

STRINGS OF HOPE: THE MEANINGS OF THE VIOLIN
IN JEWISH AND HOLOCAUST HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the impact of orchestra music, specifically the violin, in concentration camps during the era of Nazi rule. What impact did the violin have on Jewish music and culture prior to Nazi domination? How did the Nazis use instrumental music to manage of the camps and control the lives of prisoners? How did the music prove to be a means of defiance against Nazi power? In an era when Nazis stripped Jews of their belongings, what did simply possessing a musical instrument mean to Jewish musicians? This study places the violin at the center of Holocaust inquiry and at the intersection of music history and Jewish history. I examine a broad body of primary sources from autobiographies to art and oral histories to photographs utilizing textual, material, and visual methods of analysis.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Science, have examined a thesis titled “Strings of Hope: The Meanings of the Violin in Jewish and Holocaust History,” presented by Tracy M. Cobden, a candidate for the Master of Arts Degree, and certifying that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1. Alexander Stupel brings his violin in preparation for deportation	12
2. Birkenau camp orchestra plays in the presence of an SS officer.....	15
3. Max Beker was the concertmaster standing to the left of the conductor.....	17
4. Marching to work with orchestra accompaniment	19
5. Orchestra playing as prisoners return from work details to the camp	20
6. An orchestra escorts prisoners destined for execution	22
7. Orchestra at the Janowska Camp	23
8. Henry Rosner's Guaragnini violin	32

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT iii

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS v

*STRINGS OF HOPE: THE MEANINGS OF THE VIOLIN IN JEWISH
AND HOLOCAUST HISTORY*..... 1

VITA 40

Introduction

At the age of four, Shony Braun lost his way while walking with his parents in the Romanian forest. Luckily, a woman found the lost little boy and she safely escorted him back to her house. For three days, Shony listened enthusiastically to music played on a violin. Once at home again, Shony Braun spent the next nine years practicing the violin, the instrument he loved to play. At age 13, Shony again found himself in dire circumstances. In Dachau, a Schutzstaffel, or SS officer, ordered him and other Jewish violinists to audition for their lives. After the SS killed the first two musicians on the spot, a *kapo*, a prisoner assigned by the SS to a supervisory role, handed the violin to the young Braun. Although shaking with fear that he too would be shot, Braun drew the bow across the strings of the instrument he tucked under his chin. The SS appreciated his performance and let him live. To Braun who narrated his story of survival more than a half century later, his God-given violin had saved his life.¹ This story raises a number of questions about music and the Holocaust: What role did music play in the lives of other Jewish musicians in concentration camps? What had music meant to the prewar Jewish community? What did music mean to German SS officers? What purpose did music serve in concentration camps? What did music mean to Jewish survivors?

This essay examines how music – particularly violin music that assumed a central role in prewar Jewish culture – helped Shony Braun and other Jewish musicians in Nazi camp orchestras to survive the Holocaust. Historians, musicologists, and other scholars who have examined Holocaust era musicians have argued that music benefitted prisoners

¹ "Oral History: Sandor (Shony) Alex Braun." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. January 1, 1990. Accessed April 2, 2015. http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_oi.php?MediaId=1211.

physically, mentally, and spiritually. In *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, Joseph Moreno examined music as a form of therapy for prisoners and perpetrators alike. In Violins of Hope: Violins of the Holocaust, James A. Grymes focused on the violin, but emphasized life outside of concentration camps. In Music in the Holocaust, Shirli Gilbert concentrated on music as a communal experience to gain a better understanding of the victims' experiences. However useful their insights, none have focused attention on the role that the violin in particular played in the Nazi concentration camps themselves. In what ways did the violin simultaneously serve as an implement of submission by the SS and as an instrument of survival to Jews? Unlike previous works, this study places orchestra music, particularly the violin, at the center of Holocaust inquiry and at the intersection of music history and Jewish history. I argue that the violin served as a weapon of control and as a defense against death. I examine a broad body of primary sources from autobiographies to art and oral histories to photographs utilizing textual, material, and visual methods of analysis. I trace the meaning of music in Jewish life, the use of music by Nazis, how music enabled Jewish prisoners to cope in the camps and later on, as survivors of the Holocaust.

The Meaning of Music and the Violin in Jewish Life and Antisemitic Resistance

In *Did Jews Invent the Violin?* (2009), Roger Prior argues that Jews invented the modern violin that has played a part in Jewish culture for centuries. Following the Spanish Inquisition, which led to the expulsion of the Jewish population, the violin appeared in Italy where many Jews sought refuge from antisemitism.² The violin continued to accompany

² Elana Estrin, "Did Jews Invent The Violin?" *Jerusalem Post* (October 30, 2009): 1. Accessed March 18, 2015. <http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Features/Did-Jews-invent-the-violin>

diasporic Jews for whom the instrument proved well suited for social mobility and acculturation.³ String instruments, like the violin, also “have a certain intensity and passion, and capture the feelings of the heart in a way that’s intense and immediate” explains ethnomusicologist, Alexander Knapp.⁴ Israeli violinists Hagai Shaham suggests it is this “‘intensity and passion’ of the violin” that explains why it is so “well suited to Jewish music.”⁵

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the violin continued to provide many European Jews with a source of power and hope. While antisemitism had limited job opportunities for Jews, the violin opened up options for the employment of musicians.⁶ In cafes, clubs, and orchestras, violins dominated musical performances. For Russian Jews like Vadim Gluzman, the violin afforded a way for getting out of the *shtetl*, a traditional Eastern Europe Jewish villages. As Gluzman explains: “If you were accepted into the St. Petersburg Conservatory that was your way into the big city. That was the way for the [musicians] and their families to move and have the legal right to bigger cities.”⁷ Thus by the mid 1910s, Jews constituted nearly half of the students at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and eighty percent of those at the Odessa Conservatory.⁸ Jewish violinist Berel Beker studied at the St.

³ Ibid., 1.

⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁸ Frances Padorr Brent. *The Lost Cellos of Lev Aronson*. (New York: Atlas & Publishers, 2009) 20.

Petersburg Conservatory and went on to serve as the conductor of the Russian Czar's brass band.⁹ Berel's son Max explained that, "with a position like that, the family enjoyed a good life."¹⁰ Although the violin provided Jewish musicians with access to European high culture, some people viewed them as a destructive influence. In the Soviet Union, for example, Russians blamed Jews for preventing the development of "true" Russian music.¹¹

In Germany, music helped establish a sense of national pride among Jews and served as a means for assimilation until the Nazis came to power. In 1933, the Nazis established the Reichsmusikkammer, meaning the Reich Music Chamber, which supervised all professional musical activities in Germany.¹² The Reichsmusikkammer's impact reached from concert halls to radio programs and from schools into homes.¹³ Nazis prohibited Jewish musicians and composers from taking part in the Reichsmusikkammer and sought to promote "good German music" that conveyed German values and cultural identity. They suppressed "degenerate music" by disparaging Jewish composers. According to Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Minister of Propaganda who founded the chamber, "the purer the blood of the

⁹ Sonia Pauline Beker. *Symphony on Fire: A Story of Music and Spiritual Resistance During the Holocaust*. (New Milford, NJ: Wordsmithy, 2007) 79.

¹⁰ Ibid., 79.

¹¹ James Loeffler. "Richard Wagner's "Jewish Music": Antisemitism and Aesthetics in Modern Jewish Culture." *Jewish Social Studies* 15, no. 2 (2009),13.

¹² Joshua Jacobson. "Music in the Holocaust." *The Choral Journal* 36, no. 5 (2015), 11.

¹³ Irene Heskes. *Passport to Jewish Music Its History, Traditions, and Culture*. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994) 155.

community of the Volk, the greater art will be.”¹⁴ Believing that “National Socialism is not just the political and social conscience of the nation, but also the cultural conscience,”¹⁵ Nazis systematically fired Jewish music teachers, performers, and composers. Nazis also banned music written by Jewish composers or composers believed to be pro-Jewish.¹⁶ Songs by Jewish musicians could no longer be played on the radio and their records could no longer be purchased in stores.¹⁷ Because so many Jewish musicians played the violin, the music community immediately felt the impact of their removal. Consequently, the violin sections of all German orchestras shrank in size until Aryans took over these positions replacing their Jewish neighbors.¹⁸

A watershed moment of antisemitic bias against Jewish music in Germany dates back to 1850, when Richard Wagner published “Das Judentum in Music” in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. Wagner argued that because Jews could not understand Christian music they could not comprehend Europe’s deep cultural heritage.¹⁹ Describing synagogue music as a travesty, Wagner rhetorically asked, “Who has been seized with a feeling of the greatest repulsion or horror mingled with absurdity at hearing a senseless and irritating gurgle, yodel, and cackle

¹⁴ Michael H. Kater. *Music and Nazism: Art Under Tyranny, 1933-1945*. (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 2002) 65.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁶ Heskes. *Passport to Jewish Music*, 155.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁸ James A. Grymes. *Violins of Hope: Violins of the Holocaust, Instruments of Hope and Liberation in Mankind's Darkest Hour*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014) 20.

¹⁹ Jacobson. “Music in the Holocaust,” 10.

which no caricature could make more repugnant?"²⁰ Furthermore, he asserted Jews could not present "themselves as artists because of their appearance, speech, and, particularly, their singing."²¹ Wagner also erroneously believed that Jews conspired to achieve domination of the opera and theater. Jewish conductors selected Jewish music to be performed by Jewish musicians. Jewish music critics then published laudatory reviews that unfairly swayed public opinion.²² Wagner found himself in competition with Jewish composers and he did not like it. Wagner suggested in order to achieve "a higher evolution of our nobler human qualities," either the removal of all Jews or their assimilation. Wagner reflected that he did not know how practical the first solution would be "for this would require forces whose presence are unknown to [me]."²³

In order to combat antisemitism in the West, turn-of-the-century Jewish authors published books and pamphlets that presented Jews as a positive force in music culture. By the mid-1930s, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith in New York published a series of pamphlets titled "Jews in Music" claiming "that of every twelve musical artists, vocalists, violinists, and conductors, eight are descendants of the people of Israel."²⁴ They also asserted

²⁰ Albert Goldman. ed. *Wagner on Music and Drama: A Compendium of Richard Wagner's Prose Works*. (New York: Dutton, 1964) 51.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

²² Jacobson, "Music in the Holocaust," 11.

²³ Goldman, *Wagner on Music*, 55.

²⁴ Maurice Alterman and Celia Krieger. "Jews in Music." *Fireside Discussion Group XVI* (1936) 3.

the “violin virtuosity has become almost synonymous with Jewish musical genius.”²⁵ The pamphlet included a two-page list of seventy-two Jewish violinists, who had influenced high culture in the Western World. While these pamphlets reasoned that Jews helped improve society, antisemites argued that these same Jewish achievements and contributions undermined true European culture.²⁶

Despite the growing antisemitism in Germany, Kurt Singer, a Jewish musician and conductor successfully convinced the Nazis in 1933 to permit the establishment of the Jewish Cultural League. Singer believed that the 175,000 Jews living in Berlin could support their own cultural activities. In this way, they could help maintain Jewish cultural identity and provide Jewish musicians, actors, and lecturers with much-needed employment.²⁷ Singer saw the League as a compromise that, on the one hand, accepted the exclusion of Jews from German cultural activities while on the other, permitted Germany’s diverse Jewish populations to come together in a unique organization.²⁸ Yet the League had no choice but to follow the strict guidelines imposed by Nazi officials. The staff, as well as the audience, had to be exclusively Jewish. The Cultural League could not advertise performances and all materials performed or presented by the League had to be approved in advance by the German Interior Minister.

²⁵ Ibid., 3.

²⁶ Sander Gilman. "Einstein's Violin: Jews and the Performances of Identity." *Modern Judaism* 25, no. 3 (2005), 223.

²⁷ Grymes, *Violins of Hope*, 22.

²⁸ Michael Hass. *Forbidden Music: The Jewish Composers Banned by the Nazis* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2013) 232.

Other Jewish communities established similar branches of the League in various parts of Germany by accommodating to the demands of Hans Hinkel, a Nazi official in the Reich Ministry for the People's Enlightenment and Propaganda. In a letter written by Hinkel dated June 19, 1934, he explained the primary purpose for the League included "the easier supervision and the concentration of Jews in an organization where Jews will 'make art' only for Jews." Hinkel also granted permission for the League's existence for foreign policy reasons. Hinkel realized he had a good propaganda tool on his hands. Nazis used the Leagues to prove to international observers, like the International Red Cross, that they treated Jews in a civil manner.²⁹

The Use of Music by the Nazis in Concentration Camps

From labor camps to prisoner of war camps and transit camps to extermination camps; Nazis organized musical ensembles in the various concentration camps they established across Europe. Polish Jewish violinist and Auschwitz camp orchestra leader, Szymon Laks, never doubted that Germans loved music and he said their "insistence on having music at a place like Auschwitz is only one example of this passion."³⁰ Before prisoner orchestras dominated Nazi camps, the Nazis stationed SS music corps in many concentration camps, although the repertoire of these largely consisted of military music.³¹ Camp ensembles made up of inmates had a much more varied repertoire.

²⁹ Ibid., 67.

³⁰ Szymon Laks. *Music of Another World*. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989) 69.

³¹ John Eckhard. "Music and Concentration Camps: An Approximation." *Journal of Musicological Research* 20 (2001): 282.

At first instrumental music accompanied collective singing, prisoner arrivals, and roll calls in the camps. In 1933, the Nazis established camp orchestras in Breslau-Dürrgoy, Hohnstein, Sonneburg,³² and Oranienburg.³³ The Sturmabteilung, or SA, ran Oranienburg, a political prisoner camp, until it closed in 1935. Commandant Werner Schäfer, himself a musician, established the orchestra. His father had also been a high-ranking army musician.³⁴ An SA propaganda film from Oranienburg shows daily life in the camp; roll call, working, and eating. In this short 77-second silent film, a small group of men sitting on the ground relaxing suddenly rush to roll call. One can assume that the musicians – the men holding violins, mandolins, and guitars – played for roll call, a common occurrence in Nazi camps.³⁵

After the Nazis reorganization of the camp system starting in 1936, the only camps with organized orchestras included Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, and Dachau.³⁶ After the war began and camp populations expanded, the number of orchestras increased. Auschwitz had an orchestra dating back to 1941 when the Nazis arrested an entire Polish radio orchestra mid-performance and sent them to Auschwitz. At first, the Nazis prohibited Jews from being part of the orchestra. During the summer of 1942, SS Unterscharführer Michael Wolf

³² Guido Fackler. "Cultural Behavior and the Invention of Traditions: Music and the Musical Practice in Early Concentration Camps, 1933-6/7." *Journal of Contemporary History* 45, no. 3 (2010), 622.

³³ *Ibid.*, 622.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ "Oranienburg Camp." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed June 7, 2015.

³⁶ Guido Fackler. "Music in Concentration Camps 1933–1945." *Music and Politics* 1 (2000), 7.

established an orchestra in Birkenau and allowed Jews to join the ensemble. By the spring of 1943, Maria Madel, head of the women's camp, established the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz to help further her own career by demonstrating her level of culture and influence.³⁷ This orchestra also included Jewish members.

Orchestras consisted of amateur and professional musicians and camp officials often found musicians through word of mouth. While playing bridge with this block leader in Auschwitz one evening, for example, Szymon Laks mentioned in conversation that he played the violin. The block leader responded, "tomorrow you'll stay in the barracks [instead of reporting for work detail] and I'll take you over to one of the orchestras."³⁸ At Auschwitz, prisoners had to pass an audition before Nazis assigned Jewish musicians to an orchestra.³⁹ Sometimes Nazis sought out specific musicians upon their arrival at a camp. When violinist Otto Sattler arrived at Auschwitz from Theresienstadt, the Nazis welcomed him with extra rations, cigarettes, and an assignment to a special, less crowded, barracks.⁴⁰ When Jewish trumpeter Lex van Weren arrived, the Nazis rewarded him with barrack's duty and he avoided much harsher work in the Jawischowitz coal mine.⁴¹ The Nazis gave these

³⁷ Richard Newman and Karen Kirtley. *Alma Rose: Vienna to Auschwitz*. (Portland, OR.: Amadeus Press, 2000) 228.

³⁸ Laks, *Music of Another World*, 32.

³⁹ Grymes, *Violins of Hope*, 116.

⁴⁰ Shirli Gilbert. *Music in the Holocaust Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005) 190.

⁴¹ Hermann Langbein. *People in Auschwitz*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) 128.

musicians perks because they were celebrities the Nazis knew before the war and having these celebrities be part of their orchestras elevated the Nazis to a more cultured status.

Early on, Nazis allocated money for orchestras to buy instruments and scores. Later, Nazis simply confiscated instruments and scores and handed them over to orchestras.⁴² Jews brought many musical instruments into the camps with them on prisoner transports. Prisoners packed their most valued possessions. This often included musical instruments. This is demonstrated in a photograph of Alexander Stupel, a famous German-Jewish violinist who is preparing for transport (Fig.1). He is wearing his winter coat, hat and boots and carries his bags, an enamel pot and violin.⁴³ Stupel may not have known his destination, but he brought his precious violin with him. For musician Tadeusz Jawor, a trombonist, having his own instrument proved a condition for joining the orchestra at Auschwitz. On a few rare occasions, the SS allowed non-Jewish orchestra members to write to family or friends back home so they might send them their personal instruments.⁴⁴ Max Beker, in a German POW camp, purchased an instrument. Beker recalled POWs made “three Marks for...work on arbeitscommando [or forced labor], so all the boys contributed thirty or forty Marks and gave me the money.”⁴⁵ Beker purchase a violin from an Austrian he had befriended outside the

⁴² Heskes, *Passport to Jewish Music*, 158.

⁴³ Alexander (Shmaya) Stupel, a Well-known German-Jewish Violinist and a Member of the Kovno Ghetto Orchestra, Stands outside with His Instrument Case." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed April 1, 2015.

⁴⁴ Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*, 178.

⁴⁵ Beker, *Symphony on Fire*, 98.

camp. "It was not a Stradivarius, but it was a violin," he recalled.⁴⁶ SS officers also confiscated additional instruments from the communities surrounding the concentration camps.⁴⁷



Figure 1: Alexander Stupel brings his violin in preparation for deportation
Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

For the Nazis leadership, the concentration camp musical ensembles elevated their status. As some camp commandants formed camp orchestras, other commandants followed suit.⁴⁸ It provided Nazis with the opportunity to present themselves as cultured members of German society. Various ensembles, ranging in size and musical make-up, often played at birthday parties for members of the SS and their families. The ensembles performed on Christian holidays and German state holidays, like Hitler's birthday.⁴⁹ At Auschwitz,

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Grymes, *Violins of Hope*, 116.

⁴⁸ Fackler, "Music in Concentration Camps 1933–1945," 14.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 10.

commandant Rudolph Höss used the orchestra to entertain camp guests and family members. Three camp musicians, including violinist Louis Banet, played at Dr. Joseph Mengele's birthday party at Auschwitz in 1943. The Jewish musicians sat in a location where they could be heard but not seen by the partygoers.⁵⁰ Amon Goeth, commandant at Plaszow, forced camp musicians, like violinists Henry Rosner, to entertain at parties held in his private home at Plaszow.⁵¹ Demonstrating culture and status proved vital for these officers but their means of demonstrating their standing relied on the talent of Jewish musicians.

For SS officers and guards who attended orchestra concerts at Auschwitz, on Sunday afternoons and on holidays, music provided comfort.⁵² Musicologist James A. Grymes argues that the "concerts lent a sense of normalcy, decency, and even nobility to working in the camps."⁵³ SS officer Johann Paul Kremer wrote "This Sunday afternoon from 3p.m. till 6p.m. I listened to the prisoners' orchestra in glorious sunshine."⁵⁴ Professor of music therapy, Joseph Moreno argues that music served as a form of therapy for the SS officers. It allowed time for the SS to have a drink, relax, and unwind after a long week of work. "Perhaps the music somehow supported their denial, distracting them from their own

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Joseph Moreno. "Orpheus in Hell: Music and Therapy in the Holocaust." *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 2015, 7.

⁵² Grymes. *Violins of Hope*, 117.

⁵³ Ibid., 118.

⁵⁴ Jadwiga Ska and Danuta Czech. *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS: Höss, Broad, Kremer*. 2d ed. (Oświęcim: Publications of Państwowe Muzeum, 1978).

behavior and the reality of what was before them.”⁵⁵ One musician at the time explained that music probably made the prisoner selection at extermination camps more bearable for the SS who determined who would be sent to work and who would be killed. Dr. Joseph Mengele often performed his experiments with orchestra accompaniment.⁵⁶ Jewish violinist Henry Rosner and his brother played lullabies at Amon Goeth’s bedside in Plaszow as Goeth drifted off to sleep. Rosner believed that listening to the music helped to ease Goeth’s conscience after his camp killing sprees.⁵⁷

The SS officers also fraternized with Jewish camp musicians even though Nazi’s banned any music produced by what they deemed “degenerate” members of society; this included jazz, cabaret, and music by Jewish composers. Nevertheless, Nazi party official, SS-Unterscharführer, Perry Broad loved jazz and visited the musicians’ barracks at Auschwitz to enjoy private concerts. On occasion, Broad would even play accordion with the group.⁵⁸ At Auschwitz, the SS enjoyed regular performances by a jazz group led by famous trumpeter Lex Van Weren.⁵⁹ SS official Unterscharführer Heinrick Bischof liked Jewish music and visited the prisoner barracks to hear it performed. Other musicians stood lookout during these private concerts. When Nazi officials learned of Bischof’s escapades, however, his

⁵⁵ Moreno, “Orpheus in Hell,” 7.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 176.

⁵⁷ Elinor J. Brecher. *Schindler's Legacy: True Stories of the List Survivors*. (New York, N.Y.: Dutton, 1994) 1.

⁵⁸ Laks, *Music of Another World*, 81.

⁵⁹ Grymes, *Violins of Hope*, 130.

commanding officer shipped him to the frontlines as punishment.⁶⁰ For the Nazis, the SS fraternizing with the musicians proved a potential threat to order. If the SS saw these musicians as people, would they be able to carry out their order for extermination of the undesirables?

Francois Reisz, a prisoner, in his own act of defiance secretly sketched musicians during the time he spent in Birkenau.⁶¹ In one image a musical ensemble of over a dozen musicians played inside of a prison barracks while other prisoners rested, possibly after a long day of forced labor (Fig. 2). Behind the conductor, Reisz drew an SS officer dressed in a uniform sitting and listening to the music. Reisz's rendered the scene using hard lines and sharp angles to depict the barrack structure that contained them. While the musicians are somewhat more three-dimensional, the other men sitting on stacked bunks are dark, faceless stick figures. Who were these men? How did they sound? What music did they play?

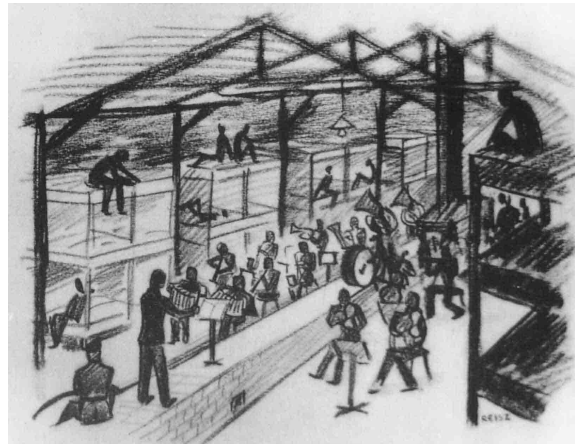


Figure 2: Birkenau camp orchestra plays in the presence of an SS officer.
Source: Music in Concentration Camps 1933–1945

⁶⁰ Laks, *Music of Another World*, 72.

⁶¹ Fackler, "Music in Concentration Camps 1933–1945," 16.

Orchestras also existed in Nazi POW camps. Jewish violinist and Polish prisoner Max Beker remembered that the camp orchestra “used to present concerts” and the camp officials “brought in some military companies from the German Army to be part of the audience” as a positive reward and to boost morale.⁶² According to Beker, the “Germans had been interested in having an orchestra because of the laws and regulations of the Geneva Convention.⁶³ When we formed the orchestra, they took us to Leipzig to buy instruments and choose sheet music.”⁶⁴ Beker, the only Jew allowed in the orchestra, believed that his violin helped save his life. During a concert, Captain Hauptman-Lise halted the concert and approached Beker. “What are you?” he demanded to know. “I’m Jüde,” Beker replied...I saw him shaking his head...then he said ‘continue, continue.’”⁶⁵ While the SS sent many Jewish POWs to extermination camps, the SS allowed Beker to stay with the orchestra. In this case the SS likely allowed Beker to stay in the orchestra for their own personal enjoyment. While Beker was allowed to live and the integrity of the orchestra was maintained, the SS challenged Nazi rule. Max Beker, a prisoner of Stalag 13, can be seen in Figure 3.⁶⁶ Beker, the concertmaster,

⁶² Beker, *Symphony on Fire*, 100.

⁶³ According to the Geneva Convention, Nazis bore responsibility for the treatment of prisoners of war under their control. Prisoners must be humanely treated and Nazis used orchestras to help demonstrate their compliance.

⁶⁴ Beker, *Symphony on Fire*, 102.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ "Concertmaster Max Beker, a Jewish Prisoner-of-war from Vilna, Performs a Solo with the Camp Orchestra under the Direction of Ferdinand Carrion, a Belgian Prisoner-of-war, for Infirmary Patients." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed May 4, 2015. <http://digitalassets.ushmm.org/photoarchives/detail.aspx?id=1167259>.

stands to the left of the conductor during an outdoor performance for camp personnel and prisoners.



Figure 3: Max Beker was the concertmaster standing to the left of the conductor.
Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

In the camps, the Nazis used music for their own entertainment as well as for a means of distraction and deceit. With at least five of the orchestras established by the SS between 1940 and 1943 in Auschwitz I and Birkenau, music often distracted prisoners as they arrived and disembarked from the cattle cars. During the selection process, the orchestras often played various pieces depending upon the origin of the new arrivals; Polish music for the Poles or Hungarian music for the Hungarians. The music created an illusion of normalcy about the camps and kept the new arrivals calm, distracted and even slightly disoriented while trying to make sense of their surroundings.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Fackler, “Music in Concentration Camps 1933–1945,” 5.

Orchestras also helped contributed to a military style discipline in the camps. Each morning at roll call, and as prisoners marched to exit the camp for their forced-labor assignments, the orchestra played a military-style march. Prisoner Primo Levi recalled the orchestra tunes were “few, a dozen, and the same ones every day, morning and evening: marches and popular songs dear to every German.”⁶⁸ The music helped to demoralize the spirit and had the prisoners “marching like automatons,” Levi recalled.⁶⁹ Jerzy Brandhuber, a prisoner at Birkenau, remembered the music very differently; “the day began cheerfully, when a march rings out...in the morning.”⁷⁰ SS officer Perry Broad recalled that the orchestra “played a jolly German marching tune. It was not easy for [prisoners] to keep step...with blistered feet. If one of the prisoners failed to do this, he was mercilessly kicked or beaten in the face.”⁷¹ In another sketch by Francois Reisz, skeletal men in striped uniforms marched from the camp under the supervision of the SS and to the accompaniment of the orchestra located in the back of the scene and below the sign, *Arbeit Macht Frei*, (Fig. 4).

⁶⁸ Primo Levi. *If This Is a Man and The Truce*. (London: Abacus, 1987) 57.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁷⁰ Jerzy Brandhuber. *Hefte Von Auschwitz*. Vol. 5. Museum, 1962, 91.

⁷¹ Ska, *KL Auschwitz Seen*, 112.



Figure 4: Marching to work with orchestra accompaniment
Source: Music in Concentration Camps 1933–1945

In the evening orchestras played as workers returned from their daily work detail. Some prisoners explained that the music inspired them to say alive. As one recalled: “We could clearly hear how our colleague musicians spoke to us in masterly fashion on the instruments...Don’t give up brothers! Not all of us will perish!”⁷² Other prisoners saw the orchestras in a different light. In another image by Reisz, the orchestra plays in the foreground as prisoners transport the sick, injured, or dead back to camp on carts and stretchers, a dark cloud shrouds the camp buildings (Fig. 5). Prisoner Olga Lengyel remembered how, “the funeral procession was greeted with gay orchestra music.”⁷³ Survivor Benjamin Jacobs found such scenes of orchestras composed of prisoners nothing short of grotesque. “They followed his [the conductor’s] baton as if they were playing in a symphony

⁷² Grymes, *Violins of Hope*, 145.

⁷³ Olga Lengyel. *Five Chimneys*. (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1995) 131.

orchestra.⁷⁴ For many prisoners, the reality of death and suffering transposed against the beauty of orchestra music proved too much to emotionally bare.



Figure 5: Orchestra playing as prisoners return from work details to the camp
Source: Music in Concentration Camps 1933–1945

For the SS, music at Auschwitz also satisfied sadistic goals. According to historian Guido Fackler, Nazis made use of music “as part of the process of de-culturalization...[and] as a daily form of degradation and dehumanization.”⁷⁵ The SS ordered violinist Szymon Laks and the orchestra to play outside of an infirmary at Auschwitz on Christmas Eve of 1943.⁷⁶ The orchestra played a series of Christmas carols including *Silent Night*. Some of the doctors and nurses enjoyed the music, but Laks could hear patients sobbing from inside the

⁷⁴ Benjamin Jacobs. *The Dentist of Auschwitz a Memoir*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995) 122.

⁷⁵ Fackler, *Cultural Behavior*, 625.

⁷⁶ Laks, *Music of Another World*, 99.

infirmary. Laks recalled one patient yell: “Enough of this! Stop! Be gone! Clear out! Let us croak in peace.”⁷⁷

According to violinist Syzmon Laks, “music...became entangled in the hellish enterprise of the extermination of millions of people, and even took an active part in extermination.”⁷⁸ Such was the case in October of 1944, when the SS sent several orchestra members to the crematorium where they performed a two-hour concert for members of the Sonderkommando, the group of prisoners assigned to dispose of the bodies of other murdered prisoners. The SS rewarded the workers with a concert before sending them to the gas chambers.⁷⁹ In Auschwitz, a Jewish violinist named Leon Bloorman recalled how he played his violin while the SS hanged a man. Leon assumed the prisoner to be a Frenchman because the SS ordered him to play *La Marseillaise* during the execution. “Other than being a Jew, I don’t know what crime he committed.”⁸⁰ Jewish violinist Louis Bannet recalled when a prisoner tried to escape and the SS caught him, killed him, and tied his body to a chair in the midst of the orchestra. The SS did this as a deterrent to others who may wish to try and escape, but prisoners had to look at his corpse as they performed.⁸¹ On the far left in Figure 6 Hans Bonarwitz is standing in front of a large box that had been part of his escape plot. After eighteen days of freedom the SS captured him, locked him inside the crate and placed him on

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Moreno, “Orpheus in Hell,” 8.

⁷⁹ Grymes, *Violins of Hope*, 135.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 127.

⁸¹ Moreno, “Orpheus in Hell,” 9.

display in the camp before the rest of the prisoners. Leading the procession past a gauntlet of fellow prisoners is the orchestra that played “Beer Barrel Polka” among other tunes on the way to Hans’ execution in Mathausen on July 30, 1942.⁸² In many of these instances, musicians became part of the extermination process of their inmates. Unfortunately, the musicians’ participation helped prove their value and saves the lives of at least some of the musicians.



Figure 6: An orchestra escorts prisoners destined for execution
Source: Yad Vashem

For many musicians the orchestras or musical ensemble provided a false security. For unsatisfactory performances, musicians could face punishment. In the Main Camp Orchestra at Auschwitz, the Nazis maintained a high turnover rate. Over 800 musicians cycled through the ensemble that reached a peak of 120 members during the run of its existence.⁸³ When the SS no longer needed certain musicians they too faced death.

⁸² “Mauthausen Austria, An Orchestra Escorts Prisoners Destined for Execution.” 30/07/1942. – Yad Vashem Photo Archive. Accessed June 9, 2015.

⁸³ Grymes, *Violins of Hope*, 119.

“An Honorable Act of Defiance” the Use of Music by Jewish Prisoners

Tangible benefits existed for the Jewish prisoners who played in musical ensembles. While many orchestra members wore the prison stripes, others donned formal wear. The well-dressed orchestra members at the Janowska concentration camp in Poland, seen in Figure 7, wore suit and boots during performances.⁸⁴ These uniforms would have been warmer during the winter and would have provided greater protection from the elements. The women’s orchestra at Auschwitz also had special uniforms for concerts. While these shirts, blouses, stockings and jackets, elevated the commandant’s grandeur, they also protected the women from cold temperatures faced by other prisoners.⁸⁵



Figure 7: Orchestra at the Janowska Camp
Source: United State Holocaust Memorial Museum

⁸⁴ "Members of the Camp Orchestra Perform in Front of a Barracks in the Janowska Concentration Camp." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed May 4, 2015. <http://digitalassets.ushmm.org/photoarchives/detail.aspx?id=5048>.

⁸⁵ Newman, *Alma Rose*, 251.

In addition to superior clothing, orchestra members also received better food rations. According to violinist Shony Braun he “was... able to entertain the SS in exchange for food, providing the margin of strength that enabled [him] to survive until his liberation.”⁸⁶ Survivor Charlotte Delbo remembered that “when the commandant ordered [the orchestra] to play for him, he had an extra loaf of bread passed out to the musicians.”⁸⁷ Szymon Laks also reflected on how kapos rewarded musicians with food as well as cigarettes that they traded on the black market in Auschwitz.⁸⁸ According to an orchestra member Anita Laker-Wallfisch, workers in Kanada, a place where confiscated prisoner belongings were stored in Birkenau, had “access to anything [people] wanted at a price – and that price was bread.”⁸⁹ In Auschwitz, bread could be traded for personal items like soap and toothbrushes. Bread could also be traded for warmer clothing, under garments, nightgowns, and canned food. According to survivor Helen “Zippy” Spitzer, “In Auschwitz, diamonds, even by the handful, could not save a person from death...bread was far more precious.”⁹⁰ According to Fenia Felelon, while the members of the all-female orchestra received double portions of bread, they still suffered from hunger.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Moreno, “Orpheus in Hell,” 9.

⁸⁷ Newman, *Alma Rose*, 267.

⁸⁸ Laks, *Music of Another World*, 96.

⁸⁹ Newman, *Alma Rose*, 253.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 249.

According to Felton, members of Birkenau's all-female orchestra received other material benefits as well. She had her own bed and sufficient clothing including socks and under-garments. Women's orchestra members also received mattress pads, sheets, and blankets. The barracks also included an iron stove that kept the instruments in tune and the musicians warm. Conditions for female orchestra members were considerably better than the average prisoner or even other male orchestra members. Life in Auschwitz, for those not killed upon arrival, ranged from a few weeks to a few months. At its height, the orchestra reached between forty and forty-five members.⁹²

Musicians forced to play marching music as prisoners left for their work in the mornings and returned in the afternoon received slightly lighter work details. Permitted to return instruments to the barracks, orchestra members reported to work after regular prisoners. And orchestra members returned from work earlier than other prisoners in order to retrieve their instruments for the evening prisoner march back into the camp.⁹³ Some musicians avoided tougher work details as the SS granted them time to copy sheet music and repair orchestra instruments. Szymon Laks, as conductor of the main Auschwitz orchestra, convinced the SS that having the orchestra play in a blizzard would damage the musical instruments. In doing so, Laks helped establish a precedent: orchestras did not perform in poor weather.⁹⁴ The members of the all female orchestra in Auschwitz practiced all day entirely avoiding hard labor. To be sure, performing in the camp orchestra constituted a type

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Grymes, *Violins of Hope*, 125.

⁹⁴ Laks, *Music of Another World*, 61.

of forced labor; but in some instances, this labor helped to sustain life while surrounded by death.⁹⁵

Playing in the orchestra also provided a means for musicians to cope and find a motivation to continue fighting for their lives. According to musician Paul (Rabinowitsch) Sandford, “if your life really hangs by a thread, then expressing yourself and being able to ... absorb culture is more important, almost more important than food.”⁹⁶ Playing in the orchestra enabled musicians to maintain contact with culture and the beauty of the outside world. An Auschwitz survivor explained that the “Germans put barbed wire all around the camp so that no one will escape, but I just close my eyes [play my music] and I’m on the other side of the wire ... they have no idea we are all fugitives.”⁹⁷ While many professional musicians admit that the level of the orchestras’ performances failed to meet their high standards, it proved good enough for the SS. Nevertheless, prisoners felt constant pressure to perform well or else. Alma Roza, violinist and the conductor of the Auschwitz all female orchestra, reminded her musicians that “- if we are not going to play well, they will send us to the gas chambers.”⁹⁸ With that kind of pressure, Elisak Kleinova, a prisoner of the Terezin

⁹⁵ Gabriele Knapp. "Music as a Means of Survival: The Women's Orchestra in Auschwitz." Women's UN Report Network. June 1, 2009. Accessed April 3, 2015, 1.

⁹⁶ Patrick Henry. ed. *Jewish Resistance Against the Nazis*. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2014) 319.

⁹⁷ Grymes, *Violins of Hope*, 118.

⁹⁸ Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*, 195.

concentration camp, noted that it is “amazing that people are able to create such beauty while surrounded by such atrocities.”⁹⁹

Joseph Moreno, director of the Moreno Institute for Creative Arts Therapies, argues that, for the orchestra members, playing music proved to be therapeutic. The hours they spent rehearsing had a positive emotional impact on them.¹⁰⁰ The SS usually prohibited prisoners from gathering in a camp for any type of communal activity they perceived as potential threats to their authority. Creating music in groups helped musicians to find consolation through imagination and creativity. One camp survivor recalled that music “was the only elements of beauty in their circus of death...a reminder that there still was something such as family, home, and artistry outside Auschwitz.”¹⁰¹ According to James M. Glass, in Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust, musicians found “refuge inside the self and within the community, where the self’s identify as a person and a Jew could not be touched or degraded by German barbarism.”¹⁰²

The Nazis controlled orchestra members whose creativity they sought to constrain. Usually the orchestra played for the SS officers or for other inmates within the camp. German tunes most often filled the air. Some SS officers sought out musical compositions that prisoners brought into the camps. The musicians themselves struggled to recall music from memory and even composed some original scores. Famous conductor and composer,

⁹⁹ Jacobson, “Music in the Holocaust,” 9.

¹⁰⁰ Moreno, “Orpheus in Hell,” 8.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² James M. Glass. *Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust: Moral Uses of Violence and Will*. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 104.

Herbert Zipper, composed music in his head during his long hours of forced labor. He scribbled his compositions on strips of paper torn from the margins of Nazi newspapers.¹⁰³ Zipper said, “ – the arts in general have the power to keep you not just alive, but to make your life meaningful even under the most dreadful circumstances.”¹⁰⁴

For the musicians, practicing, performing and even composing music provided emotional comfort and spiritual resistance. Ensembles would sometimes take the risk of practicing secretly in barracks or lavatories. They also played concerts for small groups of prisoners and rotated through the barracks in short shifts so as many prisoners would hear the concert as possible. In this way they could enjoy music they wanted to play even though they faced torture or even death for these clandestine activities. Violinist and composer Szymon Laks recalled finding a crumpled piece of paper on the ground in Birkenau. It turned out to be a piece of sheet music, with only a melody, entitled “Three Warsaw Polonaises of the 18th Century, author: Anonymous.”¹⁰⁵ Making use of the melody, Laks wrote additional parts for other instruments in a small ensemble. The orchestra practiced the piece in secret. To his Polish colleagues, Laks’ actions were an honorable act of defiance.¹⁰⁶

Music served musicians as a premise for defiance and as a means for small acts of manipulation. During his time at Dachau, Herbert Zipper convinced two inmates who had been instrument makers in their former lives to secretly construct instruments out of stolen

¹⁰³ Grymes, *Violins of Hope*, 68.

¹⁰⁴ Henry, *Jewish Resistance*, 324.

¹⁰⁵ Laks, *Music of Another World*, 65.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

wood in the camp woodshop where they worked. At a party hosted by Amon Goeth in Plaszow, Henry Rosner recalled how an ensemble had inadvertently undermined the mood of the Nazi patrons who grew more somber after the tenth performance of *Gloomy Sunday*, a rather sad tune about a man who had died from a broken heart, repeatedly requested by an SS officer. “I felt so happy that I hurt a German,” recalled Rosner¹⁰⁷ On more than one occasion, the Auschwitz Main Camp Orchestra played marches by John Philip Sousa. Music by the enemy, the Americans, remained strictly prohibited, but sometimes went unnoticed. Musicians used it as a way to inform fellow prisoners about rumors of Allied victories and they needed to continue to hold on and fight to survive. All of these small acts of defiance enabled Jewish musicians to retain their sense of self.

Violins: Lost, Maintained and Recouped

Maintaining possession of personal objects during the Holocaust proved difficult if not impossible. The Nazis stripped prisoners of their possessions. Everything from clothes to photographs to family mementoes were taken. This helped strip prisoners of their identity which proved detrimental to prisoners and helpful to the Nazis. Most musicians lost possession of their instruments that had monetary value for the Nazis. For the Nazis, plunder proved a great motive. Adolf Hitler, in fact, appointed a group of musicologists to identify rare musical instruments they confiscated from undesirable members of German society. “The deliberate spiritual battle [of confiscating of instruments]...is a necessary part of the war effort,” wrote Alfred Rosenberg, head of the Nazi Foreign Policy Office, in a memo

¹⁰⁷ Beker, *Symphony on Fire*, 12.

blaming Jews for the war against the Reich¹⁰⁸ Over five years, the SS confiscated instruments from schools, museums, and individual musicians intended for the university Hitler wanted to establish in his hometown - Linz, Austria. Possessing some of the finest crafted instruments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would be a crowning achievement for the Nazis. Trained musicologists identified instruments and kept detailed records of the models and the years the instruments were crafted. The Allies unknowingly destroyed most of the records as they recaptured Europe with the exception of a list housed in Paris. According to these records, the crown jewel of the collection proved to be a 1742 Guarneri del Gesu which today would be worth millions of dollars.¹⁰⁹

Unfortunately, the Allies never returned most of the Nazis confiscated violins to their original owners. Those who survived often lacked adequate documentation that proved ownership and most violins also lacked traceable markings. As years passed, many violinists only had a vague memory of what their instruments looked like. Musicians struggled to identify their violins and thus reclaiming them proved almost impossible. These violins represented millions of dollars in losses for Jewish musicians. Before World War II, a musician hid his 1719 Stradivarius violin behind a display of X-Ray equipment in the Polish National Museum in Warsaw.¹¹⁰ In 1940, the museum fell under the control of SS officer Theodor Blank who found the instrument and traded his own personal, worthless violin for

¹⁰⁸ Howard Reich and Gaines William. "How Nazis Targeted World's Finest Violins." *Chicago Tribune*, August 19, 2001. Accessed April 1, 2015. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2001-08-19/news/0108190236_1_violins-holocaust-era-instruments/ 2.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

the valuable Stradivarius.¹¹¹ After Blank died, the U.S. military went to his home and retrieved the violin. After surviving the Holocaust, Francis Akos went back to his hometown but friends “weren’t around anymore.” None of them had survived; the musical instruments had been destroyed by the SS. Everything was gone.¹¹²

While the Nazis stripped Jews of the vast majority of their possessions, deprived Jews of a sense of well-being, personhood, and stability, some survived — along with their instruments. Henry Rosner played for Dr. Joseph Mengele and Amon Goeth in order to survive and save his son from extermination. Rosner told Goeth, “As long as you keep my son alive, I will play for you.”¹¹³ Being able to hold onto his 1890 Guadagnini violin impacted the rest of his life. While in a Displaced Persons Camp in Munich after the war, Rosner played his violin as part of an ensemble. When Rosner and his family moved to the United States, there existed no doubt how Rosner would support his family. Rosner brought his Guadagnini violin with him to the United States and he joined the musicians’ union and got his first full time job about a month later at a Russian nightclub in New York City. He eventually got a job playing music at a Polish restaurant where he would work until he retired in his eighties.¹¹⁴ Henry’s son, Alex, acknowledged his father’s ability to play violin and speak the international language of music played a vital role in his dad’s ability to support the

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Jacobson, "Music in the Holocaust," 2.

¹¹⁴ Brecher, *Schindler's Legacy*, 20.

family after the war.¹¹⁵ Rosner donated the Guadagnini violin, to the United States Memorial Museum in 1994 (Fig. 8).¹¹⁶



Figure 8: Henry Rosner’s Guadagnini violin
Source: United State Holocaust Memorial Museum

Bernard Gotfryd survived the Holocaust along with the eighteenth-century violin bequeathed to him by his grandfather in 1938. He had buried it in the backyard of a Polish, non-Jewish friend of his fathers in order to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Nazis. Gotfryd returned to Poland decades later to reclaim the instrument that “had the richest, sweetest tone I had ever heard.”¹¹⁷

Gotfryd’s family violin, along with others, constituted a type of ethical will. Ethical wills date back to Biblical times in Jewish history and constituted a way for one generation to

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 19.

¹¹⁶ "A 19th-century Italian Violin Owned by Henry Rosner, a Professional Jewish Violinist from Krakow Who Was Saved by Oskar Schindler during World War II." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed May 4, 2015. <http://digitalassets.ushmm.org/photoarchives/detail.aspx?id=1091383>.

¹¹⁷ Bernard Gotfryd. *Anton the Dove Fancier: And Other Tales of the Holocaust*. Expanded ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) 35.

pass down lessons to future generations. Ethical wills “expressed direction of fathers to their children and of aged teachers to their disciples.”¹¹⁸ Historically people wrote these documents as a person got closer to death or before they would begin a dangerous journey.¹¹⁹ Ethical wills, to quote author I. Abrahams, proved a means of “gaining insight into a father’s heart.”¹²⁰ Gotfryd’s prized possession carried a message from his grandfather to future generations. In a public appearance at St. John’s University in March of 2007, Gotfryd said that in a concentration camp “one thing you can still do is dream. Without hope you wouldn’t stand a chance. Dreams keep a spark of hope alive.”¹²¹ This violin survived as a message of hope for future generations.

Conclusion

There is an old Jewish saying — “*How do you know how many Jewish men live in a house? You count the number of violins on the walls.*”¹²² For Jews, the violin constituted a key element of their culture dating back to the sixteenth century. The violin linked them to their faith and their cultural identity. As the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933 and antisemitism overtook the country, Jewish musicians struggled to survive financially and culturally. The SS used music in the camps for their own personal self-interest, but also as a

¹¹⁸ I. Abrahams. "Jewish Ethical Wills." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 3, no. 3 (2015), 436.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 439.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 440.

¹²¹ Christina Heiser. "Holocaust Survivor Tells His Story to SJU Students." *Torch*, March 21, 2001, 2.

¹²² Brent. *The Lost Cellos*, 21.

means of manipulating those inside the camps too. Music by Jewish violinists played a powerful role in the functioning of those camps. At first, recalled Jewish violinist Paul Kling, “the Germans tolerated...music, they then encouraged it, and finally they demanded it.”¹²³ Jews used music to gain access to the privileged class within the camps so they could reap tangible benefits to help them stay alive day to day. Simply possessing and being able to maintain possession of an instrument had the potential to save a life during the Holocaust. Holding on to that instrument, proved an important link to all that being Jewish stood for. These violins constituted a physical link to life; a life lived or a life lost.

At the intersection of music, Jewish history, and the Holocaust we see the power of the violin. When it came to music, Nazi power held sway. Yet, Jewish musicians had power too. Why some people may view camp musicians as accomplices in a world of unimaginable choices and consequences, Jewish musicians did what they had to do. Holocaust survivor and author Moshe Avital said it best, “the philosophy of the suffering Jew was to first of all to survive, not only to survive but to survive with dignity as a human being.”¹²⁴

¹²³ Jacobson, “Music in the Holocaust,” 16.

¹²⁴ Moshe Avital. "The Role of Songs and Music During the Holocaust." *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy* 2011/2012 (2012): 51-60.

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In 1997, Mrs. Cobden began her teaching career at Summit Hill Junior High in Frankfort, Illinois where she taught Social Studies. After moving to Kansas City in 2002, and worked at Raytown High School as a Social Studies instructor. Mrs. Cobden returned to school in 2003 at Baker University in Overland Park, Kansas. She earned a Master of Liberal Arts degree with an emphasis in History in December, 2004.

Through a Teaching American History Grant, Mrs. Cobden began work on a Masters of Arts in History at the University of Missouri - Kansas City in 2011. Upon completion of her degree she plans on continuing her teaching career and pursuing her doctorate at the University of Missouri - Kansas City.