

Singing: Spiritual Survival and Resistance During the Holocaust

Das Singen: Spirituelles Überleben und Widerstand während des Holocausts

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This article deals with Jewish folklore, specifically songs and singing, during the Holocaust.

Hundreds of songs composed during this period have survived, songs from Jews throughout Europe. These songs, originating wherever Jews were to be found, regardless of condition or circumstance, and in dozens of languages, were composed at a time of unprecedented violence and murder. A question of utmost importance arises for music therapists: „Why?“

Why songs and singing during a period of time when pure survival was the foremost goal?

In seeking an answer to this question, several songs are presented along with the stories associated with them, stories which lend an understanding as to how songs became a venue of communication when and where language had collapsed. The development of songs as a form of written history becomes evident, during the struggle against the eradication of murder. When the spark of humanity and hope had extinguished, songs and singing became an incentive for life. The Jewish voice has never stopped singing but with one exception: during the „Death Marches“. With the liberation of the Displaced Persons (DP) camps, singing started again.

I believe that as much as the singing of the Jews during the Holocaust was in reaction to an utterly incomprehensible period, it also offers an intriguing perspective for therapists to understand one of the coping mechanisms that Jewish people developed to psychologically survive such devastation.

Dieser Artikel handelt von jüdischer Folklore, insbesondere von Liedern und Gesängen während des Holocaust. Hunderte von Liedern, die während dieser Zeit komponiert wurden, haben überlebt, Lieder von Juden aus ganz Europa. Diese Lieder entstanden überall, wo auch Juden waren, sie wurden ohne Rücksicht auf Bedingungen und Umstände komponiert in Dutzenden von Sprachen zu einer Zeit von unvorhergesehener Gewalt und unvorhersehbarem Morden. Eine Frage von höchster Wichtigkeit erhebt sich für Musiktherapeuten: „Warum?“ Warum gab es Lieder und Gesänge während einer Periode, in der es um das pure Über-

leben ging. Um eine Antwort auf diese Frage zu finden, werden mehrere Lieder und die dazugehörigen Geschichten angeführt, Geschichten, die uns verstehen lassen, wie die Lieder zum Ort der Kommunikation wurden, als die Sprache versagte. Die Entwicklung von Liedern als einer Form geschriebener Geschichte wird offenbar während des Kampfes gegen die Auslöschung durch Mord. Als der Letzte Funke von Menschlichkeit und Hoffnung ausgelöscht war, wurden die Lieder und Gesänge zum Ansporn für Leben. Die jüdische Stimme hat nie aufgehört zu singen mit nur einer Ausnahme: während der „Todesmärsche“. Mit der Befreiung der Deportationslager begann das Singen von neuem. Ich glaube, so sehr das Singen der Juden eine Reaktion auf die äußerst unbegreifliche Periode während des Holocaust war, so bietet es Therapeuten eine Sicht auf eine der Coping-Strategien, die jüdische Menschen entwickelten, um seelisch eine solche Verwüstung zu überleben.

The subject of this article is one which has scarcely been written about: the singing of the Jews during the Holocaust. Within the fateful years of 1939–45, a period of unprecedented violence and genocide when six out of seven million European Jews were murdered, Jews never stopped composing and singing songs. As we shall see, many of these songs are anonymous, but from the texts, the music, the context and the testimonies, we can draw a precise picture of the composers and singers of these songs: a people in the midst of genocide. We stand before a unique and dramatic folklore created out of the killing pits and gas chambers, suffering in all kinds of places and from all kinds of torture; it is folklore unparalleled in the history of music. With these songs, we are dealing with an extraordinary living testimony that reaches us from the depths of the Holocaust experience.

It confronts us with many questions, the most obvious being: *Why?* Why singing in such circumstances, when every day is worse than the one before? Why singing when every day one witnesses destruction, terror and death, personal and communal? Why singing when, as we shall see, the struggle for one's own life as well as the lives of family members is a constant battle, confronted everyday, every single moment? Why should one engage in an activity that is not directly linked to survival when, obviously, the priorities are surely the instinctive actions essential for survival?

There are further questions that must be addressed. What needs did this singing fulfill? Is it the continuation, or development, of a cultural phenomenon? In other words, is there a link between the folk-singing tradition of the Jews during their long and eventful Diaspora wanderings, and their singing during the Holocaust? Or is it linked to the need to express a voice, a kind of a swan song?

Before answering these questions and others, I would like to bring forward three points linked to the development and the character of the „Final Solution“ which are very important if we are to understand the full scope of the subject of this article. I am aware these facts are known to many. They need to be brought to mind, however, as a background to the current context.

Moreover, we will need to examine briefly the overall reaction of the Jews to the Nazis' plan, in order to contemplate the singing and songs of the Holocaust as an aspect of Jewish reaction to the genocide.

1. The Final Solution: The Plan

Total annihilation:

The main goal of the Nazis regarding the Jews was total annihilation. Hans Frank, Governor of the General-Government in Poland, for example, told his cabinet on December 16th, 1941: „Gentlemen, I must ask you to rid yourself of all feelings of pity. We must annihilate the Jews, wherever we find them and wherever it is possible, in order to maintain the structure of the Reich as a whole. ...we shall be able to take measures which will lead somehow to their annihilation...“ Rudavsky¹.

The Nazis considered it a failure, if one Jew remained alive. As historian Prof. Saul Friedlander writes: „*The Jew was a lethal and active threat to all nations, to the Aryan race, and to the German Volk. ...*“ To the Nazi regime the Jews were the only group that, since its appearance in history, relentlessly plotted and manoeuvred to subdue all humanity.² This depicts the type and the extent of the war waged against a people scattered all over Europe, with no military defence. An incredible amount of energy was invested, contrary to all logic, to bring Jews to their death, even at the price of Germany's own security. I shall give one example out of so many available. In the spring of 1944, while it was already obvious to all that Germany had lost the war, and that every single soldier, train and piece of equipment was of the utmost importance to defend Germany from the advance of the Red Army (and later from the Allies), the Germans diverted an incredible amount of energy and equipment to create ghettos and deport more than 500 000 Hungarian Jews from distant Hungary to Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland, primarily to face death in the gas chambers. In fact, the murder went on until the very last day of the war. *Because the murder of the Jews was an ideology of a totalitarian regime, there was no place for even one single Jew in this Nazi world.*

Eradicate the traces:

The Nazis did not want to leave any evidence of the genocide. So as soon as they understood that the war might not prove victorious for Germany, the Nazis began

1 Joseph Rudavsky, *To live with hope, to die with dignity, Spiritual resistance in the ghettos and camps* (Aronson, 1997), p. 29

2 Saul Friedlander, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1943* (Harper Collins Publisher, 2007), p. XIX

eradicating all traces of the massacre. This was achieved by ordering Jews to open mass graves in extermination camps and burning hundred of thousands of corpses that had been thrown into the pits. Knowing that the Jews have a long collective memory and record their history, the Germans were aware that they had to prevent Jews from leaving any documents before they were murdered. All means were used for that purpose.³

Dehumanization:

From the moment the Wehrmacht entered a country and until the Jews were herded to the camps or to the killing pits, a period of time took place of varying duration, during which, *consciously and systematically* the Jews were submitted to a process of dehumanization. Consciously and systematically, the Germans isolated the Jews from their fellow citizens, depriving them of their livelihood and then throwing them into sordid, squalid quarters, namely, the ghettos. Here, in terribly overcrowded conditions, infested by lice, with little water and barely enough food, they died from illness and starvation. They were submitted to a daily regime of insults, terror, kidnappings, slave labour and killings. That was just the entrance to hell, the step preceding deportation to the camps, the killing factories or the slave factories, where death was just a question of time. There, the Jews were even deprived of the dignity associated with death. During executions, they were subjected to mockery with accompanying music and dance⁴. The Nazis turned the killings into an industry with detailed inventories of the amount of clothing, hair shorn from women, gold teeth extracted from corpses-all recorded as commodities.

The Jews had to be eliminated and the best way was to transform them into a mass of non-beings, since non-beings do not resist. This also reinforced the reigning ideology that when the Jews were stripped of all human qualities, the truth became obvious: they had, in fact, become non-beings. They *had* to be „reduced to dregs“.

A typical example were the so-called „*children actions*“ that took place in many ghettos. In the Kovno ghetto⁵ in Lithuania, for instance, the SS declared a

3 Leny Yahil, *Ha-Shoah: Goral Yehudei Europa 1932–1945* („*The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry 1932–1945*“) 2 vols. (Shoken, 1987), Vol. 2, p. 591.

4 Kalmen Wewryk, „*To Sobibor and Back: An Eyewitness Account*“ *Memoirs of Holocaust Survivors in Canada*, Vol. 1. (as one example)

5 Kovno ghetto: „(in Lithuanian, Kaunas; in Polish, Kovno), city in Lithuania. In 1939 about 40 000 Jews lived in Kovno. Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941; Kovno was occupied on June 24. Even before the Germans entered the city, anti-Semitic Lithuanians went on wild killing sprees directed against the Jews. When the Germans arrived they took charge for the killings. Thousands of Jews [...] were brutally abused and then shot by the Lithuanian guards. In all, some 10 000 Jews were murdered within

curfew on March 27th–28, 1944, and entered every house, every apartment, every corner, every attic to capture, deport and kill all of the children under 12 years of age. As in all the ghettos where such action took place, there were terrible struggles between the SS and the families, who desperately tried to hide their children. Very few children escaped. Most of them were found and murdered. At that time, the families were completely aware of the consequences of such actions perpetrated against the Jewish population all over Europe. One must ask the obvious question: why separate the children from their families? The families were already hopeless, destitute, and destined to be murdered. So why remove the children before annihilating the community? The only possible answer to such a question lies in the fact that the Nazis knew perfectly well that, no matter how fierce the struggle, a family would fight to save its children and that *no parent or older sibling could feel psychologically whole* after the children were taken away from them. No family, no sensitive human being can remain psychologically intact after such an attack and this was just one of numerous forms of physical and psychological torture. The Nazis knew the level of resistance, the will to live, the will to continue with even the simplest of tasks, would be reduced to nothing. So from this kind of „action“, the Nazis' two goals, emotional fragmentation and death of the Jew psychologically, leading to the breakdown of the will and all desire to resistance, were achieved.

Thus total eradication of the evidence of genocide and systematic dehumanization leading to annihilation of the Jew, were the basic steps that defined the frame of the German policy towards the Jews during World War II. It is in that context that we shall listen to the songs of the Jewish people during the Holocaust.

As mentioned previously, we should briefly examine how the Jews typically reacted to the German policies. Since the end of the war, we have often heard that the Jews allowed themselves be murdered „like sheep to slaughter“. Today, however, we have a very different picture, and the songs are part of that picture.

the first six weeks of the Germans' arrival. Soon, the Germans established a civilian administration, which issued a series of anti-Jewish decrees. The Jews were given one month to move into a ghetto. When the ghetto was closed off from the outside world in August 1941, it contained 29 670 Jews. During the next ten weeks 3 000 Jews were murdered. The Germans staged a mass killing operation – „the big action“ – On October 28, during which 9 000 Jews were taken to the Ninth Fort and murdered. [...] Until March 1944, relative quiet reigned in Kovno. However the quiet was shattered on March 27th, 1944 when 1,800 babies, children, and old people were dragged out of their homes and murdered. [...] In early July 1944, as the Soviet army drew near, the Germans began transferring the Jews of Kovno to concentration camps in Germany. Many Jews tried to hide; The Germans literally smoked them out with grenades and firebombs. [...]. Kovno was liberated on August 1, 1944. At the war's end, almost 2 000 Kovno Jews had survived.“ *In: Yad VaShem: Shoah Resource Centre, The International School for Holocaust Studies*

2. The Jews facing the Holocaust

The Jews, scattered all over Europe, for nearly 2000 years, were largely dependent on their host countries, some of them outwardly hostile and anti-Semitic. During the Holocaust, they were confronted with a threat incomparable to anything experienced in human history. They found themselves alone, facing pure evil and hatred professed by one of the most powerful and cultivated countries of the time and which had conquered most of Europe.

Moreover, we must point at something very important that Prof. Bauer states in his book: „Jewish Reaction to the Holocaust“: „From the beginning of 1942, the mass murder extended to all parts of Europe, and the Jews were faced with something which had never happened before in history and for which they were unprepared. [...] The mere fact of receiving the information was hardly sufficient, since this was so utterly incredible, so entirely remote from any human experience before this period. [...] Even in Poland itself, it was difficult for the Jews to believe what they were told. The first to give credence to the news were members of the Jewish youth movements.“

Later, he adds: „Those who had been brought up on European culture and had reached the middle or later years of their lives found it difficult to accept these reports as correct. And once they had begun to understand this information more thoroughly and to believe it, their reaction was often shock and indecision.“⁶

Armed Resistance:

The Jews resisted and of course their resistance took many different forms. Usually people judge the degree of resistance according to the most visible kind, namely armed resistance. There was indeed armed resistance. Some of the young fought bravely, despite being unarmed, without an organized military, and in many countries being denied, even by the partisans fighting the common enemy, the most basic help. We know, of course, about the Warsaw ghetto revolt, but there were many others, in terrible places, where revolt seemed even less probable, including those in the death camps of Sobibor⁷ and

6 Yehuda Bauer, *Jewish Reactions to the Holocaust*, (MOD Books, 1989), p. 108.

7 Sobibor Camp: „[...] The General Government consisted of the districts of Warsaw, Cracow, Lublin, Radom, and Lvov. According to the estimate of the German authorities, they were inhabited by approximately 2,284,000 Jews. A special organization was set up in Lublin to prepare for their extermination. *The actual killing was to be carried out in three camps – Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, at the eastern border of the General Government. [...] Operation Reinhard named after Reinhard Heydrich who had been assassinated on May 2, 1942. [...] *Sobibor*: a village in a thinly populated region on the Chelm- Wlodowa railroad line was chosen by the Central Building Administration (SS-Zentralbauverwaltung) in Lublin as a suitable locality for an additional extermination camp. [...] mass extermination began during the first days of May (1942). [...] On July

Treblinka⁸. They were many instances of armed and/or physical resistance throughout Europe. Sometimes we hear about groups of Jewish fighters, sometimes the Jews were parts of larger organizations. In France, for instance, according to many historians including Leon Poliakov, nearly 20 % of the partisans in the Resistance were Jews, although the Jews made up just over 1 % of the general population. We must also take into account that in many cases of revolt and action, the Jewish fighters were totally eradicated, and the Germans of course did not propagate Jewish heroism. These acts therefore remain unrecorded.

Nevertheless armed resistance was just one of many different forms of resistance.

5, 1943, shortly before the dispatch of the last transports of Dutch Jews, Himmler decreed that Sobibor was to be converted into a concentration camp. [...] However, even before the conversion from extermination to concentration camp was completed, the revolt of the Jewish prisoners on October 14, 1943, put an end to the Sobibor camp.[...] According to Polish official publications based on data of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland and the trials of war criminals, the total number of victims killed in [...] Sobibor was- 250,000. „Operation Reinhard“; *Extermination Camps of Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka* „Yitzhak Arad.“ Source: *Yad VaShem Studies XVI*, Yad VaShem, Jerusalem 1984 pp. 205–239. In: Yad VaShem; Shoah Resource Center, the International School for Holocaust Studies.

- 8 Treblinka Camp: For general information see note no. 9. *Treblinka*: Construction of Treblinka began after Belzec and Sobibor were in operation. [...] Thus it became the most „perfect“ extermination camp of operation Reinhard. The camp was situated in the north-eastern part of the General Government, not far from Malkinia, a town with a railroad station on the main Warsaw- Bialystock line ... [...] The main extermination installations were completed by mid-June 1942. The murder operations started on July 23, 1942, while the construction work continued for another few months. [...] Some 268,000 Jews met their deaths in the first extermination wave in Treblinka which lasted 5 weeks – from July 23 to August 28. (mainly from Warsaw). [...] The dismantlement of Treblinka began after Himmler’s visit to the headquarters of Operation Reinhard and to the death camps at the end of February–beginning of March 1943. Prior to that, 800,000 victims had to be exhumed and incinerated and also other work had to be done in order to obliterate all the traces. In March and April 1943, several transports continued to arrive from the destroyed Warsaw ghetto, from Yugoslavia and from Greece, but this hardly delayed the razing of the camp. The revolt of the prisoners in Treblinka on August 2, 1943, occurred in the final phase of the camp’s existence and speeded up its liquidation. [...] According to Polish official publications based on data of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland and the trials of Nazi war criminals, the total number of victims killed in Treblinka was 850,000.“ „Operation Reinhard“: *Extermination Camps of Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka*. „Yitzhak Arad“, In: Yad VaShem; Shoah Resource Centre, the International School for Holocaust Studies.

KIDDUSH HAHAIM – KIDDUSH HASHEM

Since the Romans, during those periods when they were imposed upon to convert or die, many Jews performed an act that was defined, much later, during the First Crusade in 1096, as dying for Kiddush Ha Shem, namely, dying for the Sanctification of the Divine Name. Jews are asked to sanctify and glorify the Divine by living their life in the service of G'd: Kiddush HaShem. But in such cases as forced conversion, Jews preferred to die by free choice and remain true to their G'd, rather than living their lives as non-Jews lying to their G'd and to themselves. During the Holocaust, there was no such choice; it was impossible to convert in order to save one's life; even Jews who had converted to Christianity were killed. In many cases, nonetheless, Jews still viewed death as a mean to sanctify G'd's Name or/and a way to assert one's free will. An example: a young man or woman with the possibility of joining the partisans in the forests, but deciding against it and remaining in the ghetto with his parents and younger siblings until the end.

In June 1940, Churchill realized that after the fall of France, Britain stood completely alone against Germany. (In 1940 the USSR was still linked to Nazi Germany by the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty, and the US was still far away from entering the war). So, when Churchill addressed the British people in one of his most quoted orations, he spoke of the fight for victory. But victory was not something the Jews could achieve at that time. Instead, as Leni Yahil cites in an article: „The choice (for the Jews) was not victory or defeat, because the opportunities of victory did not exist. The choice was: disappearance or existence. Any kind of continuity in the existence of the people was already a victory whose meaning was: to defeat the will of total annihilation.“⁹ Indeed this was meant to be a way of assuming one's free choice, one's free will and dignity on front of the murderer and his manipulations. As a survivor I once interviewed told me, „Who is the real hero? Me, for having joined the partisans and fought in the forest, or my cousin, who stayed with his old mother and younger sisters knowing exactly where they were heading for, to take care for them until their last breath?“

As Marc Dworzecki writes, *this* was a choice the Jews made for themselves: „If the Germans denied the Jews the choice between remaining true to their faith and apostasy, the Jews set a different choice for themselves – going to their death as people degraded and without hope or doing so serenely, proudly, erectly, without tears and without humbling themselves before their murderers. Those who were led to their death saw the refusal to degrade themselves as one way of

⁹ Leni Yahil, *Shlavei Mediniut Ha-Hashmada Nocab Ma'avak Ha-Yehudim LaHaiim*, (“The German Reaction to Manifestation of Jewish Resistance Other than Physical“), (HaKibbutz HaMeuchad Publishing House, 1978) Vol 1.

performing Kiddush HaShem as by the deeds in their lives: „You shall be holy for I the Lord your G'd am Holy...“ Leviticus 19:2.¹⁰

Jews of many communities went to their death wrapped in prayer shawls, with Torah Scroll (*Holy Scriptures*) in their arms and prayers on their lips. This was a new form of „choice“ that was created in the days of the Holocaust: the choice between a death of denial or a death of faith.¹¹

Despite these changes in the conceptualization and formulation of Kiddush HaShem, it became more and more evident that the Germans wanted not only the soul of the Jews but their bodies as well, and that the massacre was of enormous proportions. The scope of the murder could not be grasped, yet some religious and intellectual leaders understood the oppression with which the Jews were now being confronted, leading to a change in their response. Hence, their positions toward the concept and acceptance of dying for the „Sanctification of the Divine Name“ started to develop. This is why as early as 1940, Rabbi Nissenbaum (1868–1942), an outstanding personality and leader of the religious Zionist Mizrahi party, in the Warsaw ghetto, held a secret meeting in which he declared: „Beforehand, the enemies asked for the soul, and the Jew gave his body for the Sanctification of the Divine Name; now the murderer demands the Jew's body so it is an obligation for the Jew to protect himself, to protect his life.“¹² An old concept was redefined: Kiddush HaHaim, „*The Sanctification of Life*“. Anything was to be done in order to save one's life. Rudovski, in his book: „The Concept of Kiddush HaHaim“ writes the following:

„What was operative for Rabbi Nissenbaum was not the arbitrary development of a unique response which dealt only with the Holocaust experience. Nissenbaum dealt with Kiddush HaHaim as an element in an historical process which expressed the sense of Jewish continuity and will to live“. It was an „ongoing process which permitted the Jews to adapt to changing times and conditions“ „These conditions should have resulted in total disorganization, breakdown and dissolution. But in fact, „for Nissenbaum, Kiddush HaHaim was the basic value on which to reorient ghetto life in the face of the Nazi challenge.“ p. 6.¹³

Saul Esch writes: „That Kiddush HaHaim was to all accounts and to all purposes the general feeling is borne out by all evidence. It explains the enormous will to live that was emphasized at all times and in all places in the midst of the basest degradation, a will best expressed in the Yiddish word that was on the lips of

10 Mark Dworzetsky, „The Day-to-Day Stand of the Jews“, in: *The Catastrophe of the European Jewry*, (Yad vaShem, 1976) pp. 377–378.

11 Mark Dworzetsky, „The Day-to-Day Stand of the Jews“, in: *The Catastrophe of the European Jewry*, (Yad vaShem, 1976) pp. 377–378.

12 Joseph Rudavsky, *op.cite*, p. 5.

13 Joseph Rudavsky, *The Concept of Kiddush HaHaim*, (New YORK University, 1978), p. 6–7.

the majority of the survivors of the Holocaust: iberleybn, to survive, to remain alive.“¹⁴

It is precisely here, where the songs take on an important role.

In this context, I will introduce two songs and testimonies, before beginning with specific explanations of the songs and singing. Both songs were written for the Theater Cabaret of the Vilna ghetto in the summer of 1943.

The Vilna Ghetto was created by the Nazis in August 1941, where, at the time 60 000 Jews lived. In August 1943, mainly through murder and deportation only 8 000 remained. But even in those terrible conditions, mutual aid, and secret education survived. (In most places, education was forbidden by the Nazis, since educating the young was to prepare for the future – and there was no future for the Jews in Europe). A library, concerts, and theater were organized. There was also a very strong and active Resistance Organization about which there will be more details later in this article. The ghetto was liquidated at the beginning of September 1943, bringing with it an end to the brilliant chapter of the Vilna Jewry.

In the summer of 1943, when the first of the songs I am presenting was created and sung, it was clear to all that the end was approaching. The song's words were written by Leib Rosenthal in Yiddish, composer unknown, and quickly moved out of the theater and into the streets. Here is the translation:

We'll Live Forever

*We'll live forever, though the world's in flame!
We'll live forever, without a cent to our names!
We'll live despite the burden of our woes!
We'll live despite the slander of our foes!
We'll live forever, each hour and day!
Well live forever, let come what may!
We'll live and persevere –
We'll live forever, look – we're here!*¹⁵

The second song I want to introduce is also from the Vilna Ghetto. From the last cabaret representation, it was written by Katriel Broido a few days before the ghetto was liquidated:

14 Saul Esh, *The Dignity of the Deprived*, (AJC, 1962), pp. 99–111

15 Shmerke Katcerginsky, *Lieder fun Gettos un Lagern* („Songs from Ghettos and Camps“) (New York: CyCo Books, 1949) p. 357.

The Hour Strikes

*The hour strikes,
 And we are here!
 We're looking to the future.
 The skies are turning blue again;
 A new day is coming.
 Today is still dark,
 But we are patient, we can wait,
 Until the day, until the hour
 When the guilty will be cast to the ground.*

*When life is bleak and heavy,
 When storms sweep over the earth, it is no use shedding tears,
 Or sighing: „this is how it was meant to be.“
 ‘This is a wind which tears us limb from limb.
 A wind which penetrates our bones;
 We're bent, but we intend to rise again
 And we shall go on.*

Refrain:

*We look to a better tomorrow;
 We march on to better days;
 And though our joy may still be withheld,
 Our path leads us toward it.
 A new world reborn
 Smiles at us from afar –
 Enchanted, blossoming, in full bloom –
 We are believers in this magic,
 For this we know for certain,
 It will come.¹⁶*

None of the writers, the singers, including most of the public and the street singers, and the ordinary Jews that sang these songs survived. Only the songs survived. They are a singing testimony that even after two years of hell, even when facing death, the commandment of the Sanctification of Life, was still felt and thought by many.

From Rudavsky again: „What... (these) songs meant to the Jew in the Nazi ghettos of Eastern Europe can best be understood from the words of a Hassid who insisted on remaining in his Succah instead of hiding when the Nazis chose the Feast of the Tabernacles to initiate a mass deportation of Jews to Treblinka: „What could the Germans possibly take from me? Perhaps my body, that bag of bones.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34–35.

But they have no control over my soul... Our Jewish soul will not surrender; our soul is still free, and so is our song“

Moshe Prager, who recounted this incident, added: The first command expressed in the songs of the camps and the ghettos was: „Do not cry! Laugh in the face of the enemy“... These folk songs accurately reflect the war of nerves which the Nazis waged on the Jewish masses even before the hangman built his houses of death...He employed every device in his power to break the resistance of the Jews, to destroy their will to survive...But the Jews were determined to suppress the pain within them and gathered their strength to confront the catastrophe...“¹⁷ We shall see that up until the very end, there were Jews who expressed the will to survive through their songs, knowing that these songs would not die. In this manner and in other ways, the songs were a vibrant part of Kiddush HaHaim, the Sanctification of Life, and the spiritual resistance.

3. Singing and Songs

Not all the Jews sang. But there always were Jews who did.

Jews sang everywhere.

They sang in all the countries where they resided, from Greece to Poland, from the Soviet Union to the Western Occupied countries.

In all the places they were thrown or moved to: in the ghettos, while hiding, in the forests, in the bunkers, in family camps, in transit, concentration and extermination camps. We even know, thanks to the diaries found buried next to the Crematoria in Birkenau by the ZonderKommando who wrote them, that Jews sang songs while dying in the gas chambers and which songs were sung.

Nahman Blumenthal writes: „Wherever there were Jews, songs were born. Chased from place to place, they were accompanied by song [...] even to the death camps and the crematoria, songs followed them“¹⁸

Jews sang in all the languages they spoke.

The primary language of all this body of songs is Yiddish, followed by Polish and Hungarian. This reflects the demographic reality of pre-Holocaust European Judaism. Songs are also written in French, German, Czech, Italian, Rumanian, Greek, Ladino¹⁹, Russian, Serbo-Croat, Lithuanian, Latvian and other languages.

¹⁷ Joseph Rudavsky, *The concept of Kiddush HaHaim*, op. cite, p. 107.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁹ Ladino or Judeo-Spanish is the language spoken and written by Jews of Spanish origins. See: Encyclopaedia Judaica, 16 vols, (Keter Publishing House, 1972) Vol 10, pp. 1342–1353, *passim*.

Jews sang from all socio-economic and religious backgrounds.

We have songs from orthodox and Hassidic Jews,²⁰ traditionalist and assimilated, communist, socialist, Zionist or anti-Zionist. Songs written by a body representative of the entire pre-Holocaust Jewish population; songs written by women, children, and men.

Jews sang throughout the entire duration of the Holocaust era:

Most of the remaining songs were written after 1941 since only a very small number of people survived, who could recall and sing the songs that were written earlier. Despite this, we have songs originating from almost the very beginning, from the rise of the Nazis to power in January 1933, to the opening of the first camps and until the very bitter end in 1945. One period, that of the so-called Death Marches, remains an exception. The Death Marches started at the end of 1944 and the beginning of 1945. With the Red Army approaching, the SS began evacuating the camps, forcing all the Jews without food, water or clothes, and in the terribly cold weather, to travel on foot or in open wagons down endless paths and roads deeper into Germany. It is estimated that 250 000 Jews perished in these marches. As exemplified in Martin Gilbert's *Atlas of the Shoah*, on January 26th, 1945, a march began from a camp near Neusalz, with 1 000 women. The march continued for 42 days. When they arrived in Bergen Belsen after this terrible ordeal, very few women had survived. This happened after six years of „Holocaust“.²¹

At this time and place in history, no singing had been heard and reported.

As soon as the war ended, however, in the DPs (Displaced Persons) camps, the singing started again.

Many songs written by the Jews are now anonymous.

Although the songs „took flight“ over the barbed wires and were sung by other Jews, even more Jews were being murdered, as were the songs' composers, with the final outcome that the source of the songs became lost.

Most songs are contra facts.

This means that the melodies were taken from songs that existed before the war but the words were modified and adapted to the reality the Jews were confronting. As the genocide policies became more horrific, people felt that there were no pre-war songs that could adapt to the new reality. This is why they felt the need to write new words on known melodies. For the most part, these songs were written by

20 Hassidic Jews: Jews belonging to the Hassidic movement that was born in Eastern Europe in the 18th Century.

21 Martin Gilbert, *Atlas de la Shoah*, (Editions de l'Aube, traduction française, 1992), p. 218.

people who did not have a musical education so they could not write melodies. That is why they adapted new words to melodies, a device that was already well known in Jewish folklore.

Some songs were literal translations. The song, „Dort Baym Breg fun Veldl“, for instance, is a plain Yiddish translation of the Russian song: „There by the Edge of the Forest“, apparently written during the Russian Civil War in 1918–1920. The Yiddish translation was sung by the Jewish partisans in the woods near Vilna. An interesting development is that after the Holocaust, some survivors who fought in the partisans and knew the song relocated to what became the State of Israel and fought during the Israel War of Independence. This song was then translated into Hebrew. The main difference between these two songs is that instead of taking place in the forest, this sad scene is set in the Negev Desert. So there are three different periods depicted: first, the originally Russian source, sung during the Civil War in Russia, second, the Yiddish translation during the Holocaust by Jewish partisans of Vilna, and third, the Hebrew translation during the War of Independence in Israel, which is still very popular today.

In some cases, there is an obvious link between the original song and the contra fact, the link originating in the musical context. For example, the song „To Belzec“ was written by eleven year-old Yanina Heschles from the Lvov Ghetto. Her father had been murdered on the first day of the German occupation of the city in July 1941 and by January 1943, her beloved grand-parents had been taken during an „Aktion“ and deported to Belzec²². By then everyone in the Lvov Ghetto knew more or less that Belzec was synonymous with death. Grieving, little Yanina, from the depth of her mourning, remembered a very well known rhythmic poem from before the war, describing a happy family going on a Sunday with the train to picnic in the forest. This poem imitated the rhythm of the train wheels. For Yanina, as for so many Jews throughout Europe, this sound became associated with a most

22 Belzec camp; for general information: see note no. 9. *Belzec*: „Belzec, a small town in the southeast district of Lublin, close to the border of the district of Lvov, [...] was selected as the locality for the first extermination camp. [...] At the end of February 1942 the installations for mass extermination were completed. [...] Organized mass extermination began with the deportation of the Jews of Lublin on March 17, 1942. This date marks the actual onset of Operation Reinhard. [...] Belzec was the first camp where the exterminations were stopped – at the beginning of December 1942. The camp continued to operate till March 1943, and in this final phase the mass graves were opened and the corpses incinerated. During this period the gas chambers and other buildings were destroyed. The Jewish prisoners were taken from Belzec to Sobibor where they were killed. [...] According to Polish official publications based on data of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland and the trials of war criminals, the total number of victims killed in Belzec (was) – 600,000.“ Excerpts from: „*Operation Reinhard*“: *Extermination Camps of Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka*.“ Yitzhak Arad. Yad VaShem, Shoah Resource Centre, The International School for Holocaust Studies.

terrible tragedy. And this is why, a few days after her grand-parents' deportation, inspired by the original Polish song, 11 year-old Yanina wrote a song-recitation, imitating the sound of the train wheels. Here is the translation of the first stanza and the refrain:

*What a terrible picture!
A wagon full with people
Some dead in the corner,
All are undressed.
The tac-tac of the wheels: a sigh
The doomed alone understands
The language of the wheels:*

Refrain:

*To Belzec! To Belzec! To Belzec!
To death! To death! To death!
To Belzec! To Belzec! To Belzec!
To death! To death! To death!*²³

Very few songs „survived“ the Holocaust without modification

Indeed, very few songs survived the Holocaust, without any changes. Very few songs were perceived as containing such depth, emotionally or descriptive, to depict the realities of the Holocaust without being modified. One such exception is an extraordinary song, known and sang by Jews throughout Europe and written by one of the most extraordinary Jewish troubadours of all time, Mordechai Gebirtig. It is the song:

*Brother! Our shtetl is burning
Our town is burning, brothers, burning.
Our poor little town is burning.
Angry winds are fanning higher
The leaping tongues of flame and fire,
Our whole town burns!*

*And you stand looking with folded arms,
And you shake your heads,
You stand looking on, with folded arms
While the fire spreads!*

23 Moshe Prager, *Min Ha-Meitzar Karati* (From the Depth I called) (Jerusalem, Hotza-at Mosad Harav Kuk, 1959), p. 168.

*Our town is burning, brothers, burning,
Our poor little town is burning,
Tongues of flames are leaping,
The fire through our town goes sweeping,
Through roofs and windows pouring,
All around us burns.*

Refrain:

*Our town is burning, brothers, burning,
Any moment the fire may
Sweep the whole of our town away,
And leave only ashes, black and gray,
Like after a battle, where dead walls stand,
Broken and ruined in a desolate land.*

Refrain:

*Our town is burning, brothers, burning.
All now depends on you.
Our only help is what you do.
You can still put out the fire
With your blood, if you desire.²⁴*

Mordechai Gebirtig was a carpenter living in Krakow. He wrote many songs, although he had no formal music education. Before the Holocaust, he became a well known troubadour in the Yiddish world, in Europe and America. His songs were indeed a reflection of the life of the Jews in Eastern Europe. During the Holocaust, he continued writing songs. He was murdered on June 4th, 1942 at the Krakow railway station en route for Belzec. In his book, Sinai Lechter explains exactly how:

„The circumstances of the death of Mordechai Gebirtig are of special interest to all lovers of his musical and folkloristic legacy. It has been known for a long time that he died during the „*Aussiedlung*“ of the Jews of Krakow on June 4th, 1942 from a single bullet shot by a German guard who accompanied the otherwise solemn march of the Jews to the railway station in Krakow, destined for the Belzec camp. But why? Why was he singled out for instant death, while the other Jews were sent to the death camp of Belzec? (...) While still in the procession of the victims to the railway station, Gebirtig caused an uproar when he suddenly began to dance and sing at the top of his voice in Yiddish, as if he had gone out of his mind. To silence him the German guard fired at him.“²⁵

²⁴ Sinai Lechter, *Anthology of Yiddish Folksongs*, vol. 5: The Mordechai Gebirtig Volume, (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2000), p. 233.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. XVII.

This song is indeed one of the few that was not changed, but was sung by Jews throughout Europe during the Holocaust. There are many testimonies of survivors that it was translated in many languages. Gebirtig wrote the text in 1938, influenced by the pogrom in Przytyk, a small city close to Radom, and the increase of anti-Semitism in Poland. It is a kind of prophecy, in which Gebirtig sees the end of the shtetl, the Jewish village, burning after an attack. As such, there is no doubt whatsoever that the Jews felt the song did reflect what they lived, felt and observed. This is why this song, this prophecy of sort, survived the Holocaust intact.

I would like now to come back to the questions we asked at the beginning of the article:

4. Why singing in the midst of constant fear, terror and death?

A people who can sing while being murdered, is a people for whom singing was part and parcel of the culture. One does not resort to a kind of behaviour that is absolutely unknown in time of extreme conflict and danger. On the other hand, one searches inside to look for existing sources of strength and life and uses them to fight back. In his book, „Le Destin Juif et la Musique, 3000 ans d'histoire“, Franz Lemaire writes the following: „From David's mythical harp to the cantor psalmodic scansion, from the Yiddish song or the kleizmer dance that mixes so well laughter and tears, to Mahler's desperate symphonies, Jewish music raises up as a song whose very source, more than any other songs are the pains that destroyed so many destinies“ (my translation)²⁶. This depicts the tradition of singing, personal and communal, to express disarray in front of persecution. We are faced with a cultural phenomenon; one, in fact, that is shared by Jews from many different countries, socio-economic levels and backgrounds of belief and religiosity. This is an extensive subject, going well beyond the content and scope of this article. Several points that are essential in order to grasp the cultural framework in which these songs were written and sung are presented here.

The People of Israel have a very long singing tradition. One can hear the collective singing of the Israeli people on the bank of the Red Sea. Singing is part of a great tradition and is not only mentioned but eagerly discussed, praised, sometimes distrusted in the Talmud, and by later scholars and Rabbis. Jews have sung in all their Diasporas, from Yemen to the United States, from Poland to North Africa. Singing was not confined to the Synagogue and its prayers, but quickly spread, becoming part of everyone's daily life. Most of the six millions Jews who were murdered belonged to the Ashkenazi tradition, of which the Yiddish folksong was an integral part and a form of collective expression. The late Sinai Lechter wrote in Volume 5 of his magnificent Anthology of Yiddish Songs:

26 Franz C. Lemaire, *Le destin Juif et la Musique: trois mille ans d'histoire*, (Edition Fayard, 2001), p. 12.

„The Yiddish folksong is the collective creation of the Jewish people in Eastern Europe, mainly in greater Poland, where some 80 % of all Jews in the world resided during the 18th and 19th centuries. The geographical expanse in which Yiddish folksongs were created included, in addition to Poland also Lithuania, Latvia, Byelorussia, the Ukraine and Rumania ... Listening to any group of these songs conjures up the entire world of that era – the aromas and the noises, the masses of bubbling humanity, the children and the mothers and Bobbehhs, (...), that wonderful kaleidoscope of Jewish life that was and is no more, except in our minds and memories.“²⁷

Here are a few sayings of Hassidic Rabbis who lived in the 18th and at the turn of the 19th Century:

„*Through song calamities can be removed*“
Rabbi Nachman of Braslav.

„*Lord of the Universe, were I a singer I would not allow You to live in the heavens, but You would be forced to live with us on earth*“

Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz

„*Neginah (playing) is the language of the soul... A nigun (melody) can pull one out of the deepest mire.*“

Rabbi Sneur Zalman of Ladi.

Let us return to the songs of the Holocaust: Here is a testimony written at the beginning of 1942 in the Ringenblum's Archives²⁸ of the Warsaw ghetto, by an

27 Sinai Lechter, *op. cite*, p. XXV–XXVI.

28 Emmanuel Ringelblum, (1900–1944), historian. From a young age, he was very active in public affairs and with the Institute for Jewish Research (Yidisher Visenshaflikher Institut, YIVO). As an historian, he understood from the onset of the war, that something of unprecedented proportions was taking place. So, in October 1939 he instituted a secret archive: *Oneg Shabbat*: Shabbat delight, because the staff of the secret archive would meet on Shabbat afternoons. On the sealing of the ghetto, in November 1940, Ringelblum and his colleagues decided to turn the archives into an organized operation. From that time on, hundreds of people, historians, writers, doctors, teachers, witnesses documented and recorded secretly the events that were taking place in Warsaw and in Poland, events that had reached Warsaw. They also tried to acquire German documents related to the deportation and extermination of the Jews, and they contacted the Polish Resistance through the Jewish Underground Organizations in order to send information about the extermination to the free world. In August 1942, March 1943, and again in April 1943, the archivists started sealing the contents of the archives in metal containers and hide them in various places in the ghetto. The first and second containers were discovered shortly after the war. The third was never found. „*The Oneg Shabbat Archive is the single most important historical source from the era of Nazi occupation in Poland.*“ As for Ringelblum himself: in March 1943 he went into hiding with his family on the

anonymous survivor of the expulsion from the small town of Skempa to the Warsaw ghetto, December 1941. In the middle of the night, the SS entered the small town of Skempa and, without any previous warning, threw the Jews out of their houses in the dark cold winter night onto the market square. An awful ordeal followed. Half walking, half in open wagons without food or water, the elderly, the pregnant women, the babies and the sick: all the Jews from Skempa were deported to the Warsaw Ghetto.

The witness: „Darkness, cold night, we drag on with the children. From time to time, one can hear the rabbi singing: „from the depth of the Galuth“. [...] Tears started to run from the rabbi's eyes... These are not personal tears but they are tears of Galuth (i. e. Diaspora) that history has borne... The Rabbi started to sing the old Jewish song: „the Yiddish Rose““ ...

„Rabbi, excuse me, why do you sing in such sadness? From where comes your happiness?“

Answers the Rabbi: „There are three different levels of response to suffering. The first one is just a scream: „It hurts!“ This is the lowest level. At the second level, one keeps silence. This is indeed a high level. The third level, the highest of all levels, is when one sings as the Besht (the Baal Shem Tov: „The Master of the Good Name“, the name given to the first Hassidic Rabbi in the 18th century) with his pupils.“

And then we all heard the song of our Rabbi in the darkness:

„With the stick of the wanderer in his hand

With no Savior nor friend

Do not be afraid

It will be good, go on.

With no house nor roof

With no tomorrow nor today,

One cannot stop going,

And it hurts, and it hurts,

But strength we have.“²⁹

For the Rabbi of Skempa, as for most Hassidic Jews and many others, singing or playing a tune was and always had been the ultimate and highest form of response in expressing the entire range of human emotion toward the Divine and the Humane.

non Jewish side of Warsaw. During the uprising of the ghetto, in April 1943, he went back to the ghetto. There he was deported to the Trawniki labor camp. A Polish man and a Jewish woman successfully helped him to escape. He joined back his family hiding in Warsaw. However, soon after, in March 1944, someone denounced them to the Gestapo; Ringelblum, his wife, his 12 years old son, and the Jews that were hiding with them were shot on the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto.

29 Yad VaShem Archives: M10.AR.1/906.

This is not enough, however, to explain the singing of the Jews while confronting the realities of the Holocaust. It is obvious there must be other intrinsic reasons.

Here we shall attempt, through songs and testimonies, written or told during or after the Holocaust, to try and determine the role, or roles, the songs had for the Jews during the Holocaust. We shall try to understand, if and how, it expressed in one way or another, the will to live while facing the constant menace of opposition. We will explore if singing was a way to face the Nazis and their collaborators, if it was one of the mediums the Jews used during the struggle against the constant threat of losing their humaneness.

Singing as communication

In her book, the result of thorough research of the songs of the Lodz Ghetto, Dr. Gila Flam interviews a survivor of that ghetto, Miriam Har'el. Miriam Har'el was a young adolescent when the Nazis entered into Poland and erected the ghetto, and wrote many songs there. She states: „The Jewish people came to such a deep state of despair that only singing could help. When one sings, even when one sings a sad song, his loneliness disappeared. *He listens to his own voice. He and his voice become two people.*“ Describing her compositions, Miriam goes on: „The words were lying in the streets; you just had to pick them up. It was not my imagination, the words were there, and I just had to put them on paper. I knew the melodies from before the war. All the melodies were happy melodies, I did not know any sad melodies. So I wrote, and I felt free after I let it out. My family read it, then sang it according to the melodies, again and again. These were long, dark nights and we were all hungry and could not fall asleep.“ Then she adds: „Singing is a manifestation of hope. People before their death do not mourn, they sing. The song is a cry, and afterwards you feel free.“³⁰

First and foremost, singing was a means *to communicate with oneself in a time when everything was done to separate, to cut a person from herself.* As in the Hassidic tradition, Miriam, whose family was very orthodox, regarded singing as a way to chase sadness, and to break the barriers of loneliness and alienation.

Here we have a very important testimony of a woman who, as a young girl, experienced the loss of most of her family under the most terrible circumstances; she was in fact later deported to Birkenau as well. She experienced the realization that singing and listening to one's voice is like looking at a mirror and discovering one's face, the reality of one's existence. The face is, in that case, the voice of one's existence. *Singing provided her with a sense of identity and belonging that was being stolen and destroyed.* This should be discussed while keeping in mind that she was in constant, continuing trauma. We know the effect trauma has on one's perception of self and reality and yet it is still difficult to assess the damage that she

30 Gila Flamm, *Singing for Survival, songs of the Lodz Ghetto, 1940–1945*, (University of Illinois press, 1991) p. 107.

experienced in regard to self perception as well as that of inner and outer reality. It is clear that she experienced vast self redemption by singing.

Another important aspect that she, as well as many other survivors, reveals is the fact that when one engages in an activity like singing, particularly with a group, one tends to forget, temporarily at least, the pangs of hunger.

As previously mentioned, the Jews were forbidden to record the murder and to communicate from one place to another; in fact, each community was to be isolated. In the camps the slaves were stripped of their names, becoming a number, and communication began losing its meaning. Language was losing its role as a means of communication among human beings.

In many cases, songs and singing took the place of language; through songs and singing the Jews were able to communicate and break the physical and psychological barriers the Nazis had built around them. I shall give a few examples:

Communicating information surrounding an event: Yitzhak Wittenberg

In the Vilna Ghetto, of which I have already written extensively, a strong Partisan Organization existed, at the head of which stood a young man named Itzack Wittenberg. On July 12th, 1943, he was arrested by the Gestapo and brought to the nearby prison, the Pawiak. A few days later, in a bold act, his friends raided the prison, released him and brought him back to the Ghetto. The following morning, on July 18th, the walls of the Ghetto were covered with huge placards written in Yiddish and German. With these placards, the SS announced that, if by late evening Wittenberg had not surrendered, the Ghetto will burst into flames.

It is mid 1943: most Polish and Lithuanian Judaism have already disappeared, a known fact to Wittenberg and his friends. Moreover, the population of the Ghetto has been decimated, and they rightly suspect that the end of the Ghetto is approaching rapidly. But at the end of a terrible day, Wittenberg surrenders. A few days later, he died under terrible torture, without giving the names of any of his comrades. As soon as people heard of his death, they began writing songs about him. Here is the most popular of these songs, written by another well known partisan and poet, Shmerke Kacerginski. He wrote the words in Yiddish to the melody of a Soviet partisan song, present to us a contra fact, with an obvious link to the original song:

Itsick Witenberg

Lying somewhere concealed

Is the enemy like an animal.

The Mauser keeps watch in my hand, but suddenly the Gestapo

Leads a prisoner in chains

Through the darkness: our Commander!

*The night tore the ghetto
 With lightning flashes.
 „Danger“ shouts a gate, a wall,
 Loyal comrades
 Free him from his chains – Disappear with the Commander.*

*The night flew by, Death before our eyes,
 The ghetto is burning fever.
 The ghetto in turmoil,
 The Gestapo threatens:
 „The Commander or death!“*

*Then Itzick said:
 And it penetrated like a bolt of lightning –
 „I don't want you on my account
 To have to surrender your lives to the enemy...“
 Proudly, to his death goes the Commander.*

*Once more lying concealed
 Is the enemy like an animal.
 I hold you in my hand, Mauser.
 Now you are dear to me,
 You be my liberator.
 Now you be my Commander!³¹*

Many songs written and sang during the Holocaust tell us a story, an event. The Jews could not communicate, could not own radios, subscribe newspapers, etc. The songs were a way to communicate information; when one writes a song it belongs to the writer, but as soon as it is sung, it is publicly transmitted and belongs to all who listen, and even more to all who sing it. During the Holocaust, it meant that the song flew over the barbed wires and with it the information it carried. It meant that many facts the Nazis wanted to keep secret could be „archived“ through songs.

Communicating forbidden information under extreme circumstances: Elvira Micaeli

On April 11th, 1944 a transport of Greek Jews that had left Athens on April 2nd arrived at Birkenau, after nine days of a terrible ordeal. Among them were the 245 Romaniotes Jews from the small community of Prevezza³², out of which 175

³¹ Wittenberg

³² Romaniotes: Jews leaving in the territories of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople, the Balkans and Asia Minor who are said to be there since the destruction of the First

men were quickly directed to the Zonderkommando (ZK). Most of them perished during the revolt of the (ZK) on October 7th, 1944. Some of these men were directed to Crematorium no. II, situated in front of the women's camp. Few of the young women from Prevezza passed the selection and were eventually relocated to barrack no.15, which happened to be just on the other side of the fence/ barbed wire that separated the camp from Crematorium no. II. A survivor from this barrack, Elvira Micaeli, who was deported in that same train, tells the following story in the testimony she gave to Yad vaShem:

She used to talk in Greek with the other girls from Prevezza that were with her. On Sunday afternoons, if they had some time they would wash the clothes they had, next to the fence. Apparently, Elvira assumes one of the Greek Zonder heard the girls talking and singing in Greek. In any case, a ZK from Prevezza would occasionally open the window of the upper floor of the Crematorium facing block no. 15 and sing in Greek. The SS may or may not have heard him, and in any case did not think his singing was offensive, which was a false assumption. Through his singing in Greek, on melodies originating before the war, he was describing the entire killing process, from the moment the Jews went down the stairs until the moment they were reduced to ashes in the Crematorium. And he would always end his songs with the same plea: „Girls! I won't survive! ZK are killed every few months. But perhaps one of you will survive and she must testify! TESTIFY! For this she will survive!“ According to Mrs Micaeli, this man sang this way numerous times. Unfortunately, she could not remember his name.³³

In most extermination camps, although the inmates of the camps knew perfectly well that people were murdered in the gas chambers, the SS had tightly isolated the ZK from the other inmates of the camps. They did not want the details of the murder to be known. Had they understood what the ZK was singing to these young women, it is very likely that they would have killed the ZK and the women. This man had no other way to communicate to those outside of the circle

Temple in Jerusalem. That made them the oldest Diaspora in Europe. They had their own language, derived from Greek, and customs. Most were murdered by the Nazis. Prevezza: city in the gulf of Arta. Jews mostly arrived there in the 19th century from Corfu and Ioannina. They were Romaniotes Jews, and were numerous enough to organize themselves into a community in 1913. In May–June 1942 Prevezza, as all this part of Greece, went under Italian Occupation. But with the fall of Mussolini in summer 1943, the city was occupied by the Germans, with all the consequences: anti-Jewish measures and harassment. On March 25, 1944, 245 Jews (all) are arrested, transported to Athens and from there to Auschwitz with other Jews from the south of Greece. 175 men were sent to the ZK. They participated in the revolt of the ZK on October 7, 1944. Only 15 Jews from Prevezza survived. Aure Recanati: *Mémorial de la Déportation des Juifs de Grèce*, 2 vols., (Editions Avraham Cohen-Editions Erez, 2005) Vol. 2, *zones d'occupation bulgare et italienne*, p. 483. *passim*.

33 Yad VaShem Archives, Oral Testimonies O.3/10578 Hebrew, 2000. and telephonic conversation with the survivor.

of the ZK. Any attempt to make contact with anyone on the other side of the fence, which was electrified, and to talk to him would have ended in death for all of them. So he used the song to break the prison boundaries the SS had created: (first) in the only possible way to contact the girls in a language he knew the SS did not understand, (second) in the only way it was possible to transmit forbidden information, and (third) in the only possible way to call for something the Germans were determined to prevent: the call to survive and witness. By singing he was directly opposing and resisting the Nazis' policy of annihilation and eradication, proving he was a real human being able to stand up even in the midst of the most inhumane furnace the world had ever seen, and most likely would ever see again. Even there, he did not lose his mind; he did not lose a certain sense of history. Even there, he could still think about the future, the possibility of a future when one will be able to testify about the massacre of the Jewish People. That's why he sang.

Communicating beyond death: Alzunia

After the war, in 1947, a delegation of Jewish personalities was sent to Poland to visit the extermination camps, killing pits and mass graves. When they arrived in Lublin, they visited Majdaneck and the region, and while they were visiting the site of a mass grave near Lublin, they saw a mountain of shoes. Someone spotted a piece of paper sticking out from underneath the heel of a child's shoe. The paper was brought to restoration. The following song was written on it in Polish: „My name is Alzunia, I am 9 years old, I wrote the following song on the melody of „Na woztusia z popielnika“. Here is the translation of the song:

*„How is it possible
To be a lonely, dying child
When Mother is in Auschwitz
And Daddy in Majdaneck?“³⁴*

Here is a nine year old little girl, Alzunia, who understands perfectly well she is going to die and the meaning of death, which is absolutely astonishing for a nine year old child. Her behaviour tells us that she comprehends very clearly that death signifies the end of her existence, of her being on earth, otherwise how can one understand the amazing display of invention and strength she shows in her behaviour? From the practical point of view, it must have been very difficult in her situation to find a piece of paper and something with which to write. And what should we say about her wish to leave a trace, this song, of herself as she surely knows, beyond a doubt, that she is doomed? This song is the way she found to

34 Halina Binbaum, *Shirim Lifnei umitoh haMabul*, (Poems before and within the Flood) (Sifriat Tel Aviv, 1990).

tell us that *beyond death and despite her killers' wishes*, she was once alive: a very strong, inventive little nine year old girl with the nickname „Alzunia“. She plays on the difference between the silenced subtext of the original song, which depicts a mother in a forest showing her son the beauty of the world, and the picture she paints: a little girl, alone, dying (there is no one to show her the world), doomed, no parent, her world is built out of places like Auschwitz and Majdanek. Here we have a little girl describing her world out of a question she knows has no answer: „How is it possible..?“

Without this song, Alzunia would have been one of those nameless children among the 1 500 000 Jewish children murdered by the Germans during the Holocaust. Thanks to this song, and to Alzunia's eager desire to leave a trace after her death, we have a voice, a name, and an age: a recorded picture. The song: a means of resistance beyond death and despite her killers' wishes for her and for her people.

A place: Treblinka

The Warsaw Ghetto was the biggest and the most crowded ghetto in Europe. It was erected in June 1940. Nearly half a million Jews were enclosed within its walls. During the next two years, many died of hunger, disease, murder or forced labour. Then on July 22nd 1942, the SS started a tremendous „Aktion“ that was to last until September 5th. Throughout that fateful summer, the same was occurring across Europe. During these terrible weeks when Jews were chased after and tracked down like animals, nearly 300 000 Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto were sent to Treblinka directly to their death in the gas chambers. Treblinka was an industry of death; there was no forced labour there, there were no slaves working for German factories. (The few hundred Jews that worked there were working for the SS and the Ukrainians guards, or worked for the death factory). From testimonies gathered after the war, during the month of August, a song was heard in the alleys of the ghetto. The name of this song: „Treblinka“. It is anonymous; no one knows who wrote the words or the music. This is the song that has survived with the greatest number of different versions. I know twelve different versions of this song. Let's start with the translation of the version that appears on the web site of the USHMM, since it originates from Warsaw:

There Lies Treblinka

*A storm raged through the world
Leaving people uprooted and homeless.
Without pity or sorrow, their world was destroyed,
The sun was torn from the heavens
And the day was turned into night.*

*There, not far, the Umschlagplatz lays waiting
There people push and shove*

*For space in the railcars.
 There, you hear a child crying to his mother:
 „Why are you leaving me? You will never come back to me!“
 The police roughly shout the order: „Go!
 You won't feel hungry!
 You'll get three loaves of bread!“
 But with these three kilos of bread
 They did not know that they were being
 Driven to their death.*

*There lays Treblinka.
 For everyone a final resting place.
 Whoever goes there
 Never comes back again
 The heart weeps when one recalls
 A sister, a brother murdered there.*

*The train is ready,
 And there is one thing left to say:
 „From Treblinka I am“!*

Another version of the song from the town of Mezrits:

The big Liquidation of Mezrits in Treblinka

Author: Elie Magid

(written 1943 in the forest)

*In Mezrits there is a wailing, a lament, a dread, a curse.
 Ukrainians came into the city very early this morning,
 The people – they run, they try to hide out,
 The Ukrainians – they beat: „everybody out to the market square“.*

*They run and they get hid from behind,
 The Germans found a hideout there,
 They threw grenades into it, we already can hear that,
 Instead of going to the square, they're letting blood flow there.*

*A mother also runs with her child on her hip.
 The police beat her: „Run faster to the square!“
 The mother – she runs faster, beaten, fast,
 She comes to the square and she does not have her child.*

*The dead are lying in the square and the streets
 The blood flows so that the earth is wet..*

*Gestapo is nearby so that one is caught up in fear,
They yell to the police: „Take the dead away!“*

*The Jews they sit troubled and in pain,
They tell: „Jews, stand up and form rows!“
The Jews all stand up fearful
They lead them half dead to the trains.*

*They've already bought the Jews to the train,
They are murdered and faint,
They are in gloom, and they are in pain,
They throw them, two hundred in each wagon.*

*The train gives a whistle and flies further away,
The Jews remain standing there perplexed.
The doors are locked, the heat is intense,
They open the windows and throw themselves out.*

*The Jews drop from the windows,
More than one lies there with a split head.
The Ukrainian look silently on, –
Shoots a Jew, who immediately falls.*

*The train flies, going up and down,
It's soon at Treblinka, the train stops,
They open the doors, they stand them in rows,
They lead them the Jews to the showers.*

*The Jews are soon led to the baths,
A child cries: „Mama!“ Another goes into spasms,
They turn the valves, the pipes for gas,
They burn the Jews to coals and ash.*

*In Mezrits sits a mother who's always thinking,
She sits and she cries there both by day and by night:
„Where are my children? Where is my husband?
They took them, packed them into the train!“*

*The world will consider the huge grave with tears,
And you should sentence only one, –
No more mothers, no brothers, no friends,
For us the sun has not yet shined.³⁵*

35 Shmerke Kaczerginsky, *op. cite*.

This is a very long and interesting song. It appears in the anthology of Shmerke Kacerginsky: „The songs of the ghettos and the camps“, published 1954 in Buenos Aires. This version of the song „Treblinka“ is very interesting in part because of the restless feeling the song conveys. It is like hearing a commentary of someone who is actually a part of this scene, in the present moment. The writer and the singers become, therefore, immediate witnesses of the event.

Shoshanna Khalish gives an important testimony about this song in her book: „Yes, We sang!“ She writes: The first time I heard about Treblinka was in a slave labour camp at Peterswaldau near Breslau, where my sister and I had been taken from Auschwitz in August 1944. We were among a group of 75 girls selected for transportation to that camp on Upper Silesia, to join about eight hundred Polish Jews who were working there in a German ammunition factory. These girls had been in different ghettos and concentration camps before Peterswaldau and some already knew the existence of Treblinka. It was they who sang the Treblinka song. I can still recall the ominous awareness that the song conveyed as we listened to it in the midst of our own misery and deprivation, little though we knew then about the horrifying details of that deathcamp.³⁶

What Shoshanna Khalish tells us here is extremely important; she first heard about Treblinka through that song, in summer 1944. She and the Jewish Hungarian inmates with her that heard the song, learned about the existence of this death camp exactly *a year after the revolt and the following destruction of the camp*, by the Germans. Even more significant is the following: on April 19th, 1944, the National Jewish Committee decided to print, among other songs, the Treblinka song. The Jews knew that this song had a great effect on people because of its high artistic level. They then photographed the documents, put them on micro film and sent the film to London and New York by way of the Jewish and the Polish Resistance. This reflects what they all had thought: that the song was a *primary testimony of the murder occurring now in Poland*.³⁷

In this article, we have primarily described the songs of the Jews during the Holocaust as a means of communication, which took on many forms. The Nazis wanted to isolate the Jew completely, to dehumanize him, to make him lose his sanity before killing him and spreading his ashes all over the earth. The Nazis wanted to turn the world onto a place where even the murder of the Jews would have been forgotten. Facing this, one of the roles of these songs was to keep a record at some sort of level of the murder, the life, the struggle, the death and the

36 Shoshana Kalish and Barbara Meister, *Yes, We Sang, Songs of the Ghettos and the Concentration Camps*, (Harper and Row, New York, 1985), pp. 106–107.

37 Adolf A. Berman, *Miyimei haMahteret*, (From the days of the underground) Tel Aviv, (1971): „Shira Min haTeom; Dappim le Hekker haShoah ve haMered“ (Poetry from the abyss; Pages on the Research for the Holocaust and the Revolt“) (Hotzaat Menorah, 1971), pp. 289–298.

dying. Of course, there were many other roles: for instance, there were work songs which remind us of the songs of the black slaves in America. There were songs of faith and songs of anger and angst that expressed many dilemmas and questions relating to G'd. There were cabaret songs for the cabaret performances organised in the ghettos, including the Warsaw and Vilna ghettos, or in transit camps such as the Westerbork camp in Holland. Some of these songs were simply descriptions of daily life, some of them were incredibly humorous. There were songs of hope and combat sung by the partisans in the ghettos and in the forests throughout Europe. It is beyond the scope of this article to completely analyse all the roles of the songs during the Holocaust. First and foremost, however, and through many of these songs, the Jews, even if unconsciously, expressed their humaneness, and maintained a sense of the source of life within themselves. I think that this is of the utmost importance for music therapists to understand. It is a complex process: finding the appropriate words to describe an experience that seems beyond description, adapting these words to a familiar melody chosen due to a more or less remote connection with the new words, and then singing this song to those surrounding you or singing them to yourself, in order to actually feel *alive*. The links between the acts of writing songs and singing songs alone or in a group, as well as singing in order to transfer information, or to maintain a feeling of being alive, is fundamental. It can be said that during any given time the Jews were in danger of losing their integrity, the songs and the singing helped them in remaining whole as individuals and as a community.

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