Folk Music during the Holocaust: The Voice behind the Yellow Star

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Music has always played an important role in our lives. The earliest forms of music date back to the origin of mankind. Music can be attached to different regions and cultures in the world, each with its own characteristics. Music can be part of religious rituals, cultural activities or just for pleasure. It is the only form of art that deals directly with personal emotions and it is able to express something that language cannot. Music is mostly associated with pleasure and entertainment and, perhaps, it is a luxury addition to our daily lives that we take for granted. Imagine turning to music for comfort because it is all there is left. Imagine music as the only form of expression because you are not allowed to express yourself in another way and that it is no longer a luxury--it is all there is left.

The Holocaust in World War II is considered as one of the greatest tragedies ever recorded. Jews, who were considered less than animals, were facing torture and eventually death by the Nazi regime of Adolf Hitler. Excluded from society, Jews looked for possibilities to survive and to make their lives remotely bearable under the circumstances. Music played an important role in the life of the holocaust victims. Folk songs were created and sung in the ghettos and in the concentration camps. Music in the holocaust was used by the every day person as a cultural resistance to the Nazis as well as a physical and spiritual method of survival, creating a sense of freedom.

To determine the exact purpose of music, specifically folk music, during the Holocaust, we must examine its meaning and its origin. Jewish people have always been

nomadic, and music was always part of their travels. Wherever they went, they left behind their own cultural and musical mark, and they were able to absorb the musical styles of the people they encountered as well.[1] Jewish Folk music can roughly be divided into two types: Oriental folk music (Sephardic, Persian and Moroccan), and Yiddish folk music in Eastern Europe of the Ashkenazi Jews.[2] The latter, the most recent and most significant for the purpose of this research, is heavily influenced by national folk styles of the host regions such as the Slavic countries of Russia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania.

There is a common confusion between Judaism as a religion and as a heritage and there is a blurred line between them. Within the Jewish music there is also that intertwining feeling and the blurred separation between secular music and religious music. Much of the folk music has traces of religion, but the major difference between the two is that religious music is written in Hebrew whereas folk music is largely written in Yiddish.[3]

In Jewish folk songs roughly 80 to 90 percent is written in the minor mode or has the feeling of a minor key, and only about 10 percent is written in major.[4] Important to note is that there is also a difference in the amount of songs in minor or major mode depending on where the Jews were located. It seems that the folk songs in the Slavic regions have an equal amount of songs in minor or major, whereas Oriental folk songs

[1] Ruth Rubin, *Voices of a People, The Story of Yiddish Folk Song,* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, Inc, 1973), 9

[2] Ibid.

[3] The *Yiddish l*anguage is Jewish vernacular and a form of Middle High German. It was primarily spoken by the Ashkenazi Jews in Eastern Europe. While it is a Germanic language, it utilizes the Hebrew alphabet. It was the main language spoken in the ghettos and concentration camps.

[4] A.Z Idelsohn, ''Musical Characteristics of East-European Jewish Folk-Songs'' *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 18 No. 4. (1932): 634-645.

are predominantly written in minor.[5] Research has shown that this could be linked to the folk songs of those Slavic countries itself, who wrote predominantly in the major mode.[6]

The Yiddish folk style embraces cradle songs, children's songs, work songs, love songs, holiday songs, partisan songs, and the one significant for this purpose, the Folk Songs of World War II. Within the folk songs of World War II, all those genres are present as well. Lullabies were sung for the Jewish children in the ghettos, and work songs while being imprisoned and working for the Nazis.

Although, the Jewish people are nomadic people, since about the 18th century, and long before World War II, large groups of Jews have settled in areas that are now Russia and Eastern Europe. They lived with their families, attending synagogue, and their children went to school. Because anti-Semitism has been present for centuries, Jewish people were mostly found in neighborhoods together. With the appointment of Hitler in 1933, all of this was about to change. When the war started, Jews were initially denied access to everyday things such as schools, owning a business and public transportation, and they were forced to sew a big yellow star on their clothing. Later the deportations to ghetto's and concentration camps were put into motion. Ghettos were mostly closed areas where Jewish people worked while awaiting a transport to a concentration camp, where they would eventually be exterminated. In the ghettos, somewhat of a normal life could exist with work, school and a social life. Since almost everything was taken away from them, it was only natural that they turned to music, and that they explored that to the fullest. We find that many song genres are represented in the repertoire from the Holocaust including lullabies, work songs, prayer songs, songs of pain, songs of courage

[5] Ibid,
[6] Ibid.

and heroism, faith, hope, and in addition we find songs describing daily life in a ghetto or concentration camp.[7]

Songs by Mordecai Gebirtig, a popular folk song writer and poet, were extremely popular. In ''Minutn fun b'toch'' (Moments of confidence), which he wrote in 1940, he encourages people to be happy for the war will be over soon and the Germans will be gone.[8] The line ''be patient and have faith'' is striking; it is a good example of a song that combines hope, courage, faith, with the hidden pain of having to endure so much while trying to be upbeat and believe in a good outcome. It is unknown to what melody this song was sung, but as most of the Holocaust songs, it must have been a contrafact.

''S'brent'' (It is Burning), another song by Gebirtig, tells the story following a pogrom of a Jewish Shtetl,[9] before the war in 1938.[10] It is written in Yiddish, in verse-refrain form and has three stanzas and two refrains. This song would fit in the category of describing life leading up to the Holocaust. The years prior to the star of World War II were already marked with extensive anti-Semitism, and this song reflects this situation. The lines ''When our city with us in it, can go up in flames, leaving it, like after a battle, with empty charred walls'' almost seem like a premonition as to what would later happen in extermination camps such as Treblinka in Poland, where the Jews were first gassed and then burned in the ovens. Interesting to note is that Gebirtig wrote the lyrics as well as the music, and it became one of the most popular songs throughout the Holocaust and even today.

[7] Rubin, 424
[8] Ibid., 429
[9] A *Shtetl* is the Yiddish word for small village
[10] Rubin, 430

There are also songs written by unknown people and with unknown titles. These are predominately known because of the survivors who remembered them and wrote them down for documentation. Lullabies to children, for instance, are created by their mothers or other caretakers and were not recorded or written down. Even though they are considered to be lullabies, the song content is quite haunting and expressive. Lines such as ‘’who slaughtered your father, destroyed your mother,’’[11] and, written by a teacher in the Vilna ghetto who was distraught by the many orphans wondering around,’ ‘’and your Mother, oh, your mother will never return.’’[12] These harsh lines are occasionally followed by a typical soothing lullaby word: Hush bye. It is through these songs with authors and titles unknown that people were able to express themselves. It becomes obvious that these lyrics are not suited for a young child so the purpose of the songs may not have been to sooth an already sleeping child. It seems that this was rather to sooth themselves in addition to documenting the life that they were forced to live every day. Today we can find meaning through those songs and through the music that we try to capture the basic conditions of life as they lived. People did not always have the means to write things down, but yet they made sure that others knew about them and memorized them. It might have been the case with these songs.

Besides the songs within the private homes of prisoners, there is also documentation of folk songs heard on the streets of the ghettos. These songs were known as ‘street songs.’ Even though they were under Nazi rule, Jews were able to somewhat self govern their lives, and life went on within the boundaries of the ghetto. People had jobs, there were hospitals, children went to school and there was even a mail delivery

[11] Rubin, 441
[12] Ibid., 438

system and a newspaper. It is because of this that music was able to continue to exist as part of their daily lives: ‘’Musical activities helped to perpetuate the illusion that Jewish life in the ghettos was reasonably stable and autonomous.’’[13]

Especially the Ghetto of Lodz, in Poland, folk styles flourished. In *The Chronicles of the Lodz Ghetto,* there are documented instances of street songs and street performers entertaining the imprisoned population. The songs heard on the streets were mostly written by poets as well as the ordinary prisoner trying to deal with life in the ghetto. Also Klezmer musicians and children had their part in creating folk music. The ‘street songs’ as a subgenre of folk songs emphasized four dominant themes: hunger, corrupt administration, hope for freedom, and a call for revolt.[14] To remind them of better times in the past, there were songs in Yiddish, mostly to traditional Russian and Polish melodies, documenting ghetto life, providing satire to the circumstances, work songs and prayer songs.[15] The people were looking for something that would lift their spirits and give their lives some meaning. The only thing that was allowed was singing. ‘’The Nazis could take everything away from us, but they could not take singing from us. This remained our only human expression.’’[16] In these songs they were able to express themselves. They needed something to give them some sort of relief and they found that in the songs of the streets.

The performers on the streets were known as ’street singers.’ They were sometimes accompanied by an instrument, if available, but most of it was vocal. People

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[13] Shirli Gilbert. *Music in the Holocaust: ‘’Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps’’ (Oxford University Press, 2005),* 36

[14] Roy Winkelman, *A Teachers Guide to the Holocaust, 2005,* Florida Center for Instructional Technology at the University of South Florida *http://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/arts/musVicti.htm*, (April, 2011).

[15] Seroushi

[16] Gila Flam, *Singing for Survival: ‘’Songs of the Lodz Ghetto, 1940-45’’* (University of Illinois Press, 1991), 1.

were eager to hear them as ‘’they sang for an audience hungry not only for bread and potatoes, but also for freedom of expression.’’[17] A majority of ghetto street songs were contrafacts because there was little new music composed.[18] This suggests that there was a real need and demand to perform music. They needed to express themselves and because the words were there, they just found existing tunes for their newly written lyrics.

The Chronicles of the Lodz Ghetto mentions one of the most important street performers of the Lodz Ghetto: Jankele Herszkowicz. He is described in the chronicle as the Ghetto troubadour, who composed the immensely popular song ‘’Rumkowski Chaim.’’[19] This daring song is about the controversial Jewish chairman of the Ghetto, Chaim Rumkowski. It became so popular that among the survivors, even the ones who had never heard of him or seen him perform, the refrain is still remembered and it was regarded as a ‘hit song.’[20] There are pictures showing Herszkowicz surrounded by a large crowd while performing on the streets. The song is in verse-refrain structure and is written in Yiddish. It is believed to be a contrafact on an old Yiddish folk song.[21] His performance of this song and other songs on the street enabled him to earn a living by performing these songs on the street and to relieve the prisoners with satire and comedy. Herszkowicz was a true folk singer, having traveled with his poor family from place to place and earning a living as a tailor.

[17] Ibid., 25
[18] Winkelman
[19] Lucjan, Dobroszycki. *The Chronicles of The Lodz Ghetto 1941-1944,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 92
[20] Flam, 34
[21] Flam, 37

In addition to the street performances there were the children who were trapped inside their small apartments in the ghetto, but had deep emotions that they conveyed through music. The children are probably the ones who suffered the most. Some lost their parents gradually and were sent to ghettos with their whole family. Others were separated immediately upon arrival in a ghetto and were forced to take care of themselves or be lucky enough to be taken into another family. Many young children were selected for the gas chambers immediately while other children never saw a ghetto or concentration camp at all. Those few lucky children were sent away to another part of the world well before the Nazis could get a hold of them but they would never see their parents again.

Miriam Harel, a teenager imprisoned in the Lodz ghetto was well aware of her surroundings and found that she needed to express herself through poetry. She said that ''the words were lying in the street, you just have to pick them up''[22] She wrote lyrics and though she knew melodies from before the war, they were only happy melodies, but after she sang she felt free.[23] The feeling that music creates some kind of a freedom is also expressed by another child imprisoned in the Terezin ghetto. In this respect, music becomes a journey, and even though you are far away from home, traveling gives you the feeling that you are free and can explore the world. Through music they were able to forget the 'home' they lived in. The happy tunes they sang gave them an illusion, a trip back home, confirming, very briefly, that things had not changed.

One of the best-known ghetto songs originated in the Vilna ghetto and was created by a child. ''Shtiler, Shtiler'' (Quiet, Quiet) was written by eleven-year-old Alec Volkoviski for a music contest in 1943. The poet Shmerke Kaczerginski later wrote lyrics

[22] Flam, 107
[23] Flam, 107

to this winning piece which gave it the name it has now. The tune is one of despair and illustrates the suffering of a child. The lyrics refer to a place called Ponar, which used to be a recreational area, but the Nazis wiped it off the maps and used it as a liquidation area instead and hundreds of people were shot there. Since the Nazis did not allow references to Ponar openly, the lyrics had to be changed in order to abide by Nazi rule. It was a form of resistance to the Nazis to sing this song because, even though it had different words when they sang it out loud, the meaning did not go away and everyone knew what it meant.[24] The song was carried over to other camps and ghettos as prisoners were often relocated and deported.[25] This once again shows that music remained important and gave them a sense of brotherhood by sharing it with other prisoners wherever they went. ''Normally it takes a long time before a composed song becomes part of folklore, but in the ghettos folklore was created instantaneously with songs like ''Shtiler, Shtiler.''[26] In history we have seen that the nomadic Jews changed, altered and modified their musical styles reassembling the folk styles of their host countries. During the holocaust they seem to do the same. The difference, however, is that they were now all unified; they were no longer Jews scattered all over Europe. Nazi Germany was responsible for taking the Jews from every corner of Europe and driving them together. What they did not anticipate is that in doing so, they enabled the very thing that they tried to eliminate: finding brotherhood and a common ground. The Jews found that through music.

Another instance of a child to deal with the situation by performing music was Ela Weisberger. She was imprisoned with her family in the ghetto Terezin in former

[24] Shoshanna Kalish and Barbara Meister, *Yes, We Sang! Songs of the Ghettos and Concentration Camps* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 115.
[25] Ibid., 14
[26] Ibid., 115

Czechoslovakia, which is now the Czech Republic.[27] While she was able to maintain a somewhat normal life as she went to school and had friends, she still suffered with hunger, the death of people close to her, and the threat of deportation. She was one of the children who were invited to participate in Hans Kraca's children's opera *Brundibar* and played the part of a cat in September, 1943. This opera performance was approved by the Nazis and was in fact encouraged when the Red Cross came to visit Terezin to determine the living conditions of the Jews. It was performed in the ghetto many times before and after that visit, and also for the children it did not remain innocent role play. She describes her part in the opera as an escape, because even though they were hungry and in constant fear of being transported to the East,[28] they loved rehearsing because they forgot their troubles and it was possible to have hope.[29] She expressed excitement when she observed the first performance: ''When the people filed in the auditorium, we were all seized with stage fright, but when the first beat of music sounded, we quickly got over it and forgot entirely where we were.''[30] Musicians in this day suffer from stage fright, and it is known that when the music starts, they forget where they are and play their hearts out. If music can do that even in the worst of circumstances to children who are the most vulnerable of all, it a great gift for them not only to have fun like normal children, but also for being able to cope: '' We were happy….and we all wanted to completely exhaust that moment of freedom because when we were on stage it was the only time we

[27] *Terezin*, also known as Theresienstadt in German, was a Ghetto near Prague in former Czechoslovakia, and considered a 'model camp'. The Nazis allowed cultural and musical development which they documented and used as propaganda to show the world that the life of the Jews was not bad at all. Many artists were sent here and eventually the Nazi's were successful in misguiding the Red Cross.

[28] Many Jews in the Ghetto's had no clue of the world around them. They just knew that deportations to the East meant that they would never come back.

[29] Susan Goldman Rubin, *The Cat with the Yellow Star, Coming of Age in Terezin.* New York: Holiday House, 2006), 23

[30] Ibid., 23

were allowed to remove our yellow stars''[31] This relates back to the feeling of freedom that Miriam Harel experienced when she and her family sang and felt free because of it.

One story about music and survival is described in the striking book *The Children of Willesden Lane* by Mona Golabek and Lee Cohen. This story is about a young talented pianist, Lisa Jura, fourteen years of age, who was sent to London from Vienna with the Kindertrain.[32] While she did not suffer the horrors of the concentration camps or ghettos directly, she suffered the consequences by losing her parents, her family life with her siblings and having to deal with a new living situation by herself. As a Jewish girl in Vienna, she was denied piano lessons. Music for Lisa was ''an escape from the dark streets, the rundown flats, shops, and markets that were home to Vienna's working-class Jews, and now, the most important one of all, from the Nazis.''[33] As Jews became less and less part of society this was all Lisa had left to remind her of times when it was better. Lisa remained an accomplished pianist her entire life and with her overwhelming discipline, most likely triggered by the traumas in her life, she was able to teach herself the piano and complete an education at the Royal Conservatory of Music in London.

Traditionally a popular aspect of instrumental folk music in Jewish tradition is Klezmer. The musicians who perform Klezmer music are known as Klezmorim and during the holocaust they performed in various ghetto ensembles.[34] Some Klezmorim joined the (semi) professional orchestras that were present in many of the concentration

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[31] Ibid., 24

[32] In the beginning of the war the Nazis allowed Jewish families to send their children on the train to Western Europe where they were taken into families or orphanages is England. This was known as the Kindertransport or the Kindertrain. England took in about 10.000 children from Eastern European countries such as Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia. Most of the children survived the war but most of their parents died in the extermination camps.

[33] Mona Golabek and Lee Cohen, The *Children of Willesden Lane*. (New York: Warner Books Inc., 2002), 8-9

[34] Yale Strom, *The Book of Klezmer,* (Chicago: A Capella Books, 2002) 137

camps and ghettos. Mostly in the ghetto Klezmer music was seen as a form of begging, playing on the streets with their instruments, if they were still allowed to have one.[35] Just like the street singers who entertained the population with comedy and satire, the Klezmorim attempted to make a living with playing and begging. It seems that Klezmer music mostly died away during the Holocaust. As evidence has shown, vocal music was important because it conveyed a message and provided satire. The tunes on which they were based had no significant meaning because they were contrafacts. This suggests that Klezmer music was not as important as the songs were. The need for melodies was not as important as the need to express through song. Klezmorims were able to extend their lives in camps orchestras, or earn a piece of bread by playing on the streets of a ghetto, but for the most part, they died in the gas chambers anyway.

One Klezmer performer that had significant meaning in literal survival by playing Klezmer music is the remarkable story of Klezmer musician Leopold Kozlowski. In the film *The Last Klezmer* produced by Yale Strom, he tells the story of his life during the holocaust. His father, brother and himself, all Klezmorim, were forced to leave their home to hide from the Nazis, but whenever they encountered one, they played their Klezmer songs and they were not only given food, but their lives were spared.[36] This is a very unusual and exceptional story and was short-lived. It does show however, that even in the most frightening time of their lives, they effectively turned to music. His father was executed in a forest, but both Leopold and his brother were taken to several ghettos and camps. Leopold survived the war and stayed true to his 'Klezmer heart' and continued to perform.

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Yale Strom, *The Last Klezmer: Leopold Kozlowski – His Life and His Music.* Documentary presented by Leopold Kozlowski. 85 minutes. New Yorker Video, 2008. DVD.

Some influential songs were written by the Partisans, most importantly the Partisans on the Vilna ghetto in Lithuania. In these songs, they were openly resisting the Nazis and called for revolt. In the Vilna ghetto a significant political force was operating underground under the name of *Fareynigte Partizaner Organizatsye (FPO).*[37] This is Yiddish for the United Partisan Organization. It was made up of young men and women with various political orientations. They were trying to fight back and sometimes succeeded in the beginning, but were almost always outplayed by the Nazis. Even though the impact was greater in Partisan combat in the forest, the FPO had its influence in the ghetto as well.[38] This, in turn, also influenced the music created in this ghetto as FPO members were among the realm of cultural life. Poets such as Hirsch Glick and Shmerke Kaczerginski among others, were influential because ‘’some of the Partisan writers saw songs as an effective way of promoting their cause, encouraging active resistance, and rousing a spirit of defiance and communal strength.’’[39]

The Partisan songs tend to have a different overall demeanor then the Yiddish folk songs previously discussed. Some of the songs discussed were altered in order to abide by Nazi rule and only in the minds, and probably hearts, of the Jews there was resistance. The Partisan songs however were not created for that purpose and neither were they created to display fear or sadness; they were written as a call for revolt and defiance.[40] Another major difference is that the Partisan songs were almost always based on existing Russian melodies as opposed to old Yiddish folk songs.[41] In my opinion this is because the Yiddish tunes evoke childhood memories, a sense of lost sentiment.

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[37] Gilbert, 68.
[38] Ibid., 69
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., 75
[41] Ibid., 75

During war time one should not be bothered with sentiment, there is something much larger at stake here and emotions should not interfere with the task at hand. This idea can be supported by the fact that the Partisans emphasized the good of the community rather than the individual.[42]

Especially Hirsh Glik was famous for two major songs. He was originally from Lithuania but was he was taken from one concentration camp to another. Most of his songs were written to existing traditional Russian or Yiddish tunes. His two most famous songs are ‘’Zig Nit Keyn Mol’’ (Never Say), written on a Russian tune by Dimitri Pokrass, and ‘’Shtil di Nakht is Oysgesternt’’ (The Quiet Night is Full of Stars).

‘’Zig Nit Keyn Mol’’, written in Yiddish became an anthem of the Partisans and was translated into many languages such as Hebrew, Dutch, and Polish. It was widely known and extremely popular. It was spread through many camps and ghettos, and by the end of the war, most Yiddish speaking Jews were able to sing this song.[43] Two instances of Nazi related events prompted Glik to write this song. These events included a Partisan battle with the Nazi’s and an uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto. ‘’The songs message is one of defiant optimism and encouragement and the music is written in a rhythmic march melody in a minor key.’’[44] The lines ‘’Zog nit keynmol az du geyst dem letstn veg’’ (Never say that you have reached the very end) are encouraging Jews to keep going no matter what happens. In addition, the references to ‘’we’ and ‘’us’’ and ‘’fighting spirits’’ create a sense of brotherhood – a feeling of ‘’we are in this together.’’ This is where ‘’the secret of Gliks optimism lay; its function of collective rather than individual survival’’[45]

[42] Ibid., 73
[43] Rubin, 453
[44] Gilbert, 70-72
[45] Ibid,, 73

It is easier to endure something when you are among others who suffer the same, and his music contributed to that. The fact that so many people knew of this song exemplifies the significance of the song, and other songs that bonded people together. This reflects back to the Partisan idea of 'communal strength.' ''Zig Nit Keyn Mol'' was the first song to which the fighters for Israeli independence marched, and it remains a universal song of courage until this day.[46]

''Shtil di Nakht is Oysgesternt'' is a beautiful song and documents a successful diversion staged by partisans Itzik Matskevitch and Vitke Kemper, a woman, in 1942.[47] Because of this it is also known as the ''Partisanerlied'' (Partisan Song). Hirsh Glick pays a tribute to the women who were not raised to handle guns or fight in wars. This is especially clear in the lines in the second verse with ''the girl with the velvet face who held up the enemy's caravan.''[48] This exemplifies the face of a beautiful woman who should not have to go through this, but he greatly admires the one who does.

From the people on the streets of the ghetto, the children, the people hidden behind the walls of their 'homes' to the daring Partisans with their songs and calls for revolt, it becomes clear that it does not take a professional musician to write meaningful and significant music--music with its own style and characteristics. During a time such as the Holocaust, it is clear that through music people were able to escape their daily lives, cope with the tragedy, and create a sense of freedom. To find meaning through music, of an existence that is utterly repulsive, surpasses by far the meaning we can attach to it

[46] Ibid., 66
[47] Ibid., 75
[48] Kalish, 70

from a musicological point of view. ‘’When one sings, even when he sings a sad song, his loneliness disappears, he listens to his own voice.’’ [49]

[49] Flam, 107

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