



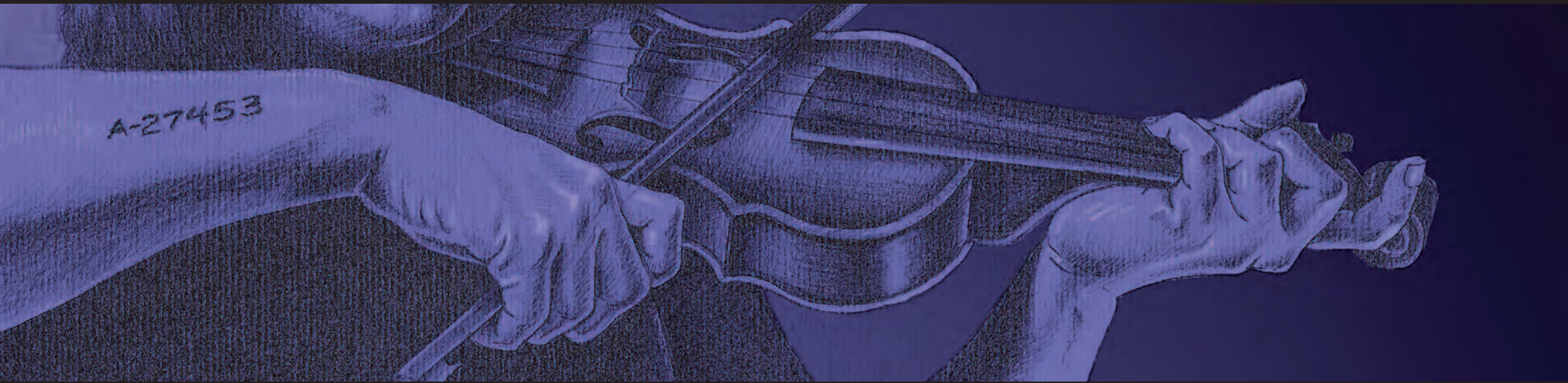
# MUSIC IN HELL

QUEENSBOROUGH  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE



The Harriet and Kenneth Kupferberg  
HOLOCAUST RESOURCE CENTER  
AND ARCHIVES





A-27453

# MUSIC IN HELL

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GHETTO ORCHESTRA

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# INTRODUCTION

RIGA, AUGUST 1941. More than 29,000 Jews, branded with the yellow star, are herded into an area of the city that before then had accommodated 13,000. On October 25, the ghetto is sealed. One text relates:

Among the Jews, there were several professional musicians. A few had instruments and even had scores. Perhaps to lift their own spirits or to restore a sense of normalcy, they got together to read chamber music. One day they discovered a piano without legs, a Bechstein [one of the most sought after German pianos] that someone had carried into the ghetto. The musicians decided to prop it up on concrete blocks and try it out. To their amazement the piano made a pretty good sound... and decided to hold a recital in the hall of the ghetto school. They performed the Tchaikovsky Piano Trio, subtitled In Memory of a Great Artist. An SD officer entered the hall with two German shepherds at his side, and silently remained to listen to the entire piece.

Frances Brent, *The Lost Cellos of Lev Aronson*, p. 84-85

How is it possible to reconcile this scene of suffering, the dearth of food and crowded rooms, with such a moment of beauty and uplifting of the spirit?

It seems equally hard to fathom how Jewish partisans in the forests of Byelorussia formed a musical troupe to soothe their souls while hiding from Nazi patrols or their local sympathizers.

And in a bizarre twist the Nazis used Jewish musical performances in the Theresienstadt ghetto as a way to lull naïve Red Cross observers into believing that Jewish prisoners received humane treatment.

Can we truly understand music making in the Vilna ghetto where everyone knew that he or she could be picked next to be summarily shot in the neighboring Ponary forest? Was this music playing defiance, resistance, or an attempt at normalcy and hope?

In a perverse fashion, the Nazis also forced Jews to form orchestras in the extermination camps. Emaciated musicians in striped prisoners uniforms had to play music during the freezing mornings or under the summer's sweltering sun while their fellow inmates were marched to and from forced labor. The same musicians also had to play tangos as accompaniment to punishments and executions.

After the war ended, many survivors continued to make music, playing in DP camps. One of them, the St. Otillien Orchestra, even offered a concert conducted by Leonard Bernstein.

This exhibit will touch on the eclectic musical expressions that existed before, during, and after the Shoah. The composite picture that emerges is compelling. It should prompt us to ask searing questions: Did music play a role in raising people's spirits in a hellish environment? Did music assist in the cause of spiritual resistance or psychological survival? Did music allow an escape to a different time, a different world? If and how did songs of despair sooth the prisoners' spirits? And what is the meaning of cultural performances in times of duress?

## PREWAR MUSICAL TRADITIONS



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE YAD VASHEM

THE PRE-WORLD War II European Jewish communities were the inheritors of a strong musical culture. Famous cantors rendered liturgical compositions in synagogues; Hassidim reached spiritual heights through their heartfelt tunes; klezmer ensembles entertained at Jewish weddings; Yiddish songs were sung in Warsaw theaters; Jacques Offenbach, Giacomo Meyerbeer, and Arnold Schönberg stood out as classical composers; Turkish and Greek Jews sang their folk and liturgical compositions in Ladino; and every European Jewish parent wanted their children to be accomplished violinists—little Jascha Heifetz. No wonder that Marc Chagall, inspired by the memories of his native Vitebsk painted the fiddlers floating in the air that made him famous. Our drawing portrays a typical Eastern European folk music trio, including a violinist.



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE YAD VASHEM

WHILE FIDDLERS and klezmer music have gained renewed recognition in the United States and Europe, its roots go back to Eastern European Jewish folk musicians. Their music was meant to lead brides and grooms to the wedding canopy and to entertain the guests with zesty dancing music. They were usually accompanied by a *badkhn* (a wedding jester) who improvised humorous and sentimental rhymes.

Most of the musicians in this image were from the Faust family, Rohatyn, Poland, 1912

## MUSIC UNDER NAZI RULE

**J**EWS, a small minority, reflected a European culture that widely valued, promoted, and enjoyed musical creativity in a variety of forms. So did the Nazis. Germany and Austria stood at the forefront of the pantheon of classical composers whose musical legacy endures to this day.

Adolf Hitler himself was a self-styled art connoisseur and great admirer of Richard Wagner, an outspoken anti-Semite. In the photo we see Hitler seated in the front row in the Leipzig concert hall during a performance of Wagner by the city's orchestra. On the other side of the aisle, also in the front row, seated from left to right are Reichsminister Hermann Göring (partially obscured by a podium), and Reichsminister of the Interior Wilhelm Frick. Also in the audience was Wagner's daughter-in-law, Winnifred, and her son, Wieland.



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE USHMM



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE YAD VASHEM

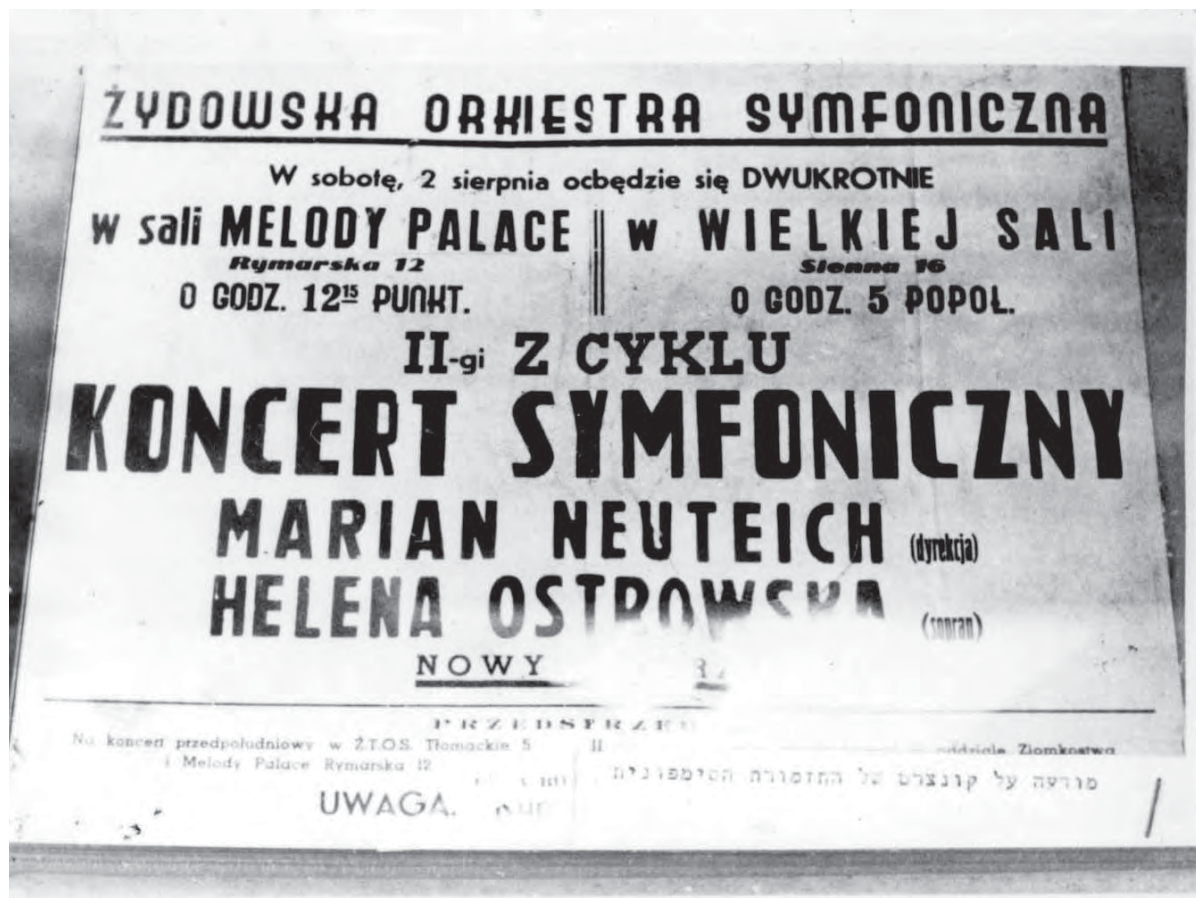
Not only did the Nazi dictatorship promote the arts it considered “authentically” German, but it also advocated massive parades and marches led by army and lay orchestras. The parades were often attended by the top Nazi brass, and joined by thousands of people. The marching music was meant to elicit loyalty and pride in the regime, an expression of Nazi militarism. These marches were immortalized in films and newsreels of the time.

Our image shows a parade of the Hitler *Jugend* (Hitler Youth), dressed in summer uniforms, led by a marching orchestra.

## MUSIC IN THE GHETTOS AND TRANSIT CAMPS

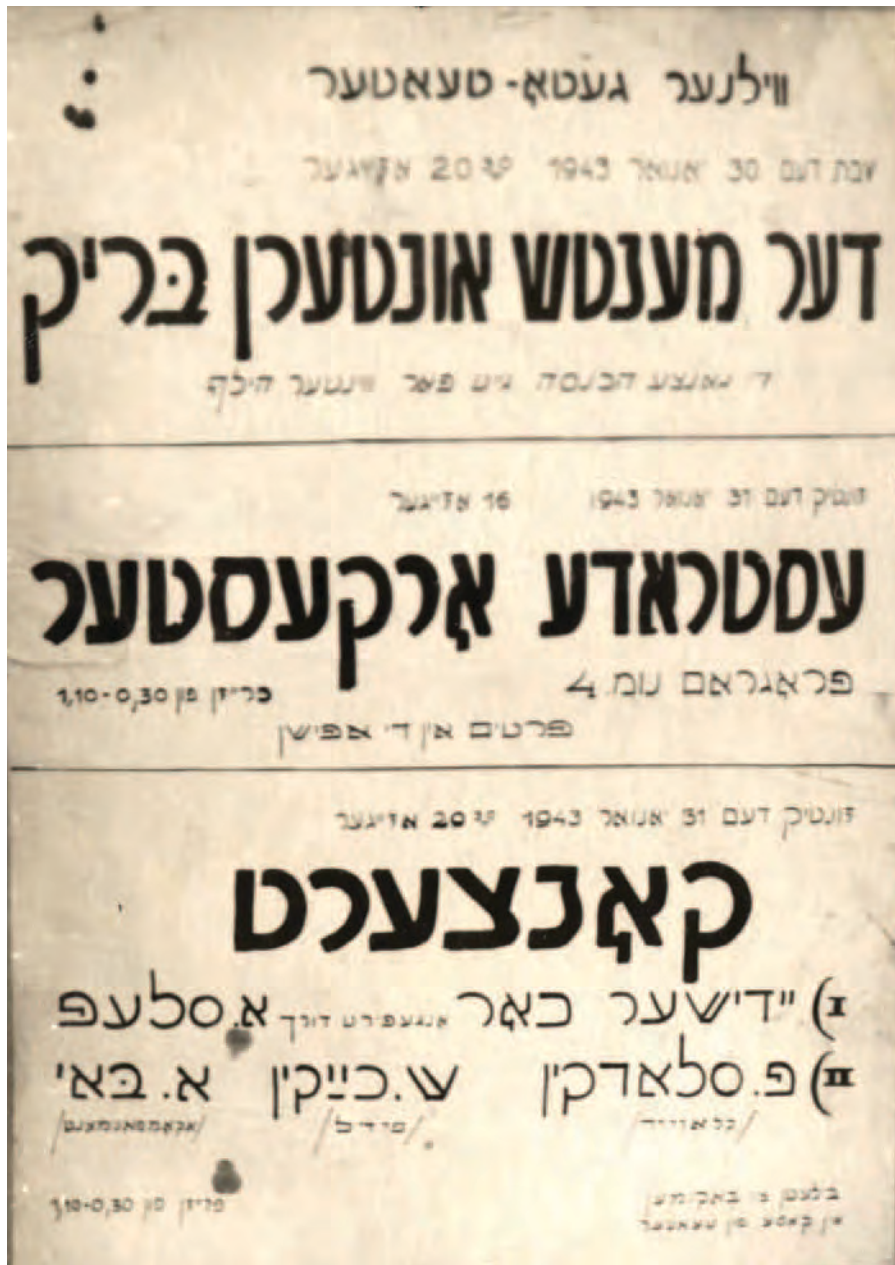
ONE OF the first anti-Jewish measures the Nazis carried out in the cities brought under their control was the establishment of ghettos into which Jewish populations were herded. The cramped ghettos were a way station to labor and extermination camps. In addition, their purpose was to aid in the control and supervision of the Jewish population. The Germans hoped that as a result of malnutrition and substandard sanitary conditions, a large number of Jews would perish before reaching the camps. The ghettos were also to provide the Nazis with cheap labor.

On the eve of World War II, Warsaw's Jewish population was the largest and most socially diverse in Europe. By the time the ghetto, occupying only 2.4 per cent of the city's area, was established in November 1940 Jews numbered well over four hundred thousand. Even under such adverse ghetto conditions of confinement and isolation, Jewish musical creativity did not cease. The photo shows a poster on a Warsaw ghetto wall announcing a concert by the Jewish Symphonic Orchestra, established in January 1941. All of the orchestra's programs had to be subjected to Nazi censorship and no works by so-called Aryans could be performed. Marian Neuteich, promoted on the poster, was a co-founder and conductor of the orchestra. But the situation took its toll. "Although the concerts were cheap and relatively well attended, testimonial evidence suggests that most ghetto inmates did not take an interest in them." (Shirli Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*, p. 43).



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE YAD VASHEM





COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE YAD VASHEM

GILA FLAM writes of the music in the Lodz ghetto: “Both on the theater stage and on street corners the performers were exposed to official censorship and unofficial ‘audience requirements.’ And yet, the ghetto inhabitants could express their feelings through these songs, whether composed by professionals or amateurs, and whether or not they rhymed according to the Yiddish folksong rules. The social drama presented in these songs gave the audience the ability to express their humanity and made the events meaningful and hopeful. The musical element represented normalcy” in a world gone mad.

Gila Flam, “The Role of Singing in the Ghettos: Between Entertainment and Witnessing,” in Robert Moses Shapiro, ed., *Holocaust Chronicles: Individualizing the Holocaust through Diaries and Other Contemporaneous Personal Accounts*, p. 141-153.

The photo is of a Yiddish poster in the Vilna Ghetto advertising theatrical and musical performances. The Vilna Ghetto Theater announced the staging of *The Man Under the Bridge*, (a Yiddish translation of Otto Indig’s Hungarian play, substituting Jewish characters for the non-Jewish originals) followed by two musical performances, the Estrade Orchestra, and a concert to be performed by the Jewish choir.

**H**ERE VIOLINISTS are seen performing in the Kovno ghetto (Kaunas, Lithuania), sometime between August 1, 1942 and March 1, 1944. Among those pictured are: from the left looking at the camera, Abrasha (Boris) Stupel, who survived the war; next to him, half-face, is Alexander (Shmaya) Stupel; the third, closest musician, is Sonia Stupel-Abramson. The last two perished in Dachau. The Stupels were a family of noted Lithuanian musicians. (I am indebted to Prof. Elyahu Stoupel of the Sackler School of Medicine in Tel-Aviv, and to his daughter, Dr. Janet Stoupel in New York, for the precise identification of the members of their family.)



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE USHMM

Following the German occupation of Kaunas, many of the city's musicians brought their musical instruments with them to the ghetto. On August 18, 1941, the Nazis held a special "Intellectuals' Action" resulting in the murder of 534 of the most educated men. To avoid a repeat "Action" the Jewish council decided that the best way to protect these musicians was to make them policemen and issue them uniforms. In the photo, the musicians are wearing the yellow star. A total of eighty concerts were given during the ghetto's existence. The performances took place in the Police House, the former building of the famous Slobodka Yeshivah.



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE YAD VASHEM

**M**USIC IN the ghettos was not only heard in formal concerts but in informal settings as well. These performances contributed to creating a fictional milieu of normalcy in a surrealistic, but all-too-real-world, where the average people were crammed into small rooms with no water or electricity and steadily deteriorating conditions.

In this picture taken in the Lodz (Poland) ghetto during an event, we see seated [center front row behind the table] Chaim Mordechai Rumkowski (1877-1944), appointed by the Nazis as “Elder of the Jews,” until his murder in Auschwitz, following the ghetto’s liquidation in August 1944. Seated with him are members of the ghetto’s education committee. Behind them are musicians and a children’s choir, wearing the yellow star.

MUSIC ALSO served as a pathetic financial survival mechanism, a way to earn a few cents. “While some musicians found occasional employment at cafés, theatres, or giving private concerts to the wealthy,” Gilbert writes, “even the community’s most prosperous members now had to resort to playing in the streets.” Children, in particular, usually boys, dressed in rags, became street musicians. (p.31-32)

In this photo taken in the Warsaw ghetto (February 1941), a child is playing the violin, while other children listen to him. It is clearly cold outside, as all the children are wearing coats, hats, and gloves, looking straight ahead, probably at the photographer, Joe J. Heydecker.



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE YAD VASHEM



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE YAD VASHEM

This image of a group of very young children was taken in the Lodz ghetto. It is assumed that they belonged to a children’s convalescent home in the Marysin section of the ghetto that included “the orphanages, youth organizations, as well as the cemetery.” (Gila Flam, *Singing for Survival: Songs of the Lodz Ghetto, 1940-45*, p. 98.) As opposed to the first photo, this time it is summer as the children are lightly dressed. They are seen playing an accordion accompanied by several flutes and a drummer. The young musicians don’t seem to have an audience.



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE YAD VASHEM

**G**HETTO LIFE was disguised by a very thin veneer of what could be called “normalcy.” In the midst of the horror signs of life were always, almost obstinately, present. Even Jewish festivals were celebrated. In this image taken in the Warsaw ghetto on May 5, 1942, a children’s choir sings at a Lag Ba-Omer celebration. The children, all orphaned or abandoned, have their heads shaved as a sanitary measure. Their teacher accompanies their singing with a mandolin, one of the most popular string instruments in pre-World War II Europe.

WHILE WE may find choirs, children's singing, and concert of classical music difficult to associate with ghetto life under Nazi rule, it is even more unimaginable to accept the existence of a cabaret in the Warsaw ghetto. In spite of all the privations, however, "there were also those who continued to live well in the ghetto... The 'prosperity' enjoyed by this elite 'handful' was manifest in many areas in the early months of the ghetto's existence... Among the items to which these people had access was entertainment, particularly music." (Gilbert, p. 28)



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE YAD VASHEM

We see this privileged group as an orchestra plays in a Warsaw Ghetto cabaret, accompanying a female singer. Male and female patrons, seemingly appropriately dressed for the occasion, sit around a table, chatting. Who took the picture? Did these Jews feel any pangs of guilt about the fact that while the majority of their brethren went hungry, they were enjoying music? Did they know that they too would end in up the crematoria? And if they knew, how could they possibly enjoy a cabaret show? Was it self-delusion? Hope? Escape?

**G**HETTOS WERE not the only venues for music. Music survived in prisoner-of-war and labor camps. These, too, were no more than holding pens, where Jews were forced to break stones, work on farms, and build roads, before the inevitable. In such unlikely venues, Jewish musicians became part of the fabric of everyday life.



In this image we see a tango orchestra on a stage in Stalag VIIIA just east of Görlitz, [Silesia] Germany, and now Zgorzelec, Poland, with concertmaster Max Beker, from Vilna, conducting. The small orchestra was made up of non-Jewish musicians. The camp commandant encouraged the twice-a-week musical performances since they made for good public relations when Red Cross visitors came to inspect. It was in Stalag VIIIA that Olivier Messiaen, the French composer and camp prisoner captured as a French soldier during the German invasion of 1940, finished composing *Quatour pour la fin du temps* ("Quartet for the End of Time"), a classic work of chamber music.

When this camp was closed Max Beker was sent to a neighboring camp that eventually was liquidated, the prisoners sent on a death march. Beker survived, but his entire family was murdered in the Ponary forest.

**W**ESTERBORK, [DRENTHE], situated in an isolated region in northwest Holland, became the main transit camp for Dutch Jewry during the Nazi occupation of the country. As of July 1942, the camp held more than one hundred thousand Jews. They remained there for weeks, after which they were deported east as part of the “Final Solution.”

In spite of living under a Damocles sword with deportations a daily occurrence, the camp’s Jews availed themselves of various clinics, schools, workshops for the repair of clothes and shoes, a bathhouse, a post office, a theater, and an orchestra. Life went on as “normally” as possible. Our photo shows the Westerbork string orchestra posing on a stage with their instruments, including the ubiquitous accordion. All the men are smartly dressed and flowers adorn the stage. Standing third from left is guitarist Salomon de Zwarte, wearing a yellow star on his left lapel. Contrary to most of his coreligionists, he survived the war.



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE YAD VASHEM



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE YAD VASHEM

In the same Westerbork camp, the orchestra was forced to play marching songs followed by a line of inmates. An expression of Nazi sadism was to have orchestras play, not for entertainment but to make a laughing stock of both the players and the Jewish prisoners.





COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE USHMM

**M**OST OF US would identify in this photo five teens, handsomely dressed in long-sleeved white shirts and ties, performing in a band. They seem to be neither in a ghetto nor in a labor camp. But these youngsters are in fact Jewish refugees playing at the Monitin, France, children's home, sometime between 1940 and 1942. No viewer would even be rattled by the orchestra's name "OSE," seen on the banner hanging in front of the battery player. The acronym stood for Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants, a French Jewish organization that saved hundreds of children during the war and ran dozens of orphanages. Yet, their own feelings were expressed in the meaning they gave to the letters: "Orchestre Sans Espoir," "The Orchestra Without Hope." Pictured from left to right are Horst Rotholz, Warner Hausman, Guenther Heilbrun, Micki Stiasski, and Hans Windmuller. The question that keeps nagging is how did these young human spirits, refugees, and orphans, without homes and families, rise above despair and play music? But play they did.

## THE CASE OF THERESIENSTADT

**T**HE MAKING of music at Theresienstadt/Terezín, in Czechoslovakia, is in a category by itself. “This town became the fate of thousands of Jews, when the SS declared it in 1941 to be a so-called ‘privileged’ camp in the protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.” (Rudolf M. Wlaschek [Hg], *Kunst und Kulktur in Theresienstadt*, p. 8) The ghetto differed from all other ghettos. It was specifically designed to deceive the outside world and to conceal the truth regarding the ultimate destiny of all the Jewish prisoners: their murder. While Terezín was nothing but a transit camp to the killing centers, the posthumous fame of Theresienstadt is based primarily on the myth generated by the hoax of the multiple cultural activities that took place in its midst. (Sybil H. Milton, “The Setting of the Myth,” in Anne D. Dutlinger, *Art, Music and Education as Strategies of Survival: Theresienstadt 1941-45*, p. 11)



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE YAD VASHEM

Few could imagine the depths of the real hell, contemplating this photo of the Theresienstadt orchestra and choir during a performance, with all the well dressed performers, all branded with a yellow star, despite the deception.



POSTERS COURTESY TEREZIN MEMORIAL, HERMANN'S COLLECTION, C. ZUZANA DVORÁKOVÁ

A CLEAR assessment comes from the historian, Anne P. Dutlinger: “The artwork produced in Theresienstadt was created in large part by those who would not survive. The work left by artists is all that remains of them—evidence of their talent, and a tragic symbol of lost potential. The art, music, and theater from Theresienstadt stands as an archive and memorial of the diverse and prolific cultural, artistic, and educational activities that took place there... For most of the inmates, life in the ‘model ghetto’ was only a temporary stop on the way to annihilation.” (*Art, Music and Survival*, p.1)

The photo is of a poster announcing a performance of Johann Strauss’s operetta *Die Fledermaus*. Some of the singers survived the war: Hans Hoffer and Wolfgang Lederer.



Another poster advertises a performance by the Swing-Club Musicians in preparation of a Red Cross visit. Fritz Weiss and Hermann Cerini were murdered in Auschwitz in 1944. Josef Brammer survived the war; Viktor Kohn did not.

**B**RUNDIBÁR—A CZECH colloquialism for a bumblebee— is a children’s opera by Czech Jewish composer Hans Krása with a libretto by Adolf Hoffmeister, that was originally performed pre-Terezin in a Prague orphanage. By 1942, Krása and the set designer Frantisek Zelenka had been transported to the camp. Only Hoffmeister was able to escape Prague in time. Krása reconstructed the full score of the opera based on memory. *Brundibár* was shown fifty five times from September 1943 till the end of 1944, when the opera was staged for representatives of the Red Cross who came to inspect living conditions in the camp. Later that year, a *Brundibár* performance was filmed for a Nazi propaganda film.



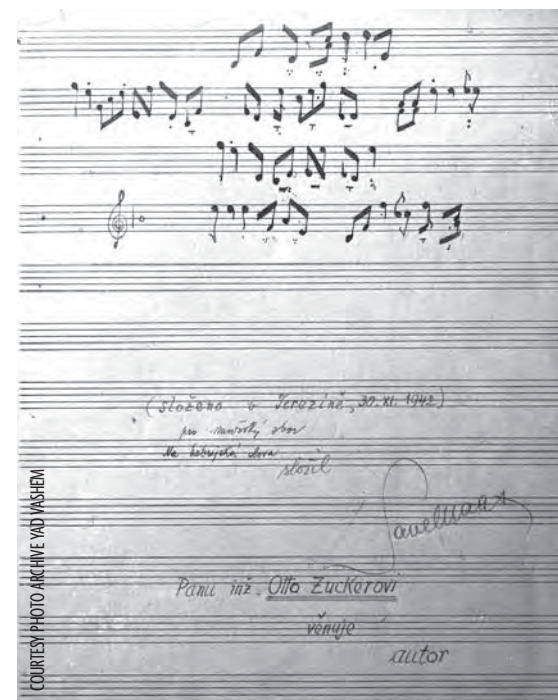
COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE YAD VASHEM

The photo of the performing children was censored out of the Nazi film. Most of the participants in the production, including the composer Krása, were exterminated in Auschwitz. In reality, for all their importance, “These presentations help maintain the myth about a supposedly active cultural life in the camp, easing the conscience of a world which stood by idly while millions of innocents were tortured and killed.” (Charlotte G. Opffermann, *The Art of Darkness*, p. 57).

**D**ESPITE THE exaggeration of the myth, the Jews in Theresienstadt, often in secret and at peril, did work to create a cultural life. “The noted Berlin Rabbi Leo Baeck, who had refused an offer to be rescued, was one of dozens of scholars and teachers who lectured regularly to audiences,” while classics like Verdi’s *Requiem*, a musical setting of the Roman Catholic funeral mass, were performed. (*Art, Music and Education*, p. 51). Josef Bor, in his postwar book *Terezin Requiem*, relates that *Obersturmbannführer* Adolf Eichmann slapped his knee, laughing out loud when told that the inmates had requested permission to perform the *Requiem*. He is said to have sputtered: “They want to perform WHAT?” almost choking with laughter at the thought. (*The Art of Darkness*, p. 79)

The heart-rending photo shows the outer cover of a musical piece for a male choir composed in Theresienstadt in 1942. Created by Pavel Haas and entitled *Al Sefod* (“Do not mourn”), the piece was based on a Hebrew poem by David Shimoni, written during the Arab-Jewish skirmishes in 1936-39. The inscription on the music sheet cover was written in Hebrew letters adapted to look like musical notes and exclaim: “Meezkeret l’yom ha’shanah ha’reeshon v’haaharon b’galut Terezin,” “A memento from the first and last anniversary in the Terezín exile.” The music was dedicated to Otto Zuckerovi, deputy chairman of the Terezin Council of Elders. The first two lines of Haas’s work sum up the thrust of his thought: “Do not lament, do not cry, when things are bad, do not lose heart, but work, work!” Haas, together with Hans Krása and Viktor Ullmann, was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944.

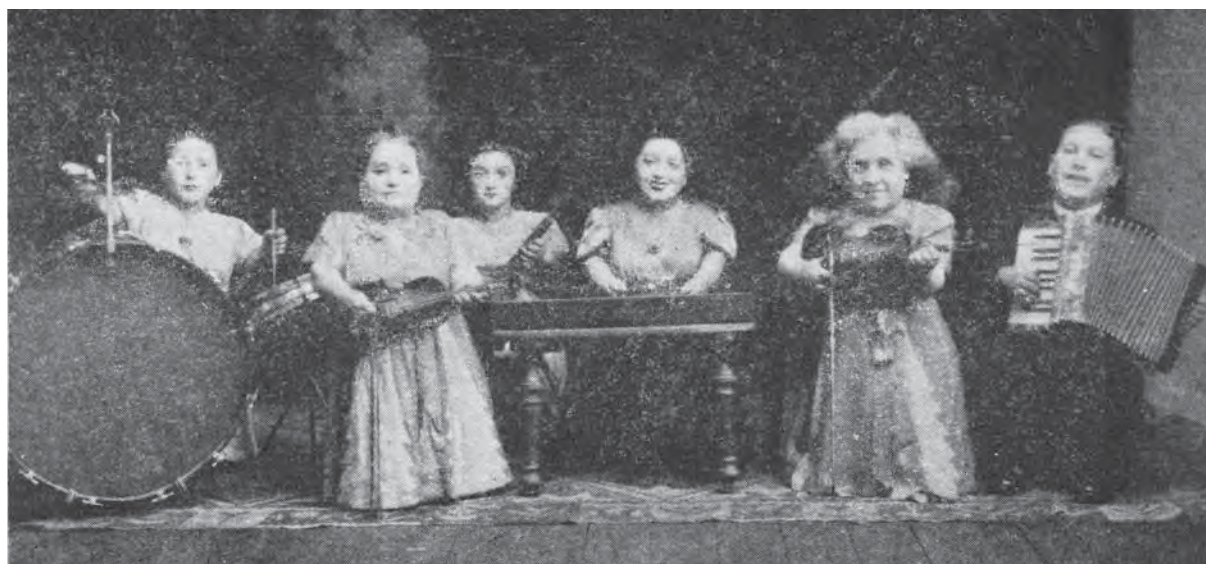
This cover prompts us to reflect once again: did artistic creativity sustain the spirit and promote survival? How was it therapeutic? Could a moment of creative work carry an inmate—even if momentarily—to a safer world? Could music and art be a balm to trauma, even if as one survivor recalled, it was “a terrible thing in Terezín, when friends that you just won disappear one day to another. And never show up again.” (*Art, Music and Education*, p. 80)



## IN THE CAMPS

OF AN even more sadistic nature, was the music performed in the concentration camps. The SS used forced music making as a means of humiliation, bordering on the ridiculous, if it weren't so chilling. Auschwitz incarcerated the largest family of dwarfs ever recorded: the Ovic (Ovitz) family, all musicians. They came from the northern Transylvania town of Rozavlea, near Sighet. Their height, about three feet, prevented them from doing physical labor. They therefore established their own musical ensemble, The Lilliput Troupe. In 1944, the Ovicis were deported to Auschwitz. They were subjected to the infamous medical experiments of Dr. Joseph Mengele. It was his perverse interest in the Ovicis and their mistreatment that allowed all of them to survive Auschwitz. In 1949 they immigrated to Israel and continued to perform until their retirement in 1955.

A press photo the Ovicis brought with them to Auschwitz was given to a guard upon their arrival. From left to right: Elizabeth, Rozika, Perla, Frieda, Francesca and Micki Ovic



PHOTOS COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE USHMM

**G**UIDO FACKLER writes: “music was an integral part of camp life in almost all the Nazi-run camps.” But then, he asks, “How was it possible to play music in these camps? What musical forms developed there? What, under these circumstances was the function, the effect and the significance of music for both the suffering inmates and the guards who inflicted the suffering? And how was the extent of musical activities affected by the development of the concentration camp system? (“Music in Concentration Camps 1933-1945,” <http://www.music.ucsb.edu/projects/musicandpolitics/archive/2007-1/fackler.html>, p. 1.)

Music and singing on command was the norm. These “command” performances took place on several occasions: while marching, during roll call, and on the way to and back from work. “This form of collective music derives from military tradition,” so central to the Nazi psyche, and as a way to develop discipline and encouraging a marching rhythm. “The practice was [also] employed with the additional purpose of exercising mental and physical force.” (Fackler, p. 2)

The photo is of Jewish deportees from Grodno, Poland, marching on railroad tracks escorted by Nazi soldiers. Outside it is freezing cold, but the march is preceded by a man playing a violin.



PHOTO OF THE  
BUCHENWALD  
CONCENTRATION  
CAMP PRISONERS'  
ORCHESTRA



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE USHMM

“THE  
GUARDS

forced prisoners  
to sing not just  
well-known songs,

but also songs which originated in the camps. These so-called concentration camp songs were either newly composed or else variations of existing songs. Thus, ‘Wir sind die Sänger von Finsterwald’ (‘We are the Darkwood Singers’) became ‘We are the Buchenwald—Beechwood—Singers.’ Other camp songs were specially commissioned by the SS, including the anti-Semitic ‘Judenlied’ (‘Jews’ Song’), composed by a Buchenwald prisoner who had been assessed as ‘asocial.’ The song begins: ‘For hundreds of years we cheated the people,/ no swindle was too outrageous/ we wangled, we lied, we cheated, we narked/ whatever the currency, the crown of the mark.’” (Fackler, p. 3-4)



“THE MOST remarkable feature of command music was the existence of official camp orchestras, the Lagerkapellen. Amateur and professional musicians among the prisoners formed these ensembles. The musicians played, first and foremost, as directed by the SS. There were various motives for setting up camp orchestras. On the one hand, these musical groups could be used in various ways in the daily life of the camp. On the other hand, ambitious camp commanders emulated what they had seen in other camps, and of course the prestige and cultural status of having their ‘own’ prisoners’ orchestra was also an incentive.” (Fackler, p. 6)

The orchestras would play not only the already noted marching songs, camp anthems, popular songs but also classical music and excerpts from operas. They had to perform on Hitler’s birthday and other public Nazi holidays, as well as for the entertainment of the SS.



A PHOTO OF THE PRISONERS' ORCHESTRA DURING A SUNDAY CONCERT FOR THE SS MEN IN AUSCHWITZ.

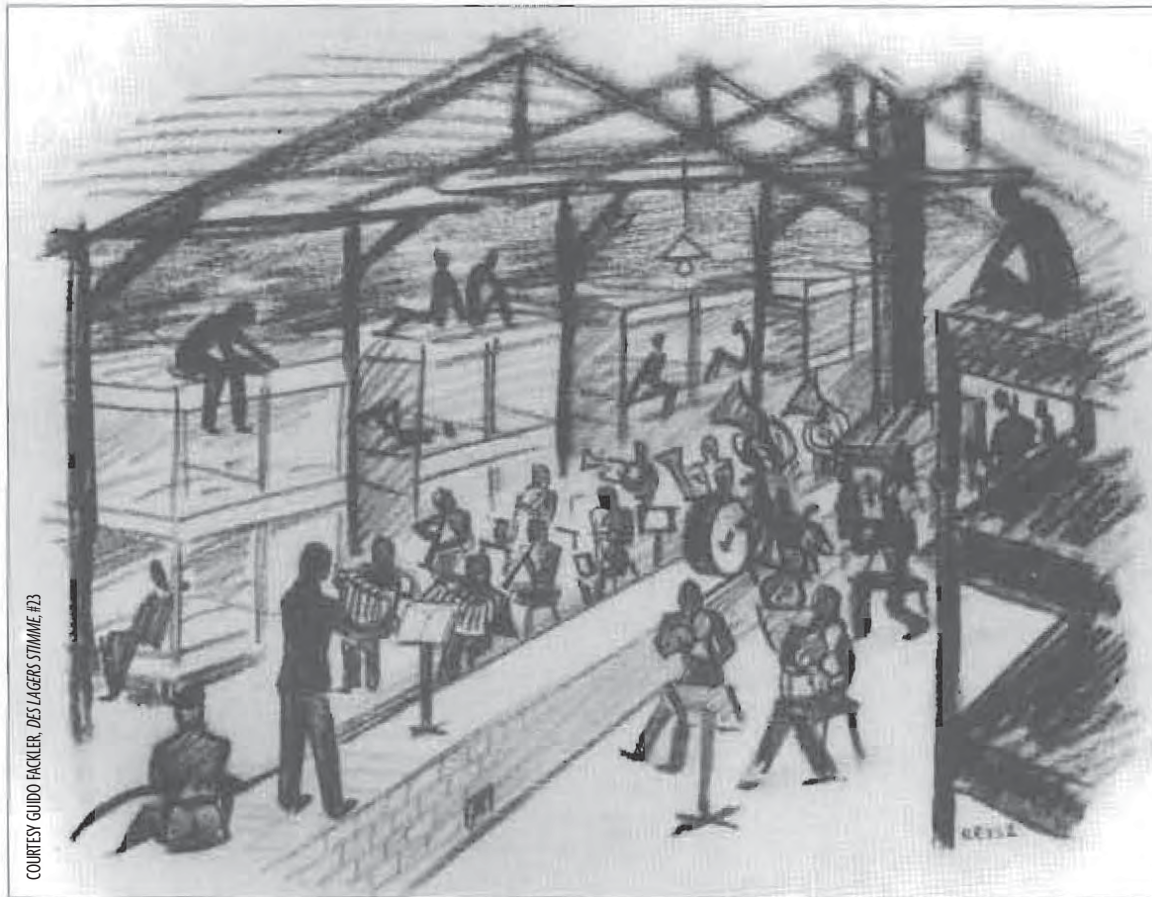


PHOTO OF A DRAWING BY FRANCOIS REISZ OF A PERFORMANCE OF THE AUSCHWITZ CAMP ORCHESTRA IN AN INMATES' BARRACK AND IN THE PRESENCE OF AN SS OFFICER.

“**M**USIC ON command was one thing. But musical activities resulting from the prisoners' own initiative took on a quite different significance, whether the performance was for the musicians themselves or for their fellow-prisoners... [This kind of music] gave the prisoners consolation, support and confidence; it reminded them of their earlier

lives; it provided diversion and entertainment; and it helped them to articulate their feelings and to deal with the existential threat of their situation emotionally and intellectually... Singing, humming, or whistling served not only as a relaxing way of passing the time, but also helped prisoners in solitary confinement, for instance, to overcome loneliness and fear.” (Fackler, p. 9)

# WOMEN MAKING MUSIC

ONLY ONE of the multiple Nazi concentration camps had a female orchestra: the women's camp at Birkenau. Being a sadist and a murderer presented no contradiction for having a taste for good music, so Birkenau's SS *Oberaufseherin* (SS chief overseer and chief warden for the women's barracks) Maria Mandel, actually encouraged the creation of an orchestra. She even became a protector of the musicians, treating the prisoner musicians better. Their barracks were kept tidy, and they usually received sufficient food and better quality than the other inmates. But, most importantly, they had a greater chance of survival, and many did.

The foremost conductor of the women's orchestra was Alma Rosé, a niece of Gustav Mahler. She died in Auschwitz due to an illness. She gained such great admiration from her commandant Mandel, that Mengele authorized a spinal tap to determine the possible cause of her illness and potential cure.



COURTESY OF THE MAHLER-ROSE COLLECTION/THE GUSTAV MAHLER-ALFREDO ROSE ROOM/THE MUSIC LIBRARY/THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO

ALMA ROSÉ

Hyg.-bakt. Unters.-Stelle  
der Waffen-SS, Südost

APR 11  
Auschwitz OS., am 4. IV. 1944  
17578/VII/113 7.4

Anliegend wird übersandt:  
Material: *Liquor cuborum* entnommen am 4. IV. 1944  
zu untersuchen auf *Keimgehalt in Pneumokokken*  
Name, Vorname: *Alma Rose*  
Dienstgrad, Einheit: *50321*  
Klinische Diagnose: *Keimgehalt*

Anschrift der einsendenden Dienststelle: *H. K. B. Jirkemau*

Bemerkungen:  
*Mengele*  
(Stempel, Unterschrift)

DOCUMENT SIGNED BY  
JOSEF MENGELE

WHEN ALMA Rosé arrived at the camp, she transformed the orchestra. According to survivors, she tried to have her orchestra, made up of Jewish and non-Jewish inmates, excel under the harshest conditions. The orchestra's routine was taxing and exhausting: marching to the camp's gate in the early morning and at night to play for the prisoners. When not playing, the orchestra rehearsed in the morning, afternoon, and evening.

Just a few members of the orchestra survive. One of them is the ninety-two-year-old New York resident and mandolin player Helen ("Tzippi") Tichauer, who has given testimony and material for this exhibit.



COURTESY HELEN TICHAUER

PHOTO OF TWENTY-YEAR-OLD "TZIPPI," WHEN, FROM BRATISLAVA, SHE WAS INTERNED IN BIRKENAU.



PHOTO OF A DRAWING BY LEO HAAS, IMAGINING A PERFORMANCE BY ALMA ROSÉ IN A SOLO PERFORMANCE BEFORE HER FELLOW INMATES. HAAS, A PROLIFIC ARTIST, WAS INTERNED IN THERESIENSTADT AND TRANSFERRED TO AUSCHWITZ IN 1944. HE SURVIVED THE WAR.

COURTESY GUIDO FACKLER, DES LAGERS STIMME

## THE REPERTOIRE

**A**T AUSCHWITZ, the orchestra's forced repertoire included tangos, surprisingly a favorite Nazi musical genre. The music provided a stage-managed, macabre background, when punishment was meted out in public as a form of sadistic humiliation. "At the Janowska camp in Lemberg (now Lviv), an SS lieutenant ordered Jewish fiddlers to play [a "Death Tango"] for use during marches, tortures, grave digging, and executions." Shmerke Kacerginski included in his collection of Holocaust songs a Polish song written by an unnamed Jewish girl who did not survive. It was known as "Der Tango fun Oswiecim" (The Tango from Auschwitz). The poet Paul Celan, whose "Death Fugue" has come to represent the highlight of Holocaust poetry, originally wrote his composition in Rumanian with the title "Tangoul Mortii," reflecting the tango's significance in the camps. (John Fekstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, p. 26-32).



This photo is nothing short of macabre. It relates to the June 1942 Austrian inmate Hans Bonarewitz's spectacular escape from Mauthausen hiding in a wooden crate that was loaded into a lorry that took him out of the camp. Recaptured 18 days later, he was publicly hanged on July 30, 1942 to musical accompaniment. He was carried to the gallows by fellow inmates while the orchestra had to continuously play. No tangos were required this time. Instead, the executioners demanded that the song "J'attendrai ton retour" ("I shall wait for your return") be played. Following the execution, the joyous "Beer barrel Polka" was played. (<http://www.cympm.com/orkest.html>, p. 4)



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE USHMM

OUTSIDE THE camps, there were partisans' groups in the forests surrounding Vilna, as well as in various fighting organizations in Warsaw, Białystok, Kraków, and other cities. These young people rebelled against the perceived passivity of the older generation. The songs generated by these guerilla fighters would become some of the most prominent with which postwar Jewish communities chose to identify. They spoke of defiance, not annihilation, and were self-generated, not forced. The most famous and emblematic was Hirsh Glik's "Zog nit keynmol az du geyst dem letstn veg," "Never say that you are walking the final road."

The photo is of a group portrait of a partisan musical troupe in the Narocz forest in Belarus. Among those pictured are Hana Posner (back row, seventh from the left), her father, Mordechai Posner (fourth from the left), and Yechiel Burgin (sixth from the left).

## THE POSTWAR

AT THE end of World War II there were an estimated fifty thousand Jewish survivors, the *She'erit ha-Peletah* (meaning both “the surviving remnant” and “the saving remnant”), who were liberated from concentration camps in Germany and Austria. They were placed in DP (displaced persons) camps until their status and future resettlement could be determined. Other survivors from neighboring countries joined their brethren in Germany and Italy. Steadily seeking to recapture threads of life so savagely torn from them, music once again came to play a role.

This 1946 photo portrays survivors of the Kovno ghetto and other concentration camps performing a concert given before the war crimes prosecutors and staff at Nuremberg, Germany. The conductor was Michael Hofmekler. The musicians are still dressed in their striped prison uniforms. But above them are two big stars. The one in the back says “Jude,” a reference to the yellow star they were forced to wear; the star in the front has the Hebrew word *Tzyion*, “Zion.” In large Hebrew letters in the front of the stage is displayed the motto “*Am Yisrael Chai*,” “The people of Israel lives.” This symbol-filled scene summarizes the mutating role of music as a form of humiliation, escape, defiance, and finally, redemption.





THIS PHOTO portrays a choir of surviving children performing after the war in a refugee camp in Selvino, Italy. On top of the stage we again see the defiant and forward looking Hebrew words: “Sheerateynu lo dam u’kravot sheerateynu chayim v’yetzirah,” “Our song is not blood and wars, our song is life and creativity.”

COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE YAD VASHEM

A more pop-oriented DP musical performance was offered by The Happy Boys swing and jazz band that performed at DP camps throughout Germany from 1945-1949. Many of the band’s musicians were survivors of the Lodz ghetto. Pictured from left to right are: Sam Spasmacher, Henry Eisenman, Abraham Mutzman, Chaim (Henry) Baigelman, Elek Silberstein, Abraham Lewin, and Josel Lewin.



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE USHMM



**T**HIS PHOTO was taken in Feldafing, Germany, on May 10, 1948, four days before the State of Israel declared its independence. The group assembled is made up of the ex-concentration camps orchestras following an evening concert under the baton of the thirty-year-old future conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, Leonard Bernstein, on the far right. The orchestra was formed by Jewish musicians, primarily from Lithuania. They had established an orchestra in the St. Ottilien monastery near the village of Schwabenhausen. The concert was sponsored by the Central Committee of Liberated Jews, the Agency for Palestine, and the American Joint Distribution Committee. (Angelika Königseder and Juliane Wetzel, *Waiting for Hope: Jewish Displaced Persons in Post World War II Germany*, p. 70-74).



COURTESY PHOTO ARCHIVE USHMM

## SUGGESTED READINGS

Sonia Pauline Beker, *Symphony on Fire: A Story of Music and Spiritual Resistance During the Holocaust*.

A personal memoir about the musicians Max Beker and Fania Durmashkin who played music in the Vilna Ghetto, concentration, labor and Nazi POW camps, and the St. Ottilien DP camp orchestra.

Anne D. Dutlinger, ed., *Art, Music and Education as Strategies for Survival: Theresienstadt 1941-45*

A well documented and richly illustrated study, including the role of music in the Nazi “show camp.”

Guido Fackler, *Des Lagers Stimme, Musik im KZ: Alltag und Häftlingskultur in den Konzentrationslagern 1933 bis 1936*

This is an exhaustive scholarly volume dealing with the role of music in the Nazi concentration camps from 1933 to 1936. The bibliography alone spans 112 pages. Although Fackler dwells on the first years of the Nazi system, he includes a final epilogue in which he extends his thesis to the entire Holocaust period.

Gila Flam, *Songs of the Lodz Ghetto, 1940-45*

This is a study of the role of songs and music in the Lodz ghetto, including the words and the translations of many of the songs. Although the work focuses on Lodz, many of the implications proposed by Flam, extend to other ghettos as well.

Shirli Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps*

This is a study dealing with the role of music in the Warsaw and Vilna ghettos and the Sachsenhausen and Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps.

Angelika Königseder and Juliane Wetzler, *Waiting for Hope: Jewish Displaced Persons in Post World War II Germany*.

Jürgen Matthäus, *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor: Holocaust Testimony and its Transformations*

An absorbing book that takes on the complexity and contingency of survivors’ recounting, in this case, of Helen “Tzippi” Tichauer’s unique story.

Richard Newman with Karen Kirtley, *Alma Rosé: Vienna to Auschwitz*

This is a comprehensive study of the life and work of Alma Rosé, the outstanding conductor of the Birkenau women’s orchestra. A list of names of the women that made up the orchestra, who had died and were still alive at the time of the book’s publication in 2000, appears at the end of the volume.

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, *Inherit the Truth: A Memoir of Survival and the Holocaust*

A memoir of one of the members of the Birkenau women’s orchestra.

Rudolf M. Wlaschek (Hg.), *Kunst und Kultur in Theresienstadt: eine Dokumentation in Bildern*

This beautifully illustrated book includes the artwork produced in Theresienstadt to advertise the musical activity, forced and voluntary, of its Jewish inmates. The book includes a very useful introduction in German with an English translation side by side.

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The mission of the Harriet and Kenneth Kupferberg Holocaust Resource Center and Archives is to use lessons of the Holocaust to educate current and future generations about the ramifications of unbridled prejudice, racism, and stereotyping.

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