources include songbooks, orchestral scores, and hundreds of song transcriptions, the latter largely compiled in the post-war years by surviving victims. As with the testimonies, some of these musical texts have been published, while most are accessible only in archives.<sup>17</sup> With a few exceptions, the published sources can be divided into two broad categories: those concerned with Jewish music, usually Yiddish songs from the ghettos; and collections of songs from the concentration camps, usually written by non-Jewish political prisoners primarily of German and Polish origin. The first collections of songs were published in the immediate post-war years, and a

<sup>15</sup> Michael André BERNSTEIN, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*, (London, 1994), 47. See also Shoshana FELMAN and Dori LAUB, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, (London, 1992); and Annette WIEVORKA, 'On Testimony' in Geoffrey H. HARTMAN (ed.), *Holocaust Remembrance*, 23-32.

<sup>16</sup> James E. YOUNG, 'Between History and Memory', 48-50.

<sup>17</sup> Archival sources are held at various repositories on the former camp sites themselves; at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, in the Arbeiterliedarchiv (hereafter AdK); and particularly at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (hereafter USHMM) in the Aleksandr Kulisiewicz collection, named after a Polish musician and activist imprisoned in Sachsenhausen from 1940-45. While still an inmate, Kulisiewicz began what became a massive post-war project to collect songs from the camps; he also composed at least forty songs of his own. He was not able to publish his work during his lifetime, and his enormously valuable collection only became publicly available in the early 1990s when it was purchased by the Museum.

significant number have been published since.<sup>18</sup> Given the diversity of nationalities, religions, and political affiliations represented in the camps, it is interesting to note that the songs represented in the public realm have often related only to specific sectors of the inmate population.

Like other sources, the musical texts pose problems of their own. In the case of the archival material in particular, information is often lacking about composers, lyricists, or dates of composition. In addition, it is often impossible to determine the context within which certain pieces would have been performed, or the extent to which prisoners would have been exposed to them. As a result, the scope and impact of certain kinds of musical activity are difficult to establish. Testimonies are sometimes helpful in this regard, and song texts at times allow for fairly reliable assumptions about how and where they might have been used: many are quite direct and graphic, and sometimes even self-referential. However, a certain amount of informed guesswork is involved.

Despite these issues, however, the musical texts are able to offer distinctive insight into an area of experience that remains difficult to access. While many sources relating to this area of Holocaust historiography originate from the post-war period, as I have suggested, the songs are a significant body of texts originating from the time itself. They convey to us not the retrospective understanding of individuals that survived — as do post-war testimonies — but the uncertain, shifting perspectives of prisoner communities facing daily life over an extended time period. They are, in other words, a unique legacy: fragments of shared ideas and interpretation, orally conveyed and preserved, from communities that otherwise left few traces. Of course, the access that they offer is inevitably partial; taken alongside other contemporary sources, however, they help to deepen our understanding of the human experience of internment.

Among contemporary sources, the songs are also distinctive as oral texts, disseminated — and, ultimately, preserved — within group frameworks. The only

<sup>18</sup> Collections devoted to Jewish music from the ghettos and camps include Zami FEDER, *Zamlung fun katset un geto lider*, (Bergen-Belsen, 1946); Johanna SPECTOR (ed.), *Ghetto- und KZ-Lieder aus Lettland und Litauen*, (Vienna, 1947); Shmerke KACZERGINSKI and H. LEIVICK, *Lider fun di getos un lagern*, (New York, 1948); Elsbeth Janda and Max Sprecher, *Lieder aus dem Ghetto* (Munich, 1962); Shoshana KALISCH and Barbara MEISTER, *Yes, We Sang!*, (New York, 1985); Eleanor MLOTEK and Malke GOTTLIEB (eds), *We are Here: Songs of the Holocaust*, (New York, 1983). Published sources on the music of non-Jewish prisoners include Inge LAMMEL and Günter HOFMEYER (eds), *Lieder aus den Faschistischen Konzentrationslagern*, (Leipzig, 1962); Günter MORSCH (ed.), *Sachsenhausen-Liederbuch: Originalwiedergabe eines illegalen Häftlingsliederbuches aus dem Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen*, (Berlin, 1995); Emil ACKERMANN and Wolfgang SZEPANSKY (eds), *... denn in uns zieht die Hoffnung mit: Lieder, gesungen im Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen*, (Berlin, n.d.). More inclusive and diverse in its selection of material is Jerry SILVERMAN's recent edited collection *The Undying Flame: Ballads and Songs of the Holocaust* (Syracuse University Press, 2002). In addition to the Yiddish songs (admittedly still the best-represented group), Silverman includes the songs of German and Polish camp prisoners, of Greek and Italian partisans, songs from the Spanish civil war, subversive pre-war cabaret hits, Soviet army songs, and others.

other forms of artistic creation that existed to a substantial degree in the ghettos and camps were literature (primarily poetry) and drawing.<sup>19</sup> Unlike either of these, music was usually a group activity, involving people either as active participants or as an informal audience. Individuals may have created entire songs or single verses, but songs were more likely to survive if they were popularly adopted and disseminated within and between groups. Verses were also often modified or added in response to changing circumstances, and the different musical and textual versions in which songs appeared after the war are helpful indicators of the kinds of changes they underwent as they circulated. Since people would only have engaged with music where they found it in some way meaningful — because of the risks involved in engaging in illegal activities, and because their energy was focused primarily on survival — any endorsement that they demonstrated was significant. Neither poems nor drawings could relate to a wider prisoner community in the same way that music could. They did not exist on the same scale, nor allow for group participation to the same extent. Further, because old melodies could be used as a basis for new lyrics, music provided a unique framework within which groups could affirm pre-war identities while simultaneously engaging with new experiences. Because it helped people to process and deal with the events within a more communal framework than was possible through other artistic means, the music is thus particularly valuable as a historical source, as it can provide insight not only into the individual responses of victims but also (indirectly) into the possible responses of larger groups.

#### *Music's Value as Source: Some Methodological Categories*

The value of music's role at the time, and its subsequent value for the historian, can for purposes of discussion be explored in terms of several theoretical categories, although in practice these inevitably overlap and cannot easily be separated. The first broad category, relating to one of the most important functions that music fulfilled at the time, is documentation. Song texts were a space where detailed descriptions of what people were experiencing could be recorded; melodies served as useful mnemonic devices, and made oral dissemination easier and more effective. The practice of setting new lyrics to existing melodies was widespread across the camp and ghetto spectrum, in part for this reason. While some songs chronicled individual stories, a far greater number addressed the experiences of larger groups and communities. In a world where newspapers, radios, and other forms of communication had almost or entirely ceased functioning, songs were an

<sup>19</sup> Most surviving drawings are accessible only in archives, including the USHMM Kulisiewicz collection, but some have been reprinted in publications such as Inge LAMMEL and Günter HOFMEYER's edited collection *Kopf Hoch, Kamerad!: Künstlerische Dokumente aus faschistischen Konzentrationslagern* (Berlin, 1965).



effective means of sharing information of this kind, on a local level and, perhaps more importantly, for the purpose of communicating with people removed from the events.

The Yiddish song repertoire is replete with examples of songs, dating back as far as the sixteenth century, documenting specific events suffered by Jewish communities, such as pogroms and uprisings.<sup>20</sup> Although few of the ghetto songs from the Nazi era compare to these in either length or detail, some follow clearly in this tradition. 'Aroys iz in Vilne a nayer bafel' (A new command has been issued in Vilna), for example, documents carefully and with understated emotion the liquidation of the shtetls (small towns) around Vilna during the spring of 1943, and the spontaneous resistance mounted by several of the victims when they realized they were being taken to be murdered, and not simply being relocated as they had been informed.<sup>21</sup> Documenting was an equally powerful impulse in the camps, and opportunities for recording perhaps even more limited than they were in the ghettos. Of Auschwitz, Tadeusz Borowski wrote: '[e]verybody here tells stories — on the way to work, returning to the camp, working in the fields and in the trucks, in the bunks at night, standing at roll-call'.<sup>22</sup> Songs, in the same way as stories, sometimes helped to reconnect individuals with their pre-war lives, or provided opportunities for imaginative escape into a world outside the camp. In addition to strengthening past identities, they were a means of producing and communicating meaning about the camp world itself: about prisoner functionaries, the state of the war, forced labour, food, the gas chambers, and other elements of camp life.

In this context melodies were recognized as a useful mnemonic device, allowing people to record experiences in a way that could be easily remembered; again, many camp songs were based on popular pre-existing melodies rather than newly-composed ones. Songwriters often took pains to portray camp life in explicit detail, in order to document the kinds of crimes being perpetrated. Several songs from Auschwitz fall into this category: 'Zwillingi' (Twins), for example, described some of the medical experiments conducted by Dr Mengele; songs including 'Zug zum Krematorium' (Train to the crematorium) and Zbigniew Adamczyk's 'Znów śmierć zagłada mi w oczy' (Again death looks me in the eye) documented torture and murder in Auschwitz and Birkenau; while songs like Czech inmate Margit Bachner's 'Auschwitzlied' (Auschwitz song) and Greek-Jewish prisoner Ya'akov Levi's 'Saloniki' chronicled the many horrors of life in Auschwitz, including disease, heavy labour, torture, and the incessant longing for home and family.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ruth RUBIN, *Voices of a People: The Story of Yiddish Folksong*, (Philadelphia, 1979), 200-208.

<sup>21</sup> KACZERGINSKI and LEIVICK (eds), *Lider*, 32-3.

<sup>22</sup> Tadeusz BOROWSKI, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, (London, 1967), 124.

<sup>23</sup> 'Zwillingi' and 'Zug zum Krematorium' cited in USHMM, RG-55.019.09; 'Znów śmierć zagłada mi w oczy' cited in USHMM, RG-55.003.70; 'Auschwitzlied' and 'Saloniki' cited in Moshe HOCH, 'Ha'tarbut ha'muziqalit b'krev ha'y'hudim tahat ha'shilton ha'natsi b'polin 1939-1945', (Bar-Ilan University Ph.D. Dissertation, 1992), 305-6, 308-15.

In addition to the task of straightforward documentation, songs were a way for victims to connect with the outside world, or, perhaps more precisely, with the future that many feared they might not live to see. The idea of bearing witness was returned to frequently and with great intensity, both in contemporary writings and post-war testimonial literature, as I have already suggested with regard to the ghetto diaries and chronicles. Cut off from the world both physically and emotionally, victims felt it crucial that someone or something survive to attest to what had happened. Because they could be orally transmitted, songs were an obvious medium, and in several cases, the lyrics themselves explicitly articulate this intention. In Sachsenhausen, for example, 24-year-old Warsaw poet and journalist Leonard Krasnodębski wrote the lyrics of 'Chorał z piekła dna' (Chorale from the depths of hell). The song is a desperate appeal to be heard, a fraught attempt to rouse the compassion of anyone who is listening. The words explicitly cry, 'Hear our choral from the depths of hell! Attention! Attention!'; the word 'attention' corresponds with the climactic point of the musical setting.<sup>24</sup> A song entitled 'Treblinka', created when inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto had begun to discover the fates of those who were being deported during the summer of 1942, chronicles how the Jews were chased out of their homes and transported to the Treblinka death camp. Again, the lyrics refer overtly to 'our brothers from over the sea' who will shed 'rivers of tears' when the victims' mass grave is discovered.<sup>25</sup> In both these songs, as elsewhere, the emphasis is on having suffering acknowledged by the outside world, and making sure that the memory of the victims and what they have endured is preserved.

If the songs were valuable to victims at the time as a means of documentation and bearing witness, they are additionally valuable to the historian today for what they can reveal about the victims' internal responses to the events they recorded. From the ways in which people chose to document what was happening to them, we can gain insight into how they understood their experiences, and the frameworks of interpretation on which they drew in order to make sense of them. A compelling example is Rikle Glezer's 'Es iz geven a zumertog' (It was a summer's day), in which the 18-year-old carefully documented the events she witnessed shortly after the establishment of the Vilna ghettos in September 1941: Jews being herded into the ghettos, their futile pleas for help, the slaughter in the streets, and the mass murders that were taking place at Ponar. Few of the ghetto songs are as explicit in their descriptions. Glezer left no doubt as to the emotional state into

<sup>24</sup> Carsten LINDE (ed.), *KZ-Lieder: Eine Auswahl aus dem Repertoire des Polnischen Sängers Alex Kulisiewicz*, (Sievershütten, 1972), 13; USHMM, RG-55.004.18. For an account of a performance of 'Chorał z Piekła Dna' in Sachsenhausen, see André GOUILLARD cited in LINDE (ed.), *KZ-Lieder*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Several versions exist of this song: see KACZERGINSKI and LEIVICK (eds), *Lider*, 213-16; Ruth RUBIN, *Voices of a people*, 444; MLOTEK and GOTTLIEB (eds), *We are Here*, 37-8.

which these events had thrown the Vilna Jews: they were 'cut off from the world', severed from their homes and families, and sacrificed on the streets 'like cattle'; 'everything was lost', and not even a 'ray of hope' glimmered in their future. But in bearing witness to the devastation of the community and to its deep trauma, the song also drew on familiar and comforting language and imagery. With Hebrew-derived words and religious allusions, Glezer brought the narrative of suffering into an explicitly Jewish context, and suggested a common conceptual framework within which people could try to absorb what had happened; she also constructed her song as the lament not of an individual, but of a community. Songwriters during this period frequently turned to earlier episodes in the long history of Jewish suffering, from the Bible to the tsarist pogroms, for similar reasons. These kinds of narrative strategies seem to have provided consolation not only because they gave some meaning to the events within the context of tradition, but also because they brought with them an affirmation, however faint, that despite its tragic history the Jewish nation had always managed to sustain its existence.<sup>26</sup>

Another broad category within which the importance of musical texts can be understood relates to the social makeup of the ghettos and camps. The songs offer insight into a wide range of human experience under internment: enormous social disparities within communities, differences in experiences between religious, national, and political groups, and the wide range of coping techniques and attitudes towards what was happening, from desperate optimism to resigned despair, anger, fear, morbid sarcasm, and black humour. They also tackle a broad range of issues relating to daily life: shock, massacres witnessed, children left orphaned, the break-up of families, religious crises, corruption in the communities, the desire to have suffering acknowledged, the desire for revenge. Music functions as a lens onto this social diversity in two distinct ways. As an object (self-contained 'work' or song), it acts as a medium for the discussion and documentation of social disparity. As an activity, it was a place where that disparity was played out.

Songs record social and political commentary not only regarding the German authorities, but also inequalities and power structures within the inmate communities themselves. Let us take as an example the song 'Moes, moes' (Money, money), which according to surviving inmates was popularly sung in the Warsaw ghetto. The song is a satire of corruption and moral decline in the ghetto, and portrays a complicated landscape rife with economic and social inequities. In particular, it criticizes the ill treatment of the ghetto masses at the hands of the powerful and wealthy elite, who do their utmost to protect their own positions. In characteristically sardonic style, the song offers this suggestion to those inmates who have descended into poverty and squalor:

<sup>26</sup> KACZERGINSKI and LEIVICK (eds), *Lider*, 7-8.

Money, money, money is a good thing.  
 If you have no money, I have a plan for you:  
 Give away your ration-card, and crawl into Pinkert's little box ...  
 Money, money, money is a fine thing.<sup>27</sup>

The 'Pinkert' referred to in the song's penultimate line was the head of the ghetto's *Khevre kadishe* (Burial society).<sup>28</sup> Many of the songs newly created in the ghettos were similarly preoccupied with the widespread poverty and the shortage of food, and documented what were becoming some of the most characteristic features of daily life: begging, stealing, and smuggling. 'Hot's rakhmones, yidishe hertser' (Have compassion, Jewish hearts), written by Polish writer and Warsaw ghetto inmate Paulina Braun, portrays a desperate street beggar, little more than 'twisted bones, dry flesh', and emitting this 'weak, quiet cry':

Have compassion, Jewish hearts,  
 Give me something to eat, or some money;  
 Have compassion, Jewish hearts,  
 I still want to live, I still want to see the world!<sup>29</sup>

The song 'Di tefile fun khaper' (The prayer of the 'khaper'), written by Irena Gleyzer and composed by Teresa Vaynbaum, depicts a ghetto 'khaper', a child who would sneak up to passers-by on the street and snatch their food. Those who had no other means of subsistence were often forced to resort to crime of this kind; the song portrays these people in a deeply pathetic way, exposing their 'sins' while at the same time showing compassion for their hopeless plight.<sup>30</sup> Other songs, like 'Motele fun Varshever geto' (Motele of the Warsaw ghetto) and 'Der kleyner shmugler' (The little smuggler) chronicle the Warsaw ghetto's highly-developed smuggling industry and the special role played by children, whose size and agility meant that they could more successfully sneak through to the Aryan side of the wall.<sup>31</sup>

As an activity, music is also a lens onto the wide-ranging experiences of different inmate communities, particularly in the camps. The types of music with

<sup>27</sup> Sixth and final verse. 'Moes, moes, moes iz a gute zakh./ Hostu nit keyn moes, hob yakh far dir a plan:/ Gib avek di bone, un rik zikh in Pinkerts kestele aran .../ Moes, moes, moes iz an aydele zakh.' The version of the song from which this quote has been drawn was related to Shmerke Kaczerginski shortly after the war by three surviving inmates of the ghetto. KACZERGINSKI and LEIVICK (eds), *Lider*, 177-8. See also Ruta PUPS and Bernard MARK, *Dos lid fun geto: Zomlung*, (Warsaw, 1962), 46-8.

<sup>28</sup> PUPS and MARK, *Dos lid fun geto*, 48.

<sup>29</sup> Third verse. 'Hot's rakhmones, yidishe hertser,/ Git mir esn, oder epes gelt;/ Hot's rakhmones, yidishe hertser,/ Kh'vil nokh lebn, kh'vil nokh zen di velt!' KACZERGINSKI and LEIVICK (eds), *Lider*, 156-7.

<sup>30</sup> KACZERGINSKI and LEIVICK (eds), *Lider*, 153-4.

<sup>31</sup> MLOTEK and GOTTLIEB (eds), *We are Here*, 66-7; KACZERGINSKI and LEIVICK (eds), *Lider*, 104-5.

which prisoners were likely to engage varied radically according to their social status, nationality, particular skills and contacts, and the latitude afforded them by the authorities. Music was a potent symbol of difference, marking the division between those who had free access to it and those who did not, and reflecting the diverging treatment of national, political, or religious groups within the prisoner hierarchies. In addition, a variety of factors affected the ways in which different inmates could make use of music. As a voluntary activity it tended to be the preserve of 'privileged' camp inmates, and although it sometimes functioned as a means for inter-group communication and solidarity, it was equally often the sign of one group's advantages over another.<sup>32</sup>

I have explored these issues in detail elsewhere, with particular reference to the concentration camp Sachsenhausen, established near Berlin in 1936.<sup>33</sup> In Sachsenhausen, inmates received widely varying treatment depending on their designation (as political prisoners, criminal prisoners, 'asocials', and so on), their nationality, particular skills, camp connections, and other factors. They were also divided on the basis of an SS-imposed prisoner hierarchy, common to most of the larger camps, with various ranks of functionaries. As a result of these structural divisions, different prisoner groups had astonishingly divergent experiences of daily life. In many cases, these differences are suggested or given expression in their songs.

The strongest and most prominent inmate group in Sachsenhausen consisted of German political prisoners, who occupied the principal positions in the prisoner hierarchy. As a result of their position they were afforded a relatively 'privileged' lifestyle within the camp, which extended to music and other leisure activities. Throughout the time of the camp's existence, they arranged regular communal sing-songs or *Schallerabende*, the primary purpose of which was to boost prisoner morale.<sup>34</sup> The *Schallerabende* drew on a repertoire of almost 300 songs, several of which had been written in other camps or in Sachsenhausen, but most of which had existed prior to 1936.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to the songs of other prisoner groups, there is a distinct absence among them of critical texts, no anger or calls for revenge, no

<sup>32</sup> Camp inmates used words like 'privileged' and 'prominents' as opposed to 'ordinary' inmates to designate types of prisoners. The title 'privileged' generally referred to inmates whose tasks or positions in the camp hierarchy afforded them better living conditions, access to resources, and prospects for survival.

<sup>33</sup> See my 'Songs Confront the Past: Music in KZ Sachsenhausen, 1936-1945' in *Contemporary European History* 13:3 (2004), 281-304.

<sup>34</sup> Many accounts make reference to the politicals' communal musical evenings. See for example ACKERMANN and SZEPANSKY, *...denn in uns zieht die Hoffnung mit*; Fritz LETTOW, *Arzt in den Höllen: Erinnerungen an vier Konzentrationslager*, (Berlin, 1997), 179; Odd NANSEN, *Day After Day*, (London, 1949), 444; and various former prisoners' accounts in AdK 43, 44 and 45.

<sup>35</sup> At least 16 songbooks related to the activities of German political prisoners in Sachsenhausen have been preserved. Originals and copies are held at the Gedenkstätte und Museum Sachsenhausen archive and repository as well as in the Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

mention of the Nazi party, and nothing approaching tragedy or grief. Even the songs written in the camps were generally set to triumphant, cheerful march melodies, with texts promoting optimism, comradeship, and solidarity. While most openly included images of camp life, such as descriptions of marching columns, forced labour, living conditions, and feelings of isolation or homesickness, their descriptions were almost always mild enough to be counterbalanced with encouraging refrains. The popular 'Grüne Kolonnen' (Green columns), for example, repeatedly intones the slogan 'Kopf hoch, Moorsoldat!' (Chin up, moor soldier!),<sup>36</sup> while the well-known 'Moorsoldatenlied' (Moor soldiers' song) follows several verses describing the prisoners' internment, forced labour, and longing for home with these hopeful concluding lines:

But there is no complaining for us,  
it can't be winter forever.  
One day we will cheerfully say:  
My country, you are mine again.  
Then the moor soldiers  
will no longer march with their spades  
into the moor!<sup>37</sup>

Because of the considerable power they were afforded in the prisoner hierarchy and the freedom granted them to engage in leisure activity, German political prisoners were able to apply music to constructive communal ends. By contrast, other prisoner groups in Sachsenhausen — such as Poles and Jews — engaged with music on a far more restricted scale, and produced songs of a radically differing nature. Polish songs like 'Spalona matka' (The burnt mother), 'Le Crucifié' (The crucified), and 'Egzekucja' (Execution), for example, testify to daily lives in the camp dominated by terror and violence; even their titles are more graphic and explicit than their German counterparts. Many others eschew the encouragement and optimism characteristic of the German *Schallerabend* tunes for what were perhaps felt to be more useful coping mechanisms: hateful, irreverent sarcasm and gallows humour. Aleksandr Kulisiewicz's 'Koncentrak' (Concentration camp), for example, describes Sachsenhausen as a place where, ironically, 'everything is shit-equal' and even 'the bishop sweeps the shithouse'.<sup>38</sup> Most of the Polish songs from Sachsenhausen depict the camp experience with similar anger and cynicism; unlike their German counterparts, they frequently include descriptions of suffering

<sup>36</sup> LAMMEL and HOFMEYER (eds), *Lieder*, 21-2.

<sup>37</sup> Sixth and final verse. 'Doch für uns gibt es kein Klagen,/ ewig kann's nicht Winter sein./ Einmal werden froh wir sagen:/ Heimat, du bist wieder mein./ Dann ziehn die Moorsoldaten/ nicht mehr mit dem Spaten / ins Moor!' LAMMEL and HOFMEYER (eds), *Lieder*, 14-15.

<sup>38</sup> LINDE (ed.), *KZ-Lieder*, 37. See also USHMM, RG-55.004.18.

and death, relentlessly express their contempt for the Nazi regime and its ideologies, and openly declare the desire for revenge.<sup>39</sup>

The differences between the German and Polish songs that I have described were informed most crucially by the context within which musical activity took place. For the German political prisoners, singing was almost always communal, a means of promoting solidarity and raising morale. Opportunities for Poles were more limited. Usually they were only able to attend performances by individuals or small groups, or occasionally to initiate spontaneous group sessions themselves. The prisoners who gave clandestine performances would generally move from block to block during free time in the evenings or on weekends, singing for small groups of fellow prisoners in exchange for extra food or cigarettes. As a result, the Polish songs constituted expressions of a more personal nature, although they frequently addressed issues of common significance to the inmates: camp conditions, love for Poland, and the prospect of freedom. The songs' musical qualities also correspond with these contextual differences: while the German songs are suited to singing by large groups (usually strophic, syllabic, and with simple diatonic melodies), the Polish songs are generally not: they are rhythmically more complex, make regular use of chromaticism, and encompass relatively wide ranges. The fervency of the anger and sarcasm with which Polish inmates approached their subject matter confirms that their songs were not intended to fulfil the same communal functions as were their German counterparts. Unlike Germans, Poles were low down in the prisoner hierarchy and had no 'privileged' status to maintain. The clandestine nature of their gatherings and, more decisively, the language factor, meant that to some degree they had more freedom to broach subversive topics: they referred directly to Hitler, and openly expressed anti-fascist sentiment. However, their lowly status and isolation from other groups in the camp meant that their opportunities for engaging in creative activity in the first place were limited.<sup>40</sup>

As I have suggested, the songs also offer a window onto the kinds of responses that different groups expressed or advocated regarding their new realities. The brief examples that I have cited here suggest how certain groups drew on the resources available to them — religious, national, and political identities, practices, and cultural traditions, as well as resources available to them in their particular wartime circumstances — in order to deal with and make sense of what was happening to them. Many more examples could be offered, including examples of

<sup>39</sup> At least 62 original Polish songs have been preserved from Sachsenhausen, of which around three quarters had either words or lyrics written by Kulisiewicz. In several cases these consisted of words written by fellow prisoners which he set to music.

<sup>40</sup> Manuscript about cultural life in the camps by Kulisiewicz, and interview, AdK, 2; correspondence of former prisoners with the Akademie der Künste regarding Kulisiewicz, GMSA, 13919; USHMM, RG-55.019.09.

how music was in some cases recruited by leaders and groups to promote or endorse particular responses to events.<sup>41</sup> Of course, it would be impossible to extract from the songs any kind of essential collective narrative. Nonetheless, patterns of popularity can show how, in active but not always conscious ways, communities articulated the ideas and perspectives with which they identified most strongly at the time.

Considered as historical sources, the songs are able to shed light on the diversity of the social environments in which they circulated, as well as the remarkably divergent experiences of those who lived within them. As I have emphasized, the value of the songs lies not only in their lyrics, although these are clearly important for numerous reasons. They are important precisely because they are not poems, but songs that were sung. Because the scholar working with these sources is generally faced with songbooks or transcribed musical material — in other words, written texts — and there is perhaps a temptation to think of the songs as inert, static objects, this differentiation is critical: it highlights music's vital role as an oral, participatory activity, particularly in circumstances where writing or documenting was extremely difficult.

Several important features define music's role as a communal activity. Many are psychological and emotional, and lie beyond the scope of this article, but several are worth isolating here, particularly if the issues I have outlined are to have wider applicability. Whatever their musical virtues or failings, and regardless to some extent of their musical content, melodies were employed as effective mnemonic devices, allowing people to heed the impulse to bear witness and document for future generations. Popular pre-war songs were widely employed — by prisoners across the spectrum of camp and ghetto populations — as a way of forging links with past identities and traditions, of situating their experiences within familiar historical trajectories, and perhaps because singing them provided a measure of emotional solace. In those situations where communal events were possible, songs allowed groups to spend time together, to cultivate a sense of community in the face of hardship, to share experiences and responses, or to find temporary reprieve from the camp world. Even where songs were created by individuals, collective attitudes can still to some extent be gauged: inmates could choose whether or not to attend clandestine performances, or to adopt particular songs and sing them amongst themselves, while ignoring others. The richest understanding of music's role as a communal activity can be gained by probing the manifold ways in which groups chose to use music in particular contexts. What did it mean, for example, to sing pre-existing songs in the way that some of these prisoners did? What did it mean to add new lyrics to melodies with powerful and long-standing associations? What did it mean to sing songs clandestinely, as opposed to singing them in languages that other prisoner groups could understand?

The examples that I have raised of course relate to one specific historical context. Although the oral nature of the songs is part of what makes them so valuable,

<sup>41</sup> See for example my discussion of the Vilna ghetto in *Music in the Holocaust*.



the groups to whom I have referred were largely literate and educated; the importance of orality was the result of trying historical circumstances rather than established musical practices within these communities. The use of songs as a historical source in the context of largely illiterate communities will inevitably differ in many respects, although there may be areas of intersecting interest, particularly where music can be seen to give voice to those otherwise excluded from dominant historical narratives and accounts.

### *Music and Memory*

In addition to being a subject for historical scrutiny, music created in the Nazi ghettos and camps has acted as a powerful vehicle for the transmission of memory.<sup>42</sup> Since the immediate post-war years, it has played an important part in commemoration ceremonies, both those organized by surviving victims and those instituted later by second- and third-generation communities. At these ceremonies, as well as in the broader discourse surrounding the Nazi genocide, music has overwhelmingly been used to promote narratives of heroism and resistance, emphasizing either 'spiritual resistance', or the armed struggle against Nazism and the bravery of those who chose to fight.<sup>43</sup> The brief examples raised in this article, however, have already intimated that the social reality of the camps and ghettos was rather more complicated than popular narratives might suggest.

My most recent work has been focused on the role of music, particularly popular song, during the struggle against apartheid in South Africa between 1948 and 1994. Largely the products of an oral tradition, the songs constitute a rich repository of communal knowledge, meaning, and identity, and offer a lens through which to consider the experiences of ordinary people under apartheid. During the course of my research, it has once again been interesting to observe the role of music in how the apartheid past is beginning to be imagined and remembered. In popular representations like the recent radio documentary *South African Freedom Songs: Inspiration for Liberation* and the film *Amandla! 'freedom songs'*, as they are popularly known, are used to frame the past affirmatively: as a time of moral clarity when a united people resisted a common enemy, in a retrospective trajectory where triumph is justified and inevitable.<sup>44</sup> Songs used in public ceremonies, po-

<sup>42</sup> The debate surrounding definitions of history as opposed to memory is not one that I will enter into here: for the purposes of this discussion, I use 'history' to refer broadly to the work of professional historians who document and interpret the past, and 'memory' to refer to more popular forms of remembering, largely in a collective setting.

<sup>43</sup> Some of the most popular songs, for example, are those created by Jewish partisan units operating in the Lithuanian forests. For more on the concept of 'spiritual resistance', see my detailed discussion in *Music in the Holocaust*.

<sup>44</sup> *South African Freedom Songs: Inspiration for Liberation*, (Cape Town, 2000); *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-part Harmony*, (Santa Monica, California, 2003).

litical gatherings, documentaries, and a variety of other contexts help to focus attention on particular aspects of national history, and can also — because of their immense power in rousing group sentiment — evoke an emotional sense of victory and pride.

In both of these cases, popular memory inevitably involves some simplification of the past, and the role played by music in elevating communal morale is both meaningful and important. Nonetheless, the songs themselves also offer a way *beyond* popular representations of historical events. In their role as historical sources — as texts that both described a given reality, and actively participated in it — they can offer important insight into a wide range of human experience in particular social and historical contexts.

#### *Sažetak*

#### GLAZBA KAO POVIJESNI IZVOR: SOCIJALNA POVIJEST I GLAZBENI TEKSTOVI

Smješten u sjecište između socijalne povijesti i muzikologije, ovaj se članak bavi odvojenim načinima na koje glazba (široko definirana) može obogatiti i rasvijetliti naše razumijevanje određenih povijesnih konteksta. Potaknut primjerima pjesama stvorenih u nacističkim getima i koncentracijskim logorima za vrijeme Drugog svjetskog rata, u njemu se pokazuje da glazba — uzeta uz druge povijesne izvore iz određenog razdoblja — može pružiti uvid u to kako su pojedinci i zajednice, zatočeni pod nacistima, odgovorili na to i interpretirali ono što im se dogodilo. Vrijednost tih pjesama je dvostruka: prvo, u području u kojem mnogi izvori datiraju iz poslijeratnog razdoblja oni su značajan korpus tekstova koji ima podrijetlo u sâmom tom vremenu. Uz to, oni se među tim suvremenim izvorima ističu kao usmeni tekstovi koje se širilo i, napokon, sačuvalo unutar okvira skupine. Oni nam ne otkrivaju samo retrospektivno shvaćanja pojedinaca koji su preživjeli rat (kao što to čine poslijeratna svjedočanstva), nego i nesigurne i promjenjive perspektive zatvoreničkih zajednica suočenih s dnevnom stvarnošću tijekom duljeg vremenskog razdoblja.

Nakon kratkog uvoda članak predstavlja pregled opsega dostupnih izvornih materijala koji se odnose na život u nacističkom zatočeništvu. Na toj podlozi autorica smješta važnost glazbe kao povijesnog izvora i istražuje njegove potencijalne vrijednosti u okviru nekoliko metodoloških kategorija. Naglasak je stavljen na ulogu glazbe kao usmene sudioničke djelatnosti, osobito u okolnostima kada je pisanje ili dokumentiranje bilo krajnje teško. U zaključku, članak se ukratko dotiče odnosa između glazbe i pamćenja te načina na koje glazba upotrijebljena retrospektivno, osobito na komemoracijama, može pomoći promicanju posebnog razumijevanja određene prošlosti. Kao ogledni slučaj, članak je namijenjen ne samo da osvjetli ovaj posebni povijesni kontekst, nego i da potakne raspravu o drugim kontekstima u kojima vrijednost glazbe kao povijesnog izvora može biti primijenjena na sličan način.