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*Reigning Sound in Postwar Europe:
Holocaust Remembrance Music and the Healing Nature of Song*

ABSTRACT: *Focusing on Germany and Poland from 1945 until the present, this article examines Holocaust remembrance music, what it has done for survivors, its appropriation as a political tool, and its preservation of the voices of those who have been lost to history. It argues that Holocaust remembrance music has been most influential in its healing ability.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; Holocaust; concentration camps; Germany; Poland; music; Yiddish music; klezmer; Aleksander Kulisiewicz; Lin Jaldati*

Introduction

Next to a pile of dead bodies in the pathology lab of the Buchenwald concentration camp, Jozef Kropinski (1913-1970), an inmate, composed his music at night by candlelight. As the Allies drew near in April 1945, the Nazis evacuated the camp, forcing its inmates on a “death march.” Kropinski was able to smuggle out hundreds of pieces of music, but most of his compositions, written on paper, had to be used for fire to keep him and his fellow prisoners alive. Decades later, Kropinski’s music was revived by Francesco Lotoro, an Italian musician who has spent the last thirty years traveling the world, “recovering, performing, and in some cases, finishing pieces of works composed” by concentration camp inmates.¹ For Waldemar Kropinski, Jozef’s son, the preservation of these songs has given his father’s music and story a new life. It serves as an example of the significance of remembrance. Stories like this offer unique insights into the experience of camp life during the Holocaust, but they also afford an opportunity for reconciliation.

Thanks to the efforts of Francesco Lotoro and others, the lives of many Holocaust victims have been remembered and honored. However, relatively little research has been conducted on the music that survives from the Holocaust, and much of what has been collected and performed since the end of World War II to commemorate this tragic event remains unfamiliar to the general public. During the war, the songs created by prisoners in ghettos and concentration camps offered inmates a temporary escape from the horrors of daily life, provided much-needed entertainment, and also acted as tools of resistance. In the aftermath of the war, a few researchers and scholars realized the importance of collecting and recording these songs from survivors before they would be lost, while others created their own music as a means of Holocaust remembrance. As an undertaking that has been historically important to some and profoundly personal to others, certain aspects of this music have even become politicized. Focusing on Germany and Poland from 1945 until the present, this article examines Holocaust remembrance music, what it has done for survivors, its appropriation as a political tool, and its

¹ Jon Wertheim, “Prisoners in Nazi Concentration Camps Made Music: Now it’s Being Discovered and Performed,” December 15, 2019, *60 Minutes*, [online](#), accessed June 16, 2022.

preservation of the voices of those who have been lost to history. It argues that Holocaust remembrance music has been most influential in its healing ability.

Much of the discussion concerning the musical commemoration of the Holocaust focuses on the music itself as a historical instrument. This is valuable because it reveals how music is uniquely connected to memory, but it leaves the question of how this commemoration has evolved over time largely unexamined. In her article, "Buried Monuments: Yiddish Songs and Holocaust Memory," Shirli Gilbert considers these pieces of music as "memorial objects," arguing that they actually have two functions, namely, "as historical sources that would enable future researchers to reconstruct what had happened, and as artifacts that could perhaps preserve the voices and thereby the memory of the victims."² Barbara Milewski's chapter, "Remembering the Concentration Camps," examines the life of Aleksander Kulisiewicz (1918-1982), a survivor who, after the war, collected and performed the music of camp musicians along with his own original pieces; Milewski focuses on how, "through his songs, [Kulisiewicz] sought to contribute constructive dialogue among nations and across different generations, believing this to be essential for lasting peace."³ Gilbert, Milewski, and others have underscored the significance of Holocaust music as a storytelling device, all the while revealing how these songs have been employed and understood in the postwar years as reminders of the horrors that mankind is capable of.

From the perspective of cultural history, this article examines how the impact of Holocaust music has changed over time, while the music itself has maintained its healing effect on those who feel connected to this past event. Oral histories, as well as interviews with survivors and researchers, offer first-hand insights into what this music has meant throughout the postwar years, while letters, articles, recorded songs, and scholarly analyses provide additional context.

I. Strength

Nothing speaks more to the inherent strength of Holocaust music than the existence of the Ex-Concentration Camp Orchestra. A touring ensemble of surviving Jewish musicians in postwar Germany, this group had its roots in Lithuania's Kovno Ghetto during the war. After liberation, they were sent to the St. Ottilien Monastery in Germany to recover. Initially naming themselves the St. Ottilien Orchestra in recognition of this, they first performed in May 1945 on the monastery's hospital lawn before a bewildered crowd of 400 patients who were still recovering from their traumatic Holocaust experience. One American soldier, U.S. Army journalist Robert L. Hilliard, recalled the emotional performance,

² Shirli Gilbert, "Buried Monuments: Yiddish Songs and Holocaust Memory," *History Workshop Journal* 66 (Autumn 2008): 107-128, here 107.

³ Barbara Milewski, "Remembering the Concentration Camps: Aleksander Kulisiewicz and His Concerts of Prisoners' Songs in the Federal Republic of Germany," in *Dislocated Memories: Jews, Music, and Postwar German Culture*, ed. Tina Frühauf and Lily E. Hirsch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 141-160, here 147.

noting how the audience of survivors appeared to be in a state of disbelief, and “[w]hen the concert ended most people were crying, few more openly than I.”⁴

The orchestra wore customized “striped concentration camp uniforms” and performed songs from the ghettos and camps that referenced loss, homelessness, and the “larger trauma of forced displacement.”⁵ Their sets also featured a range of classical pieces, from Mozart to music that the Nazis considered “degenerate” (a term the Nazis used to describe art that was believed to be un-German, subversive, or threatening to the ideals of Nazism). Their dramatic stage design included barbed-wire fences and oversized Stars of David with the word “Jude” (i.e., “Jew”) printed on them. Following recovery, the ensemble was moved to the Landsberg Displaced Persons (DPs)⁶ camp in the American Zone of occupied Germany. It was here that the group changed its name to the Ex-Concentration Camp Orchestra, performing its first Landsberg concert in August 1945.⁷

Their concerts in a number of DP camps in the American Zone of occupied Germany between 1945 and 1949 represented a reclamation of humanity. In her article, “Displaced Music: The Ex-Concentration Camp Orchestra in Postwar Germany,” Abby Anderton notes that, “[r]ather than shying away from memories of their internment, the orchestra made every effort to establish a culture of shared experience with audience members.”⁸ The solidarity of this “shared experience” empowered survivors to confront the past environment and reality of the concentration camps. With their program and stage setup, these powerful performances allowed both the musicians and those in attendance to reject victimhood and served as cathartic moments for those who had survived the horrors of the Holocaust, proving their resolve after having faced extermination. DP events were viewed as essential to the morale of survivors; they were employed by Allied authorities to “make them happy;” and they were deemed crucial for any hope of recovery.⁹ Thus, the performances were part of a vital

⁴ Bret Werb, “‘Vu ahin zol ikh geyn?’ Music Culture of Jewish Displaced Persons,” in *Dislocated Memories: Jews, Music, and Postwar German Culture*, ed. Tina Frühauf and Lily E. Hirsch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 75-96, here 86-87; Robert L. Hilliard, *Surviving the Americans: The Continued Struggle of the Jews after Liberation* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997), 9-10.

⁵ Abby Anderton, “Displaced Music: The Ex-Concentration Camp Orchestra in Postwar Germany,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 34, no. 2 (2015): 141-149, here 141-145.

⁶ After World War II, those who had been forced to leave their homes because of the war were labeled “displaced persons” (DPs). After the war, camps were set up and administered by the Allied authorities in Europe to temporarily house DPs as part of the relocation process. These camps were known as DP camps. For more information on the musical activities of DPs and DP camps, see Anderton, “Displaced Music,” 141-159.

⁷ Anderton, “Displaced Music,” 145-146.

⁸ Anderton, “Displaced Music,” 142, 144.

⁹ Anderton, “Displaced Music,” 148.

community effort to facilitate a return to normalcy, especially for Jewish musicians—a reminder that they had not been forgotten.¹⁰

Further endeavors toward such empowerment were Leonard Bernstein's performances in postwar Germany, which provided much-needed entertainment for a country trying to rebuild both physically and spiritually. Bernstein, a Jewish American composer, arrived in Germany in 1948. Initially invited to perform with the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra, Bernstein added two more concert dates to his tour after hearing about the orchestra made up of former concentration camp inmates. In a letter to his secretary, Helen Coates, he wrote that "[t]here has been much trouble and fuss over this, but I insisted. I may have to hire the orchestra myself, but it's worth it."¹¹ Performing with the Ex-Concentration Camp Orchestra and the Munich Philharmonic presented Bernstein with two different experiences which, taken together, demonstrated music's ability to restore.

Recounting his experience with the Munich ensemble, Bernstein was delighted at the reception he received from both the orchestra and the audience, telling Helen Coates, "I had three obstacles to overcome—youth, Americanism, and Jewishness [...] There's nothing more satisfying than an opera-house full of Germans screaming with excitement."¹² That Bernstein, a Jew, was cheered on by crowds of Germans just a few years after the Holocaust is remarkable. On the other hand, performing with the Ex-Concentration Camp Orchestra in the DP camps of Landsberg and Feldafing, Bernstein experienced another kind of feeling: "I was received by parades of kids with flowers, and the greatest honors. I conducted a 20-piece concentration-camp orchestra [...] and cried my heart out. I can't tell this to you now—it's too deep and involved."¹³ These performances proved to be very emotional for Bernstein, as the honor of performing with survivors for survivors moved him to tears. In a bleak, postwar environment, these concerts helped foster a survivor community "bound by common experiences and traumas."¹⁴

Apart from their immediate impact on both musicians and audience members, these concerts also served to bridge the gap between Jewish DPs and German civilians. Despite initial concerns from the military, warning that these two groups "should never attend the same concerts due to ill will," survivors and civilians often attended the same performances. Instead of hostility, observers were amazed at the intermingling. The Munich ensemble, made up of German civilians,

¹⁰ Shirli Gilbert, "'We Long for a Home': Songs and Survival Among Jewish Displaced Persons," in *"We Are Here": New Approaches to Jewish Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany*, ed. Avinoam J. Patt and Michael Berkowitz (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 289-307, here 291.

¹¹ "Letter from Leonard Bernstein to Helen Coates," May 5, 1948, *Library of Congress*, [online](#), accessed June 16, 2022.

¹² "Letter from Leonard Bernstein to Helen Coates," May 11, 1948, *Library of Congress*, [online](#), accessed June 16, 2022.

¹³ "Letter from Leonard Bernstein to Helen Coates," May 11, 1948.

¹⁴ Anderton, "Displaced Music," 159.

attended both DP concerts, and Bernstein felt that this represented a “kind of expiation,” showing that they “wanted to atone somehow.”¹⁵ The fact that only three years after the war Jewish survivors and German civilians could amicably gather in the same space is a significant comment on music’s ability to facilitate reconciliation. It was a crucial step forward in the aftermath of the Holocaust, bringing people together at a time when the memory of war and genocide was still fresh in the Jewish and German consciousness. As for the Ex-Concentration Camp Orchestra, they adopted their final name—the Representative Concert Orchestra of the She’erit Hapletah (i.e., “Surviving Remnant”)—before disbanding in 1949.¹⁶

While the DP concerts demonstrate the power of musical performance, early recordings of concentration camp songs further reveal how Holocaust music could serve as an instrument of strength. After the war, there were a number of efforts to record ghetto and concentration camp music. Israel Kaplan and the Central Historical Commission of Liberated Germany, for example, took an early interest in recording songs and folklore from survivors in DP camps throughout postwar Europe.¹⁷ While their efforts are important, the work of David Boder in the summer of 1946 reveals a different take on this endeavor. Boder, a professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology, felt that this was an opportunity to use his magnetic wire recorder to interview DPs. He believed that this method would be useful in overcoming the “multiplicity of languages” and allow survivors to tell their stories in their own words, later to be translated into English.¹⁸

Boder initially asked the interviewees to sing as a way of easing them into telling their stories. However, after recording them singing, upon playback, he noted that “the wonder of hearing their own voices recorded was boundless.”¹⁹ As he realized the significance of this, Boder pursued song recording as an endeavor separate from the interviews, thus uncovering different insights into the prisoner experience. Combining the power of song with its remarkable ability to help survivors tell their stories, makes Boder’s contribution unique. Recording music had started as a byproduct of his objective, but once he understood music’s full potential, he had no choice but to make it a substantial part of his work.

One individual, Israel Unikowski, came to his interview with notes, nervously “hoping to read from a prepared text,” something Boder believed would “quash spontaneity and thus presumably limit the interview’s range.”²⁰ However, after he had been asked to sing (and had, in fact, done so), Unikowski was able to relax

¹⁵ Anderton, “Displaced Music,” 154, 156, 157.

¹⁶ Anderton, “Displaced Music,” 151, 158.

¹⁷ Alan Rosen, *The Wonder of Their Voices: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews of David Boder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 106-107.

¹⁸ David P. Boder, *I Did Not Interview the Dead* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949), xi-xii.

¹⁹ Cited in Rosen, *Wonder of Their Voices*, 108.

²⁰ Rosen, *Wonder of Their Voices*, 110.

and set his notes aside, making his interview much more conversational.²¹ Another interviewee, Bella Zgnilek, willingly sang part of a song she had learned from her camp, damning the “German swines,” but was reluctant to sing one specific verse. Boder was eventually able to sway her to recount it: “In front of the barracks in Gabesdorf / Stands a barbed fence around the yard / And the girls with sorrowful faces [or: sit sorrowfully] / while outside freedom glitters / Good-bye Sudetenland.” While this verse deals with the reality of camp life, the loss of one’s home, and perhaps Zgnilek’s own experience, the verse she had sung first had been easier to deliver because it expressed triumph over her oppressors. The second verse, on the other hand, was too personal and traumatic to recite. Through song, though, Zgnilek was able to confront her fear, revealing the power she could harness from the music to confront and conquer her painful memory.

Both cases show how music has the ability to reinvigorate. Singing calmed Unikowski and gave him the fortitude to speak about his experience in an unrestrained, informal manner. Similarly, singing enabled Zgnilek to face the trauma of her Holocaust experience. Whether songs allow individuals to simply let their guard down or provide a temporary escape from reality, the process of singing, in these cases, did something for these individuals. In *Music, Music Therapy and Trauma: International Perspectives*, Julie P. Sutton argues that music gives trauma victims the gift of autonomy, which enables them to make their own choices and take control of their surroundings, resulting in new confidence.²² Confronting the past through song provides survivors with the courage to overcome their fears and tell their stories, showing the restorative power of music.

II. Politicization

During the Cold War, Holocaust music continued to heal painful memories. At the same time, traditional Jewish songs were being politicized amidst the rivalry between East and West. The political appropriation of Yiddish music coincided with the deactivation of DP camps in the late 1940s. Yet while the Cold War contributed to the growing division between the Jewish and communist identities in institutional politics, music served as a link between the two, connecting them for the purposes of Soviet propaganda.²³ In this postwar environment, Lin Jaldati (1912-1988), a Jewish communist, Holocaust survivor, and musician, used Yiddish music as a commemorative tool. Like the Ex-Concentration Camp Orchestra, Jaldati performed in DP camps and around Europe, building on the “shared experience” with her audience of fellow survivors. Her path deviated from that of

²¹ Israel Unikowski, interview by David P. Boder, August 2, 1946, Fontenay-aux-Roses, France,” *Illinois Institute of Technology*, [online](#), accessed June 16, 2022.

²² Julie P. Sutton, “Trauma in Context,” in *Music, Music Therapy and Trauma: International Perspectives*, ed. Julie P. Sutton (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2002), 21-40, here 29.

²³ David Shneer, “Ebehard Rebling, Lin Jaldati, and Yiddish Music in East Germany, 1949-1962,” in *Dislocated Memories: Jews, Music, and Postwar German Culture*, ed. Tina Frühauf and Lily E. Hirsch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 161-186, here 167, 169.

other performers, though, as her Jewish communist identity created a unique opportunity in the eyes of the German Democratic Republic (GDR).²⁴

Jaldati had performed Yiddish music as an inmate at Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. After liberation, she resumed performing in 1946, but the increasing political divide between East and West gradually transformed her ideological approach to music. By the late 1940s, her communist identity was becoming more prominent, resulting in a unique blending of worlds in this polarized political and cultural climate, while still acknowledging the significance of Yiddish music and Jewish culture. In 1951, urged to relocate from Holland to the GDR to help “rebuild” the new Germany through her music and motivated in part by her socialist interests to contribute to the new state, Jaldati moved to East Germany with her husband, Eberhard Rebling. Both became involved in the state’s power structure, and Rebling received a high-ranking position in the GDR’s musical establishment. During this time, politics began to play a bigger role in Jaldati’s musical career, yet despite the era’s heightened anti-Semitism, she never sacrificed her Jewish identity for state ideology. Instead of being forced into the state’s socialist musical framework, she flourished as a Yiddish musician and never abandoned her Jewish community. In the end, the GDR promoted Jaldati as a Jew above all else, rarely mentioning her communist affiliation and, instead, using her as an example of “tolerance” in the context of the East’s anti-Semitism.²⁵

Lin Jaldati’s case shows that, despite the increasing divide between the communist and Jewish identities, Yiddish music and political identity could actually be synergetic for some. Naturally, the GDR used this music as propaganda to promote a more humane image of the communist state. Meanwhile, Jaldati used this opportunity to promote Holocaust remembrance and to draw attention to the Jewish suffering in a political context. However the state truly felt about her heritage, she saw a blending of the two identities as a way for healing and rebuilding during the postwar years. In the communist political landscape, Yiddish music was seen as a tool to bring people together for the ultimate goal of commemoration and understanding. While her political counterparts were becoming increasingly intolerant, Jaldati’s loyalty was to the music and to the shared remembrance of her heritage and the Holocaust.

East and West continued this trend of musical politicization over the following decades, which saw the consciousness of a younger generation coming of age. In the 1960s, the West German student movement made the connection between Yiddish music and political identity. Being the first to protest against their parents’ generation for having been active “or at least complicit in Nazi atrocities,” these

²⁴ Shneer, “Ebehard Rebling,” 166. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) was the official name of East Germany, part of the Eastern Bloc controlled by the former Soviet Union. For more information on the politicization of Yiddish music in the GDR, see Shneer, “Ebehard Rebling.”

²⁵ Shneer, “Ebehard Rebling,” 168-172; Jaldati Rebling, interview by Allie Brudney, March 11, 2014, *Yiddish Book Center*, Berlin, Germany, [online](#), accessed June 16, 2022.

young Germans were decried as *Nestbeschmutzer* (nest-foulers) for “digging up the past.” Their activities spread, though, and eventually led to the process of *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* (reappraisal of the past).²⁶ In 1963, Peter Rohland became the first German singer to attempt a “gesture of reconciliation,” criticizing the Nazis’ persecution of the Jews and the Holocaust. Left-wing artists embraced Yiddish music, identified as *klezmer* in this context, as a protest against their parent’s generation.²⁷ Throughout eastern Europe, the anti-Semitic communist state looked at this music with suspicion as being “Zionistic.” However, as *klezmer* is a musical tradition associated with Yiddish-speaking eastern European Jews, and Jewish music could in no way be part of National Socialism, the East ironically “needed Yiddish song as proof of its antifascist identity.”²⁸

Amid the chaos of *klezmer*’s politicization, one camp survivor sought to use Yiddish music to spread a message of peace and hope. Aleksander Kulisiewicz, a Polish political prisoner from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, had written music and memorized songs of fellow inmates during the Holocaust. After the war, under the supervision of the Polish Communist Party, he was invited to perform his “repertoire of prisoner’s songs on the road” as a remembrance of the past. While being promoted by the communist state, it was actually the “anti-authoritarian” counterculture movement’s support that allowed for his message to be heard on a grand scale. During the 1960s, Kulisiewicz became a central player on the folk revival concert circuit, performing at festivals in Europe that promoted antifascism and “peace between East and West.”²⁹ Through his performances, he used the politicization of Yiddish music to promote peace and the commemoration of victims of the Holocaust, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

While most festivals were in line with Kulisiewicz’s message—“leftist, antifascist, and peace seeking”—one major festival in West Germany, Burg Waldeck, became increasingly political. Like the youth movements of the United States in the mid-to-late-1960s, Burg Waldeck and the German counterculture movement began to deviate from social activism and shifted their focus against war, specifically the nuclear arms race.³⁰ In East Germany, too, “people were protesting against nuclear weapons with Yiddish songs,” which were truly becoming a “language of resistance.”³¹ Yet, between these politically charged youth movements and the communist agenda of the East, Kulisiewicz was still

²⁶ Lizzie Widdicombe, “What Can We Learn from the Germans about Confronting Our History,” *The New Yorker*, October 21, 2019.

²⁷ Magdalena Waligórska, *Klezmer’s Afterlife: An Ethnography of the Jewish Music Revival in Poland and Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 180; Jalda Rebling, interview by Allie Brudney.

²⁸ Aaron Eckstaedt, “Yiddish Folk Music as a Marker of Identity in Postwar Germany,” *European Judaism* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 37-47, here 39, 41.

²⁹ Milewski, “Remembering the Concentration Camps,” 141-142, 146, 148.

³⁰ Milewski, “Remembering the Concentration Camps,” 148-149.

³¹ Jalda Rebling, interview by Allie Brudney.

able to adhere to his self-appointed purpose. The political climate, with its promotion of an array of leftist causes and messages, embraced his performances, which focused on remembrance as the key to harmony. For Kulisiewicz, healing the wounds of past injustice was essential for building a better future. As notions of peace were spreading eastward, his message similarly resonated with the counterculture's movement against the "ever-present, continuous threat of war."³²

When the Cold War began to wane, *klezmer* and Yiddish music became even more intertwined and politicized, creating a sort of hybrid genre linked to German and Polish identity. In fact, it was *klezmer's* political angle that kept it afloat in the mainstream culture of the East and aided in its revival during the 1980s. *Klezmer* continued to exist as an ambiguous genre that represented the Jewish heritage, antitotalitarian voices, as well as communist propaganda for East Germany's antifascist stance. Since the fall of communism, Jews and non-Jews in Germany and Poland have been debating *klezmer's* true significance and who it actually represents. At the heart of these debates lies the political question.

In Poland, for example, *klezmer* bands often perform at political events that are separate from any Jewish affiliation but attempt to use the music as a symbol of tolerance. While *klezmer* is not exclusively Jewish, its historical ties to Yiddish culture elicit strong feelings in the Jewish community regarding any political "appropriation." Therefore, other bands have made a deliberate attempt to avoid being "manipulated" for political gain, and efforts continue to transcend politics and simply promote *klezmer's* role in the "healing process between Jews and Germans." While this idea has been challenged as a "philosophy of easy forgiveness," it cannot be dismissed entirely.³³

Magdalena Waligorska has argued that, "[i]f the culture of the other serves a reflection of the collective self, it is not the factual that matters but the functional."³⁴ Listening to music is a personal, subjective experience that no label can predetermine, which is why songs move people in different ways. By politicizing *klezmer*, those feeling a connection to the Holocaust through music are able to embrace its ability to help them heal. Speaking of this embrace: from 1948 until 1988, Kristallnacht anniversary concerts were sanctioned by the East as communist propaganda, claiming that anti-Semitism was a product of German capitalism, and that the GDR could guarantee its Jewish citizens the "security that Western states were unable to offer."³⁵ Thus, the communist state accepted this music as an "antifascist" tool and propagated it as proof of its perceived superiority over the West. However, while it was allowed for political gain, people could, in turn, use it to honor and celebrate the Jewish heritage as it remained a constant reminder throughout the East and embodied in musical commemoration.

³² Milewski, "Remembering the Concentration Camps," 151.

³³ Waligórska, *Klezmer's Afterlife*, 180, 183, 188, 189, 191, for the quotes in this paragraph.

³⁴ Waligórska, *Klezmer's Afterlife*, 200.

³⁵ Waligórska, *Klezmer's Afterlife*, 182.

III. Preservation

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the story of Holocaust remembrance music continued with the preservation of camp and ghetto songs, now decades after liberation, thereby maintaining the healing process by breathing new life into forgotten victims of the past. In addition to the early field recordings of David Boder, others, such as Serge Kacserginski, also made significant contributions to the preservation of camp music and Jewish culture. Kacserginski's documentation of prisoner songs culminated in the influential 1948 anthology *Lider fun di getos un lagern* ("Songs from the Ghettos and Camps"), which has helped pave the way for like-minded musicologists and researchers. With the dwindling of Yiddish speakers since World War II, Kacserginski's anthology has become more than just a songbook; it has greatly enhanced the conservation of eastern European Jewish culture.³⁶ These early efforts, recognized as a retrieval of "Jewish cultural artifacts," marked the beginning of what would become a decades-long journey to recover the lost music of the Holocaust.³⁷ As the years went on, the purpose and meaning behind this venture evolved from person to person.

Returning briefly to Aleksander Kulisiewicz, his case reveals some of the personal significance that collecting these songs can have. Kulisiewicz's astonishing memory played a major part in his preservation efforts, as he dictated "[f]rom his hospital bed after the war [...] some 716 typed pages of poems and songs that he had heard and memorized in Sachsenhausen."³⁸ His concerts celebrated the victims and musicians he had known and heard of during the Holocaust, showcasing their songs as well as his own original works. After his festival days during the 1960s, the 1970s saw Kulisiewicz continue his earlier efforts of archiving, "collecting ever-more songs, poetry, artwork, and stories of the concentration camps."³⁹ On a personal level, Kulisiewicz's song collection and performances were meant to honor victims of the Holocaust, but his ultimate goal was to spread a message of peace and hope for the future. His personal experience as a camp prisoner gave him the unique perspective to raise awareness and warn future generations of mankind's terrifying capabilities.⁴⁰

What these preservation efforts "mean" has changed over time, especially as the past becomes more distant, and song collections, alternatively, become ways to connect with the voices of deceased and forgotten victims. Those who feel a direct link to the Holocaust have also found solace in the resurrection of

³⁶ Bret Werb, "Yiddish Songs of the Shoah: A Source Study Based on the Collections of Shmerke Kacserginski" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2014), ii, 195-196.

³⁷ David E. Fishman, *The Book Smugglers: Partisans, Poets, and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis* (Lebanon: ForeEdge, 2017), 148, 158.

³⁸ Peter Wortsman, "Aleksander Kulisiewicz: A Singer From Hell," *Sing Out! The Folk Song Magazine* 26 no. 3 (1977): 14-15.

³⁹ Milewski, "Remembering the Concentration Camps," 151.

⁴⁰ Milewski, "Remembering the Concentration Camps," 152.

concentration camp music. Continuing the efforts of people like Aleksander Kulisiewicz and Serge Kaczerzinski, Francesco Lotoro has carried the torch of ghetto and concentration camp song preservation, recovering and reciting pieces that were written in the camps. Lotoro has been on this journey since 1988, and – to this day – he sees it as a personal calling of sorts, something he cannot quit or conclude until he feels the journey is complete.⁴¹ He has already uncovered around 8,000 musical scores, but his work is important beyond the preservation of historical “artifacts;” he is also helping to preserve the memory and, in turn, the lives of victims.⁴² Among the millions of people killed in the Holocaust, “an entire generation of talented musicians, composers and virtuosos perished,” leaving behind only their music.⁴³ Their songs live on and provide proof that they actually existed. Their music provides insight into who they were and assigns them a more tangible identity. Without individuals like Francesco Lotoro, the Nazis – to a certain extent – would have succeeded in the extermination of an entire generation, yet these victims now live on in their music.

Aside from memorializing those who perished in the Holocaust, the preservation and performance of this music has also offered a sense of peace to the survivors and their relatives. In the 1990s, Lotoro formed an orchestra to perform the music he was uncovering which he called “concentrationary music.” The respective repertoire included well-known pieces from prominent composers, as well as those from unknown artists that had been lost or forgotten until Lotoro “deciphered, transcribed and arranged them.” Lotoro has also collected music from “Quakers, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Roma (Gypsies), political prisoners, homosexuals, and others held in camps and prisons as far afield as Asia,” including songs written by American GIs held in Japanese POW camps, as well as songs written by German prisoners held in Allied POW camps.⁴⁴

Lotoro’s work has provided a valuable service. For some, hearing these songs has had a profound effect, allowing painful memories of lost relatives to heal. For instance, Jozef Kropinski’s son Waldemar has described what it means to him to hear his father’s songs: “I thought it was something that was of no interest to anyone because my father was already dead and not even one camp composition of his was performed in Poland [...]. It was a very personal feeling. Even today, although I know these pieces, I go back and listen to them often, and every time I hear them, I cry.”⁴⁵ Apart from his father’s music, nothing can provide this experience for Waldemar. His father’s journey was almost lost to history, and his

⁴¹ Wertheim, “Prisoners in Nazi Concentration Camps Made Music.”

⁴² Julia Rampen, “The Salvaged Music of the Holocaust: How a Concert Brought Lost Songs to Life,” *New Statesman* 147 no. 5, 417 (May 4, 2018): 15-16.

⁴³ Wertheim, “Prisoners in Nazi Concentration Camps Made Music.”

⁴⁴ Ruth Ellen Gruber, “Man on a Mission,” *Baltimore Jewish Times* 328 no. 5 (October 5, 2012): 41-42. The quotations in this paragraph stem from Gruber’s article.

⁴⁵ Wertheim, “Prisoners in Nazi Concentration Camps Made Music.”

father's art almost faded into obscurity. But today, Waldemer can connect with his father by listening to his songs, thanks to Francesco Lotoro.

The recording and performance of this preserved music has had a significant impact on society and Jewish culture. As made evident through the pervasiveness of its commemoration, this music has been incorporated into the healing process for survivors and the relatives of victims. Consequently, collecting and preserving these songs has become an increasingly focused effort in the Holocaust memorial community, and more and more institutions are being established to honor these lost victims. Lotoro is in the process of developing a campus in Barletta, Italy, that will include a "library, a museum, [and] a theater, and will house more than 10,000 items" he has collected.⁴⁶ *Exilarte: Zentrum für verfolgte Musik* is an organization in Vienna, Austria, set up to "recover and study" music that was banned by the Nazis; they have compiled the works of twenty composers, and they arrange performances and recordings of music to be shared with the public. Other musicians, such as James Conlon and Mark Ludwig, have undertaken similar work, organizing and performing the lost songs of concentration camp inmates.⁴⁷

While these preservation efforts largely center on honoring victims of the Holocaust, they also serve as a reminder of the world we live in, similar to Aleksander Kulisiewicz's message of remembrance. For example, in 2018, a concert at Jerusalem's International Convention Center, sponsored by a British charity, was set up to express to the world that "[a]nti-Semitism in England is a major cause for concern."⁴⁸ These types of messages are, in some way, as important as Holocaust remembrance, because they raise awareness in hopes that nothing like the Holocaust will ever happen again. Commemorative concerts can provide a unique platform to speak to the masses about important issues surrounding this tragedy. The healing process is steeped in community, and since the end of World War II, people have been coming together, in solidarity, to remember the past and champion a better future.

Conclusion

The story of Holocaust remembrance music is multifaceted. It demonstrates that, no matter what other purpose the music may be serving, it always comes back to its ability to help heal and reconcile. Beginning with musical performances by Holocaust survivors, remembrance emerged as an instrument of strength in the immediate postwar period, providing a "shared experience" for musicians and audience members. The empowerment of victims singing songs from the camps, while confronting their past, further speaks to the strength that this music was able to provide survivors after the war. During the Cold War, Yiddish music was

⁴⁶ Wertheim, "Prisoners in Nazi Concentration Camps Made Music."

⁴⁷ Milton Esterow, "Saving Music That Survived The Holocaust," *New York Times*, June 23, 2020.

⁴⁸ Rampen, "Salvaged Music," 15-16.

increasingly politicized. Consequently, Jewish suffering and Holocaust remembrance were constant reminders in both the East and the West, allowing survivors and the relatives of victims to find consolation in the musical community. More recently, preservation efforts by contemporary artists and institutions have helped foster a community of commemoration that allows a dynamic approach to understanding the past. This has created a direct link to the Holocaust, connecting loved ones to the memory of lost victims, while also raising awareness and educating people in hopes of a more harmonious existence.

During the Holocaust, music was a symbol of life and vitality, survival and defiance, existence and perseverance. Since liberation, these songs have represented an affirmation of humanity, a true affront to the Nazi's attempted "Final Solution."⁴⁹ Musical commemoration of this tragic period in history allows people to connect, remember, and honor the lives that were lost, while also learning important lessons from the past. However one looks at this music, experiencing the lives of Holocaust victims through the songs they wrote facilitates an alternative, more intimate understanding of this period's significance. This trajectory of Holocaust remembrance music reveals the healing power of song, whatever generation or decade we are in. Built around community, these efforts prove that mankind is capable of overcoming hate and fear, and while we still have a long way to go, we can always look to the power of song to find solace in the face of adversity.

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⁴⁹ The "Final Solution" was the Nazis' program for the extermination of all Jews in Europe, implemented from 1941 on. For more information on the "Final Solution," see John M. Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe*, vol. 2, *From the French Revolution to the Present*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), chapter 26.