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## Songs from the Holocaust

In the Łódź ghetto, grieving the loss of his daughter Eva, the poet Yeshayahu Shpigl wrote a simple lullaby. He titled his lullaby ‘Nit kayn rozhinkes, nit kayn mandlen’ (No raisins, no almonds), referring clearly to the time-honoured and beloved Yiddish classic ‘Rozhinkes mit mandlen’ (Raisins and almonds). ‘Sleep, my little one, sleep,’ sings a mother to her child. ‘The little goat under your cradle has gone trading. When he returns, he will bring you raisins and almonds.’ By contrast, Shpigl’s ghetto version, titled ‘Nit kayn rozhinkes, nit kayn mandlen’ (No raisins, no almonds), <http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/places/ghettos/lodz/nit-kayn-rozhinkes/>, poignantly laments: ‘No raisins, no almonds. Father has not gone trading, and will never come back home. Where did he go? To the end of the world.’<sup>1</sup>

This song is just one of hundreds created during the Holocaust. In ghettos and camps across Nazi-occupied Europe, hundreds of thousands of inmates—representing diverse religions, political affiliations, ages, and nationalities—organized chamber groups and choirs, orchestras and theatres, communal sing-songs and cabarets. They performed a wide range of pre-existing music, from folk songs and dance hits to film music and classical repertoire. Hundreds of new songs and compositions were also created, not only by professional musicians, but also by ‘ordinary people’—in the streets, in soup kitchens, in youth clubs, in barracks.

Like many other ghetto songs, ‘No raisins, no almonds’ expressed the trauma of the victims’ situation by drawing on familiar pre-war musical traditions. Inmates often turned to culture in order to connect with their pre-war lives, or to seek solace in

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert, Shirli. *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 93. For a brief overview of the subject see also Gilbert, Shirli. “Music in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps.” In *The Routledge History of the Holocaust*, edited by Jonathan C. Friedman, 436–51. London: Routledge, 2011.

communal identity. Songs were a means through which victims tried to make sense of a frightening and ever-changing reality. The songs that have survived bear witness to the victims' shock and grief, to their uncertainty and enormous sense of loss. They bear witness to crises of faith, and the desire to have suffering acknowledged. In an alienating environment, songs became a kind of storehouse for victims' shared interpretations of what was happening. For us today, they offer hundreds of portraits, from the time, of life under internment.

The Nazi camps of course imprisoned not only Jews but also tens of thousands of political prisoners, Roma and Sinti, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and countless others. The 'Song of the Peatbog Soldiers' <http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/places/camps/music-early-camps/moorsoldatenlied/> was one of the first created by German political prisoners in a Nazi camp.<sup>2</sup> Premiered in August 1933 as part of a variety show organized by inmates in one of the earliest Nazi camps, it was described by its composer as a 'conscious protest song of resistance against our oppressors.' Its final verse and refrain defiantly proclaimed:

But for us there are no complaints

Because it cannot be winter forever.

Someday we will happily say:

Home, you are mine again.

Then the peat bog soldiers

Will no longer travel spade in hand

Into the moor!

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<sup>2</sup> Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*, pp. 111-112; Fackler, Guido. "Des Lagers Stimme" - *Music Im KZ: Alltag Und Häftlingskultur in Den Konzentrationslagern 1933 Bis 1936*. Bremen: Temmen, 2000.

Prisoners in ghettos and camps across Europe similarly used music to express their opposition to the regime, to build morale and camaraderie, and to galvanise support for resistance. In the spring of 1943, news of the heroic uprising in the Warsaw ghetto was a spur to the creation of some of the most popular and rousing Yiddish songs to have survived the period. ‘The news of the uprising lifted our spirits and made us proud,’ wrote the Vilna partisan Shmerke Katsberginski, ‘and although we were in agony at their unequal struggle, we felt relieved... Our hearts became winged.’

In response to the news of the uprising, the 20-year-old partisan Hirsh Glik wrote ‘Zog nit keynmol az du geyst dem letstn veg’ (Never say that you are walking the final road) <<http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/places/ghettos/vilna/zog-nit-keynmol/>>, better known today as the ‘Partisans’ Song’. The Vilna partisans quickly adopted it as their hymn, but as Katsberginski recalled, ‘the people did not wait for this decision [...];the song had already spread like wildfire to the ghettos, the concentration and labour camps, and into the woods to other partisan brigades.’<sup>3</sup>

One of the first people to record this song was the psychologist David Boder, a Latvian Jewish émigré to the United States, who travelled to Europe in 1946 to interview witnesses while their memories were still fresh. Songs fulfilled an important role in his project, and this song was taken from an interview in July 1946 with an 18-year-old Polish-Jewish survivor named Kalman Eisenberg. It is striking to hear the youthful voices of the survivors in these recordings, taken immediately after the war rather than decades afterwards.<sup>4</sup>

Although the Partisans’ Song became the anthem of a military organization, it was less a battle cry than a defiant affirmation of Jewish endurance, of collective

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<sup>3</sup> Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*, pp. 70-73.

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert, Shirli. “Buried Monuments: Yiddish Songs and Holocaust Memory.” *History Workshop Journal* 66 (2008): 107–28. On Boder, see Rosen, Alan. *The Wonder of Their Voices: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews of David Boder*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

rather than individual survival. Glik's faith lay in the overriding fact that although the dawn might be 'delayed', the *nation* would always proudly be able to assert, 'Mir zaynen do!' (We are here!).

Like 'Zog nit keynmol', songs were often a means of connecting with the outside world, or perhaps more precisely with the future that many victims feared they might not live to see. Cut off from the world both emotionally and literally, they felt it crucial that something or someone survive to bear witness to what had happened to them. The explicit expectation—or challenge—was that in the absence of millions of witnesses, the song itself would, in Glik's words, go 'like a watchword from generation to generation'. For us, the songs survive as fragments of voices from the past, a precious glimpse into the lives of those who did not survive to give their testimony.

The final song turns our attention even more explicitly to the post-war world, and the question of how as surviving generations we make sense of the Holocaust.

The composer Steve Reich, in his 1988 work *Different Trains*

<http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/memory/memorials0/europe-during-war0/>, mixes his memories of being a Jewish child in 1940s America with those of child-survivors of the Holocaust who later recorded their testimonies. This is how Reich describes the project:

The idea for the piece comes from my childhood. [Due to my parent's divorce], I travelled back and forth by train frequently between New York and Los Angeles from 1939 to 1942. [...] While these trips were exciting and romantic at the time, I now look back and think that, if I had been in

Europe during this period, as a Jew I would have had to ride on very different trains.

Reich recorded three testimonies from survivors all around his age. He then selected sound clips and arranged them into a semi-coherent narrative. In response to Reich's work, the critic Richard Taruskin wrote: Reich 'has composed one of the few adequate artistic responses in any medium to the Holocaust. There are no villains and no heroes. There is just the perception that while this happened here, that happened there, and a stony invitation to reflect.'<sup>5</sup>

I have spent much of my own life reflecting on what happened. As I grow older, I struggle increasingly with the question of how best to convey the memory to my own children, to my students, and to the generations that will succeed us. I grew up immersed in the stories of my maternal grandparents, who experienced more suffering and loss than I can contemplate. Their memory reminds me of the incalculable impact of war and genocide on countless individual human beings. Today we have fewer and fewer survivors among us. Our challenge as educators is how to convey a memory that is not abstract and superficial, but rather that urges people to engage with the concrete consequences of hatred, and that opens their eyes to individual choices in extreme circumstances.

Our website is a modest attempt to confront this challenge. We work from the conviction that music offers a more intimate way into the history of the Holocaust. It is also an emotionally engaging means through which people can reflect on its legacy for humanity. The site contains dozens of musical recordings, some dating from as early as 1946. The site contains hundreds of articles: about musicians and composers,

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Taruskin, *New York Times*, August 24, 1997.

about ghettos and camps where musical life flourished despite the circumstances, and about new compositions created in response to what was happening. The site contains rich resources for teachers who want to use these materials in their classrooms, including lesson plans and lists of books, recordings, and films. It is available in English, Spanish, as well as Russian, and is intended to make these rich materials accessible to as wide an audience as possible.

The music that survived the Holocaust helps us to deepen the ways in which we remember its victims, and the ways in which we convey their memory. After all, it is *we* who are the future generations, confronted with the challenge to remember not only what was done to the victims, but how they responded as human beings to the realities they faced. The musical compositions that have survived are a unique legacy: fragments of shared ideas and interpretation from communities that otherwise left few traces. The songs reveal to us the kinds of things that victims thought about those who held power over them, the shattering realities about which they sang to their children, how they tried to distract themselves with memories of home or dreams of freedom, how they imagined they would be remembered. The songs help us to think about the victims as human beings, unsure of what was happening to them, and full of conflicting wishes, hopes, fears, and predictions. It's my hope that we can begin to revive some of these extraordinary musical works in our own commemoration of the Holocaust—at our ceremonies, in our choirs, in our classrooms—as a way of giving voice to the victims. Let us think of these artefacts from the time as monuments to those who were destroyed: musical monuments that allow each of us to reflect on the legacy of the Holocaust for our present and future world.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why was music so widespread in the Nazi ghettos and camps?
2. Would you consider music a form of resistance?
3. What can songs from the Nazi ghettos and camps tell us that retrospective accounts, such as post-war testimonies, cannot?
4. Is music an effective vehicle for memorializing the Holocaust?
5. Can you find other examples of music being used in similar ways in circumstances of extreme persecution and violence?