



I'll Take You in the Orchestra Right Now. Music and Spaces of Resistance in Nazi Concentration Camps

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WER IST WALTER?

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Edited by

Elma Hašimbegović, Nicolas Moll and Ivo Pejaković

“I’ll Take You in the Orchestra Right Now”: Music and Spaces of Resistance in Nazi Concentration Camps

Élise Petit

The presence of music in concentration camps¹ was revealed as soon as 1934, when the initial accounts from freed political opponents or escapees from the first “preventive detention camps” (*Schutzhaftlager*) confirmed the use of music for coercion and propaganda purposes. They also mentioned the role played by certain songs in creating symbolic spaces of solidarity or resistance.² After the war, the violinist Szymon Laks and the saxophonist René Coudy were the first to give testimonies about the official orchestra in the men’s camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and to provide details regarding its activities.³ In the 1950s, the singer Aleksander Kulisiewicz, who survived Sachsenhausen, collected hundreds of songs from dozens of camps, and gave numerous recitals throughout the world to introduce people to this musical repertoire of spiritual resistance to the Nazi program of destruction.⁴

The role and presence of music in the concentration camp system began to draw the interest of researchers and musicians during the late 1980s. Milan Kuna published his *Musik an der Grenze des Lebens* in 1993,⁵ while Gabriele Knapp provided the first study of an Auschwitz orchestra with *Das*

1 This contribution focuses on music in concentration camps only. It does not deal with prisoner-of-war camps, internment camps or the Theresienstadt camp-ghetto, which had a specific status.

2 See, for example, *Braunbuch über Reichstagsbrand und Hitler-Terror* (Basel: Universum-Bücherei, 1933); Gerhart Seger, *Oranienburg. Erster authentischer Bericht eines aus dem Konzentrationslager Geflüchteten* (Karlsbad: Graphia, 1934), or Wolfgang Langhoff, *Die Moorsoldaten. 13 Monate Konzentrationslager. Unpolitischer Tatsachenbericht* (Zürich: Schweitzer Spiegel, 1935).

3 Szymon Laks, *Music of Another World*, trans. Chester A. Kisiel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000).

4 After his death, his archives were acquired by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC.

5 Milan Kuna, *Musik an der Grenze des Lebens. Musikerinnen und Musiker aus böhmischen Ländern in nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern und Gefängnissen*, trans. Eliška Nováková (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1993).

Frauenorchester in Auschwitz in 1996.⁶ Some years later, Guido Fackler's "*Des Lagers Stimme.*" *Musik im KZ*⁷ emerged as a referential text. Fackler's book was followed by other works, such as Gabriele Knapp's book on music in Ravensbrück,⁸ Shirli Gilbert's *Music in the Holocaust*,⁹ and Juliane Brauer's *Musik im Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen*.¹⁰ Recently, the exhibition *La musique dans les camps nazis*, which I curated at the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris from April 2023 to February 2024, offered a unique occasion to display hundreds of documents, music instruments, pictures, drawings and objects related to the uses of music in Nazi camps.¹¹

While no official document from the Third Reich has been found regarding the creation of orchestras in the camps, inmate music ensembles of various sizes were nevertheless constituted in almost every camp, on the orders of commanding officers. The primary function of a camp orchestra (*Lagerkapelle*) was to synchronise the steps of the prisoners in work units (*Kommandos*), in order to facilitate their counting as they marched from the roll call square (*Appellplatz*) to the camp gate in the morning and in the evening. The *Lagerkapelle* could also be requisitioned to entertain the SS, or to accompany punishments and executions. Music thus mainly served the Nazi system of moral and physical destruction. However, from the very first days of captivity in the camps, music, particularly collective singing, established spaces for communication and moral or artistic resistance for certain inmates.

What should be coined "resistance" when it comes to music in this context? To be sure, the forms of resistance that were possible in a concentration camp were mainly geared towards physical survival in a very existential sense. Although music could help in escaping the camp reality of fear, disease and hunger for a brief moment, it did not play a part in armed resistance. In a certain way, this kind of resistance has been considered "passive". But, as Yehuda Bauer wrote about the Jewish struggle in

6 Gabriele Knapp, *Das Frauenorchester in Auschwitz. Musikalische Zwangsarbeit und ihre Bewältigung* (Hamburg: Von Bockel Verlag, 1996).

7 Guido Fackler, "*Des Lagers Stimme.*" *Musik im KZ. Alltag und Häftlingskultur in den Konzentrationslagern 1933 bis 1936* (Bremen: Temmen, 2000).

8 Gabriele Knapp, *Frauenstimmen. Musikerinnen erinnern an Ravensbrück* (Berlin: Metropol, 2003).

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

10 Juliane Brauer, *Musik im Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen* (Berlin: Metropol, 2009).

11 "La musique dans les camps nazis", Mémorial de la Shoah, <https://expo-musique-camps-nazis.memorialdelashoah.org/>. All internet sources last accessed 1 December 2023.

ghettos: "When one refuses to budge in the face of brutal force, one does not resist passively; one resists without using force, and that is not the same thing." Instead of resistance, he preferred to use the term *Amidah*, literally "standing up against", which he explained:

It includes smuggling food into ghettos; mutual self-sacrifice within the family to avoid starvation or worse; cultural, educational, religious, and political activities taken to strengthen morale; the work of doctors, nurses, and educators to consciously maintain health and moral fiber to enable individual and group survival; and, of course, armed rebellion or the use offered (with bare hands or with "cold" weapons) against the Germans and their collaborators.¹²

These forms of what has also been called "moral" or "spiritual resistance"¹³ raise several questions.¹⁴ In *Music in the Holocaust*, Gilbert insists: "The rhetoric of spiritual resistance arguably has good intentions – above all, to counteract depictions of victims as passive, attribute some retrospective dignity to their actions, and impute meaning to their suffering. However, it also has a tendency to descend into sentimentality and mythicization."¹⁵ Furthermore, as Bauer stated: "Individual acts of resistance constitute a slippery and awkward topic, because what to include and what to exclude is difficult to determine."¹⁶ Lastly, as Lawrence Langer pointed out in his essay "Cultural Resistance to Genocide" in 1987: Whereas "resistance to Genocide, as both concept and fact, restores a measure of dignity to the

12 Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 120.

13 These terms were first used by Miriam Novitch, a Holocaust survivor and curator of the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum in Israel, from the 1950s onward. They gave way to an eponymous traveling exhibition in 1978. See the catalogue: Miriam Novitch ed., *Spiritual Resistance: Art from Concentration Camps, 1940-1945: A Selection of Drawings and Paintings from the Collection of Kibbutz Lohamei Haghetatot, Israel* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981).

14 Among the substantial literature on the subject: Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*, 1-20; Lawrence Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 51-63; Michael Marrus, "Varieties of Jewish Resistance: Some Categories and Comparisons in Historiographical Perspective", in *Major Changes within the Jewish People in the Wake of the Holocaust*, ed. Yisrael Gutman and Avital Saf (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1996), 269-299; Nechama Tec, "Resistance in Eastern Europe", in *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, ed. Walter Laqueur (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 543-550; Robert Rozett, "Jewish Resistance", in *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 341-363.

15 Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*, 7.

16 Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 119.

victim [...], it seems crucial to appreciate the limitations of an expression like ‘cultural resistance’, and not attribute to it a power it did not possess.”¹⁷

Numerous accounts written after the war by survivors mention the presence of music in concentration camps and killing centres, mainly to accompany the marching of the *Kommandos* in the morning and in the evening. Many of them also mention the power of music which, thanks to its soothing qualities, was said to have helped people get through the worst hours in the camps. These testimonies often fail to mention that music was first and foremost misused, or better said *abused*, by the perpetrators in a destructive way: While the camp orchestras sometimes did play for prisoners on Sundays, they more frequently accompanied punishments, violence and even executions.¹⁸ The music of the hit song *Tornerai* (known at the time in Germany as *Komm zurück*, Come Back), for example, accompanied the fugitive Hans Bonarewitz on 30 July 1942 as he had to “parade” through the Mauthausen camp after his capture, before being hanged the day after. The love song was chosen on purpose by the camp authorities because its lyrics alluded ironically to the situation of the fugitive, “awaited” by the inmates forced to attend this mock ceremony.¹⁹

Bearing in mind this preponderant and destructive abuse of music in Nazi concentration camps, how can we nevertheless view musical initiatives designed to momentarily “escape” from the camp, to make people forget the atrocity of their situation? Must resistance necessarily involve an active process aimed at overthrowing the Nazi system through arms or revolt? In this contribution, I will show how music could be linked to a form of “resistance” in specific places and spaces of the camps: As a means to transgressively stand up against the Nazi camps system, as “a life-affirming survival mechanism”,²⁰ but also as “a vehicle of moral and cultural sustenance”.²¹

17 Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust*, 51-53.

18 On this subject, read Élise Petit, *Des Usages destructeurs de la musique dans le système concentrationnaire nazi* (Paris: Cahiers du CRIF n°56, 2019).

19 Élise Petit, “What Do Official Photographs Tell Us About Music and Destructive Processes in the Nazi Concentration Camps?”, in *Photographs from the Camps of the Nazi Regime*, eds. Hildegard Frübis, Clara Oberle and Agnieszka Pufelska (Graz: Böhlau, 2019), 74-76.

20 Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*, 2.

21 Frieda W. Aaron, *Bearing the Unbearable. Yiddish and Polish Poetry in the Ghettos And Concentration Camps* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 71.

Musical activities in Nazi concentration camps

When concentration camps opened in 1933, the SA and the SS commanders brought their military and musical system to the camps. The orchestra was expected to promote group cohesion and to set the pace for marching to the beat. Therefore, *Lagerkapellen*, made up entirely of prisoners, came into being to accompany the marching of the *Kommandos*. Initially, the small ensembles of non-professional musicians often consisted of only three or four instruments. From 1938 onwards, some of them grew to even become full-scale symphony orchestras, as in Auschwitz I, where the orchestra numbered nearly 120 musicians from 1942 to October 1944.²² After January 1945, faced with the advance of the Allied troops and the approaching German defeat, the acceleration of the indiscriminate annihilation of all prisoners led to a reduction in the number of members, and even the demise of certain orchestras.

Besides the orchestra, vocal activity was imposed by the SS in the camps. As Arnold Schulz wrote after the war: "The prisoners had to sing new songs again and again. We had to sing on command – ordered to by someone who had harassed us all day at work. Sing with starving stomachs and parched throats. That was nerve-wracking, more than nerve-wracking."²³ *Singstunden* ("song hours") were a frequent punishment after roll call, inflicted on inmates on various pretexts. In the first camps, drill, the Hitler salute and singing of the *Horst-Wessel-Lied* and the *Deutschlandlied* were part of the "reeducation" of the political opponents.²⁴ The guards also frequently demanded that the inmates sing while they worked, which prevented them from communicating with each other. On a daily basis, first of all, all the detainees had to sing German marching songs with their *Kommandos* as soon as they passed through the gate, as stated in a document from the Natzweiler-Struthof *Kommandantur*: "All *Kommandos* with 10 prisoners or more must sing on the way to the workplace and when returning from the workplace. When leaving, the *Kommando* has to begin singing after passing the guard post at the protective custody camp. When returning, singing has to stop before reaching the guard post."²⁵

22 Jacek Lachendro, "The Orchestras in KL Auschwitz", trans. William Brand, *Auschwitz Studies* 27 (2015): 19.

23 Arnold Schulz, *Schutzhäftling 409* (Essen-Steele: Webels, 1947), 30.

24 *Braunbuch über Reichstagsbrand und Hitler-Terror*, 268, 289–290, 297.

25 Josef Kramer, "Allgemeine Hinweise über das Verhalten der Häftlinge im Schutzhaftlager bei der Arbeit und während der Freizeit!", 1942, 1.1.29.0/82126143/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives.

In a camp order drawn up by SS Buchenwald deputy commandant Arthur Rödl, it was specified that “free time in the evenings must be taken up by mending, cleaning and singing”.²⁶ This included learning and repeating the German marching songs, which everyone had to sing every day from memory and in German, whatever their nationality. In this context, many musicians were able to take advantage of the presence of musical ensembles and imposed vocal activities, to organise small events where music was devoid of any utilitarian function.

Spaces of resistance

Although music was mainly played on the order of the SS, musical events were authorised as early as 1933 in the inmate blocks during so-called “free time”, which many prisoners used to rest, clean their clothes and shoes, look for relatives in the camp, etc. Most of the concerts were organised in the evenings and on Sundays, officially to learn and rehearse the marching songs of the *Kommandos*. The authorised concerts provided “a distraction from thoughts of the impending fate of starvation”,²⁷ which weakened prisoners both physically and mentally. They also boosted morale, at least for a short time. It should be pointed out from the outset that spontaneous musical activities, be they clandestine or authorised, were not accessible to all camp inmates. Most required invitations, more or less formal, some were paid for (with camp money), and the audience was restricted by the size of the spaces in which the concerts took place. Even if some concerts were held outdoors, the vast majority of the detainees could not attend these events because they had to struggle for physical survival, and had no energy to engage with music or entertainment. Ultimately, almost all musical activities were aimed at the camp’s most privileged prisoners (*Prominenten*), which more often than not excluded Jewish inmates. In Buchenwald or Sachsenhausen, for example:

Organized music-making across the camp spectrum owed its existence, in large part, to the willingness of German political prisoners

26 Arthur Rödl, “Schutzhaftlagerbefehl”, 17 November 1937, Federal Archives/*Bundesarchiv* – BArch, NS4 Bu-31, 5.

27 Hermann E. Riemer, *Sturz ins Dunkel* (München: Bernhard Funck Verlag, 1947), 180.

to help other inmates in the organization of events. Their assistance could be provided in a number of ways: securing venues, providing information regarding the safest concert times, or persuading the SS that certain activities were not subversive or threatening.²⁸

As survivor Leo Eitinger wrote: "The group of people who were able to mobilize the most adequate coping mechanisms were those who, for one reason or another, could retain their personality and system of values more or less intact even under conditions of nearly complete social anomy."²⁹ For these persons, music was one of the coping mechanisms.

Interior spaces

The inmate blocks were among the interior spaces to which the SS rarely had access, and in which numerous concerts and cultural events of varying scope were organised. Restrictions to the authorised repertoires applied and varied from one camp to another. In Ravensbrück, a circular by Anna Klein-Paubel, head of the camp, stipulated: "Only German songs may be sung, no popular music (*Schlager*), no songs in foreign languages. The columns may sing when leaving and when coming back. In the blocks, singing is only permitted during free time. Outside of this time and outside of the blocks, singing is prohibited. [...] Dancing and theater are prohibited."³⁰

Vocal activities were predominant in the inmate blocks. In Sachsenhausen, a great amount of song books survived the war. Their repertoire, aimed at group cohesion, consisted mainly of popular or traditional German songs, and most of the songs were embellished with drawings in ink or coloured pencil.

Some workers' songs such as *Die Gedanken sind frei* (Thoughts are Free) acquired a particular connotation in the concentration camp context. New songs in German were also composed in detention, often praising the

28 Shirli Gilbert, "Songs Confront the Past: Music in KZ Sachsenhausen, 1936-1945", *Contemporary European History* 13, no. 3 (August 2004): 285.

29 Leo Eitinger, "On Being a Psychiatrist and a Survivor", in *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel*, eds. Alvin Rosenfeld and Irving Greenberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 196.

30 Anna Klein-Paubel, "An alle Blocks. Zum Aushang", 2 March 1944. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, RG-04.006*20.

primacy of moral resistance and calling on prisoners not to give up, such as *Kopf hoch* (Heads Up) in Buchenwald:

In the difficult long years
Remember comrade
We believed in the proven power of the saying:
Stand up straight or break!
Many have already broken
We stand behind the barbed wire
Upright, for years or weeks
Keep your head up, keep your head up, comrade!³¹

This song was meant to unite all prisoners, and it was quickly translated to Czech, French and Polish. Numerous choirs of various sizes sprang up spontaneously in the camps and performed during concerts, usually in unison. They were mainly formed by nationality and gave rise to a kind of cultural exchange, with some choirs from a block performing a variety of songs from their own country – patriotic and political songs were forbidden – for inmates in another block.

While the majority of concerts in inmate blocks were authorised or tolerated, the few clandestine or informal events were characterised by a desire for resistance, usually political: On these occasions, inmates sang in their own language, in lower voices, watching for any untimely arrivals, and the repertoire was generally more political or denounced camp conditions and mistreatment. Polish prisoner Alexander Kulisiewicz in Sachsenhausen expressed his anger at violent *Kapos* or his cynicism towards privileged prisoners in blunt terms, and described the omnipresent horror through what he called “songs of suffering”.³² Some lighter songs, such as Jan Vála’s *Kartoszki* (1942) in Sachsenhausen, mocked the major preoccupation with food, in an ironic cabaret spirit, to resist demoralisation. The chorus went: “*Kartoszki Kartoszki*, every man loves them, Monday and Tuesday,

31 “In den schweren langen Jahren / Kamerad erinnere dich / galt das Wort das schicksalharthe / steh gerade oder brich! / Sind auch viele schon zerbrochen / Wir stehn hinterm Stacheldraht / aufrecht, Jahre oder Wochen / hoch den Kopf, Kopf hoch Kamerad!” Music by Józef Kropiński to lyrics by Bruno Apitz, 1944.

32 Carsten Linde ed., *KZ-Lieder: Eine Auswahl aus dem Repertoire des polnischen Sängers Alex Kulisiewicz* (Sievershütten: Wendepunkt, 1972), 11.



Fig. 1. Score of *Kopf hoch* in Josef Pribula's clandestine book, 1944. (Stiftung Gedenkstätten Buchenwald und Mittelbau-Dora)

it doesn't matter, but only seven times a week."³³ Naming hunger, grief or despair in songs could be seen as "an attempt to control their domination"

33 "Kartoszki, Kartoszki, die hat jeder gern! / Kartoszki, Kartoszki schmecken jedem Herrn. / Montag und Dienstag, ist ganz egal / doch in der Woche nur siebenmal." The first word, Kartoszki, meaning potato, is derived from the German word Kartoffel and has a Slavic ending.

or “a form of exorcism”,³⁴ as Frieda Aaron writes about poetry. When composing in the camp, signing the score and song lyrics with their name was a way of reaffirming the artists’ identity in a dehumanising environment where names had been replaced by numbers. Some soloists or small groups also gave short concerts on Sundays from one block to another. For the musicians involved, performing in different blocks served several purposes: On the one hand, it sometimes helped their fellow inmates, for whom “these melodies were at least a reminder of home and family”,³⁵ to escape the camp in their thoughts. And on the other hand, it provided the musicians themselves with an additional means of subsistence, as they were often rewarded with bread or cigarettes by their comrades.

Given the restrictions in some camps, dancing and theatre activities could be considered transgressive and could lead to severe punishment. When forbidden, they were used as a means to stand up against the camp system. Several drawings made by the dancer and choreographer Nina Jiršíková in Ravensbrück testify to evenings where she clandestinely danced for her comrades in her block. In August 1940, the theatre piece *Schumm-Schumm*, written by Jewish prisoners Käthe Leichter and Herta Breuer in Ravensbrück, was performed in Block 11. After being denounced to the SS, the block and room elders and several prisoners were sentenced to six weeks in the bunker. The block’s occupants were deprived of bread for four weeks.³⁶ Preparing a clandestine musical event required mutual trust and cohesion on the part of the inmates, reinforcing their feeling of belonging to a group and including them in a space of solidarity.

The famous example of Germaine Tillion’s *Verfügbar aux Enfers* in Ravensbrück can also be evoked here: Hidden in a crate for several days by her fellow inmates, the French Resistance fighter wrote a work designed to laugh at the horror of the camp.³⁷ The highly cynical, denunciatory text alternated with songs, all based on well-known melodies with new lyrics. Written in the autumn of 1944 to cope with the demoralisation of her fellow

34 Aaron, *Bearing the Unbearable*, 19.

35 Testimony by Jerzy Brandhuber, quoted by Lachendro, “The Orchestras in KL Auschwitz”, 48.

36 Knapp, *Frauenstimmen*, 47; Linde Apel, “Judenverfolgung und KZ-System: Jüdische Frauen in Ravensbrück”, in *Genozid und Geschlecht. Jüdische Frauen im nationalsozialistischen Lagersystem*, ed. Gisela Bock (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2005), 49.

37 The *Verfügbar* in Ravensbrück were prisoners not assigned to a specific *Kommando*, and therefore considered “available” (*verfügbar*) for the worst chores inside the camp. About Tillion’s piece, read Philippe Despoix et al. eds., *Chanter, rire et résister à Ravensbrück. Autour de Germaine Tillion et du Verfügbar aux Enfers* (Paris: Seuil, 2018).

inmates, this work was not intended for performance on a stage. It was written on loose sheets of paper and passed from hand to hand. It therefore provided an opportunity to laugh and "sing in silence". The writing process, which involved several inmates suggesting lyrics or melodies, distracted them temporarily from the world of the camp and brought back memories of the time when they were free.

Although most musical activities took place in the inmate blocks, in some camps they were also organised in other buildings, notably the so-called infirmary (*Revier*), like in Birkenau women's camp, after 1943:

At that period it was an institution in the hospital compound that our orchestra [...] gave a little concert twice a week for patients able to be up and for the staff. It took place on a circular lawn, a little island in the desert of mud and dust. We nicknamed those concerts "sound-wave therapeutics", because they were organised while there was lack of medicaments and other means of medical treatment. [...] The band used to play light music, the time-honoured comical hits of the old Austrian music-hall star Leopoldi delighted the hearers, and we sometimes managed to laugh and joke.³⁸

From August 1943 onwards, concerts were organised in other buildings of the camps, like the disinfection block, the camp kitchen, or the *Trockenbaracke*³⁹ in Sachsenhausen:

In the *Trockenbaracke* a kind of "festival of nations" took place [...]. There, many of the nations represented in the camp performed their folklore (songs and dances). [...] We thus achieved the recognition of one side of international solidarity by presenting the cultural assets of the nations represented in the camp [...]. In this respect, these events became part of the international resistance.⁴⁰

38 Ella Lingens Reiner, *Prisoners of Fear* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1948), 72.

39 Located next to the camp laundry, these barracks usually served for the drying of the prisoners' clothes.

40 Hellmut Bock, "Einige Erinnerungen an die Kulturtätigkeit der Häftlinge im Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen", 1979, Archive of Sachsenhausen National Memorial/*Archiv der Gedenkstätte Sachsenhausen*, P3 Bock, Hellmut, 2.

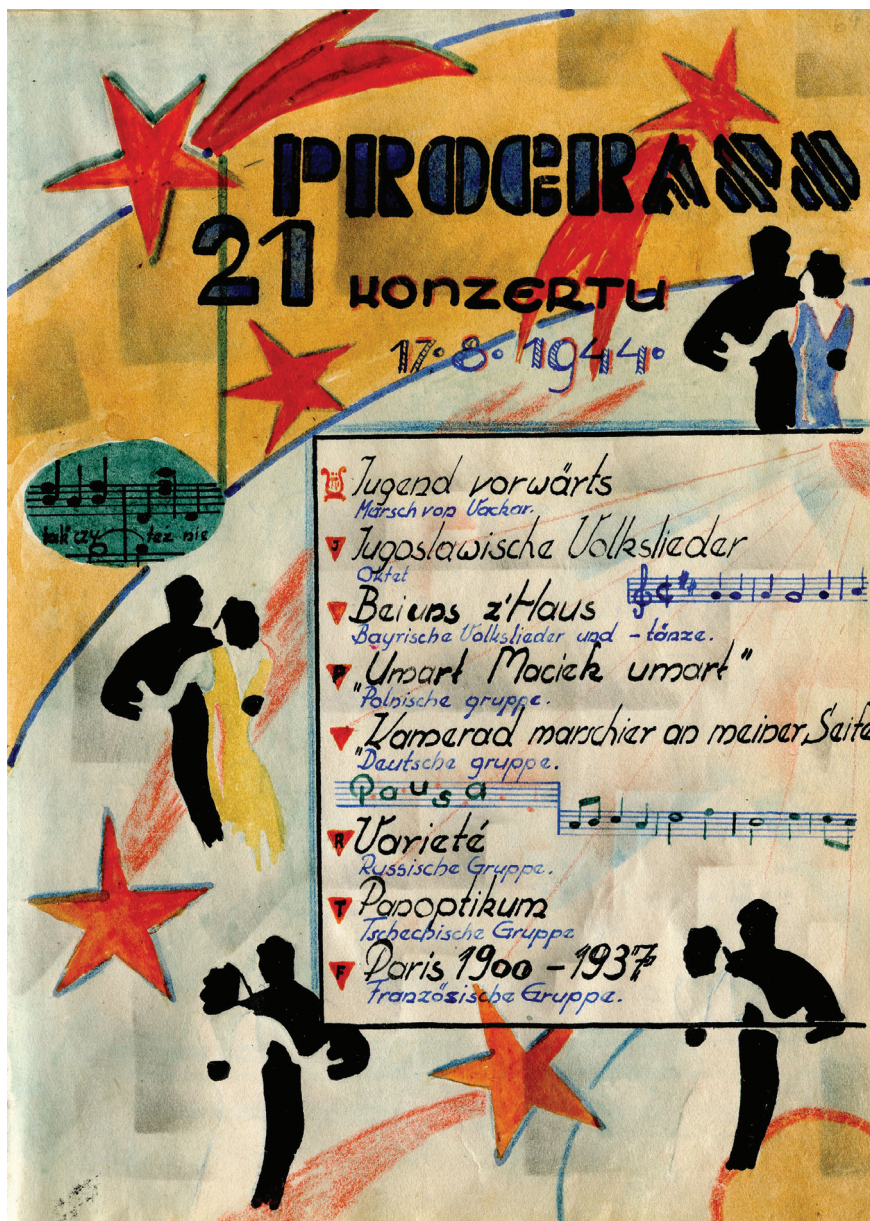


Fig. 2. Program for the twenty-first concert at the Buchenwald cinema, 17 August 1944. Illustration by Karol Konieczny in Josef Pribula's clandestine book. (Stiftung Gedenkstätten Buchenwald und Mittelbau-Dora)

In Buchenwald, over the course of a year, more than twenty concerts of varying sizes were organised in the camp cinema (*Kino*).⁴¹ These included classical music played by the *Lagerkapelle*, circus, theatre, musical comedy and more. As an example, after an introduction by the *Lagerkapelle*, the program for the twenty-first concert on Thursday 17 August 1944 alternated between choirs of different nationalities: Yugoslavs, Austrians, Poles, Germans, Russians, Czechs and French sang traditional songs and variety songs. These larger-scale events were attended by several hundred privileged inmates, and sometimes by the SS as well. As a result, programs tended to feature light music or non-political plays. The preparation process distracted the musicians from the gruesome reality, giving them something to talk and care about. Some performances required the creation of costumes and sets, allowing the artists to concentrate on their art and once again assert their creative power.

Exterior spaces

Whereas the interior could provide a space of resistance or spontaneous expression in the Nazi concentration camps, the exterior would most often be a space of restriction. The music performed outside was mainly played under coercion, on the orders of the SS or the guards and under their supervision: It contributed above all to the smooth running of the Nazi machine. Nevertheless, some attempts to struggle against the morally destructive system took place: on the roll call place, and where concerts were taking place.

In all concentration camps, roll call took place morning and night, sometimes even at midday for *Kommandos* returning to the camp. From 1943, it was reduced to morning and evening, and to evening only from 1944 onwards, in order to maximise the duration of inmates' working time in the service of war production. Roll call at night could last several hours and encroach on so-called "free time". As survivors wrote about roll call in Sachsenhausen: "For the exhausted prisoners, standing often nightlong, in

41 In some concentration camps, a "cinema" barrack was accessible to privileged inmates. For the SS, this was a way of disseminating Nazi propaganda through selected films, while at the same time capturing money from bonuses received by inmates, who had to pay for access to the cinema. This barrack would also be used for concerts or other purposes. See Rudi Jahn ed., *Das war Buchenwald! Ein Tatsachenbericht* (Leipzig: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Literatur, ca. 1945), 18-19.

a rigid posture or even with knees bent, proved fateful.”⁴² Numerous survivors testified how composing poems or songs during that time helped them in trying to find a distraction from the physical agony. In Ravensbrück, Czech music teacher Ludmila Peškařová composed many poems and songs during that time, mostly using existing melodies, and performed them afterwards from memory during clandestine events: “When we stood as silent as the grave during long roll calls, all manner of thoughts swirled around my brain! I sang inside my head, and if I could not think of the words or if the lyrics of a song did not express what I was feeling, I would supply my new, more appropriate words.”⁴³

In most of the camps where there was no work on Sundays, concerts for prisoners could take place in the outdoor space of the camp in the afternoon, depending on the weather. Prisoners who were strong enough and SS personnel could attend. The repertoires included sentimental songs, operetta or classical music, as well as traditional songs (*Volkslieder*) and songs from successful German films. The concerts provided a brief escape from camp reality and a sense of cohesion that could lead to solidarity and struggle against demoralisation. Zdzisław Maćkowiak wrote in Auschwitz in 1944: “My sole recreation on Sundays is the concerts by our excellent orchestra, the productions of which are generally well liked by music lovers. I have always been musical and it is precisely this pleasantly spent time that permits me for a moment to forget about where I really am.”⁴⁴

The most famous song composed on the occasion of a concert in an exterior space is the *Börgermoorlied* or *Moorsoldatenlied*, also called *Wir sind die Moorsoldaten*, better known under the title of *Peat Bog Soldiers*.⁴⁵ In 1933, after an episode of particularly extreme violence by the SS in the Börgermoor camp, Communist prisoner Wolfgang Langhoff asked the commandant for and obtained the right to organise a circus show in the camp on a Sunday afternoon. This *Zirkus Konzentrazani*, aimed at counter-acting the demoralisation of his comrades, ended with this song, composed by

42 “Bericht über das Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen während der Nazi Herrschaft, handschriftlich niedergeschrieben im Lager in der Zeit Mai bis Juni 1945”, Archive of Sachsenhausen National Memorial/*Archiv der Gedenkstätte Sachsenhausen*, P3, Bock, Hellmut, 5.

43 Ludmila Peškařová, letter to Inge Lammel, 8 December 1964, Archive Academy of Arts/*Archiv Akademie der Künste* (Berlin), KZ-Lieder 57/1, 5.

44 Zdzisław Maćkowiak quoted by Lachendro, “The Orchestras in KL Auschwitz”, 54.

45 Börgermoor was situated in the northwestern peat bog area of Germany, where the main work of the prisoners was the cultivation of the surrounding wetlands.



WER SIND DIE MOORSOLDATEN

Text und Musik von Politischen Schutzäftlingen
Börgermoor

1. Wo-hin auch das Aug-geblicket Moor u. Heide nur rings-um
2. Hier in die-ser ö-der Frei-de ist das Lager auf-ge-baut

3. Mor-gens ziehen die Kol-on-nen in das Moor zur Ar-bait hin,
4. Ab-ends, heim-wärts je-der gehet zu dem Ed-tern, Weib u. Kind,

1. Vo-gel sang uns nicht er quack-elt Es-chen stein-kalt und krumm, Wir
2. Wo wir fer-ven je-der Fra-ude Mann-ter Sta-ude dacht ver-staut, Wir

3. Gra-ben bei dem Brand der Men-nen doch zur Hei-mat steht der Funn, Wir
4. Man-che Brust ein Seaf-fer den-mal wir hier ge-fangen sind, Wir

1-5. sind die Moorsol-da-ten und zie-hen mit dem Spa-ten in's Moor,

6. Auf und nieder gehn die Kisten 6. Doch für uns gibt es kein Klager
keiner, keiner kann hindurch Ewig kann nicht Winter sein,
Flucht wird nur das Leben kosten Einmal werden froh wir sagen
vierfach ist uns süß die Burg, Kei-nat, du bist wieder mein,
Refrain, Wir sind die Moorsol- G. Ref. Dann ziehn die Moorsol- daten
daten... Nicht daten
in's Moor.

JN
02/10
tav.

Als
Lagerlied
gesungen
August 1933 063 !!!

Fig. 3. Hanns Kralik, illustrated score of the Börgermoorlied, 1933. (Archiv des Aktionskomitee für ein Dokumentations- und Informationszentrum Emslandlager e.V., Papenburg / © Ralf Zimmermann (Köln))

Langhoff and two fellow prisoners: It described the harsh reality of those who called themselves “peat bog soldiers”, but also the hope of a return home. The song was an immediate success, both among the inmates and the SS guards, who all identified with the “peat bog soldiers”. The musical score quickly spread from the camp to other camps in Germany and Europe, as well as to the free world. It opened the way for the composition of *Lagerlieder* in all other camps, and became after the war the remembrance song for all deportees.⁴⁶ As Langhoff wrote about the show after his release as soon as 1935: “We had dared for a few hours to decide on our acts ourselves, without orders, without instructions.”⁴⁷

The *Lagerkapelle* as a space of resistance

The integration of musicians into the camp’s official orchestra (*Lagerkapelle*) seems to have made it possible to resist the destructive Nazi system by thwarting its aims, notably that of encouraging all forms of rivalry and disunity, especially between “old” inmates and newcomers. The status of *Lagerkapelle* musicians varied from one camp to another. Most of the time, musicians went to work during the day in various *Kommandos*, and played morning and evening in the orchestra, which was a source of additional fatigue, since the rehearsals took place at night during so-called “free time”. The repertoire was generally limited, due to the lack of time to practise. The mortality rate among musicians was high, leading to incessant changes in musical orchestration that jeopardised the quality of performances and displeased the commanding officers, as in the men’s orchestra of Birkenau at the beginning:

Apart from a few privileged persons, everyone went out to work just as before and returned in a state of extreme physical and mental exhaustion. Some managed to endure this, while others broke down completely. Some threw themselves on the wires. The size of the orchestra changed almost from day to day and in time shrank catastrophically.⁴⁸

46 On this subject, read Élise Petit, “The Börgermoorlied: The Journey of a Resistance Song throughout Europe, 1933-1945”, *Comparativ. Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 28, no. 1 (2018): 65-81, <https://www.comparativ.net/v2/article/view/2822/2418>.

47 Langhoff, *Die Moorsoldaten*, 182.

48 Laks, *Music of Another World*, 47.

Nevertheless, in Dachau for example, some orchestra leaders managed to get prisoners assigned to less destructive *Kommandos*, often indoors, "which would enable them to retain the nimbleness of their hands and fingers and thereby ensure a better sound and a more rhythmic cadence of the marches".⁴⁹ These *Kommandos* often worked inside the camp, to be available if one needed them to play, and also if some *Kommandos* returned to the camp at midday for a meal and roll call. In the Birkenau men's camp orchestra, some members were assigned to the rehearsal block, where their tasks included composition or orchestration, copying scores, repairing instruments and setting up concert programs. After observing severe damage to instruments played under pouring rain, the Auschwitz orchestras "stopped going outside when bad weather threatened the instruments".⁵⁰ They played inside their block, windows open, to accompany the *Kommandos*' coming and going.

In Buchenwald, Auschwitz I, and the Birkenau women's camp, where the musical demands of the commandants grew higher after 1943, the conductors eventually got their musicians exempted from all other work, so that they could spend their days learning the pieces and adding to the orchestra's repertoire. Because the official orchestra's musical activities were seen as contributing to the prestige of the Nazi authorities, a block was allocated to the musicians for rehearsal and accommodation. In the Birkenau women's camp, their roll call eventually took place in the women's orchestra block, so they were not forced to go to the roll-call area where their comrades had to stand in all weathers for hours.⁵¹ In May 1943, to contribute to the war economy, a regulation issued by Oswald Pohl, head of the SS Main Economic and Administrative Office (*SS-Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt*) introduced several measures to increase productivity in the camps, including the distribution of bonuses:

All prisoners assigned to work should have the opportunity to earn a performance-related bonus payment. It will be given in the form of bonus coupons, which represent monetary value within the

49 *Ibid.*, 66.

50 *Ibid.*, 67; Lachendro, "The Orchestras in KL Auschwitz", 30, 56, 67, 91.

51 Rachela Olewski, *Crying is Forbidden Here! Rachela Olewski (Zelmanowicz), Testimony: A Jewish Girl in Pre-WWII Poland, the Women's Orchestra in Auschwitz and Liberation in Bergen-Belsen*, ed. Arie Olewski (Tel Aviv: Arie Olewski, 2009), 29.

concentration camp, as a reward to those prisoners who distinguish themselves through good performance, diligence and commitment.⁵²

In Buchenwald, Auschwitz I, or in the men's orchestra in Birkenau, payment lists found after the war show that the *Lagerkapelle* members received quasi-monthly bonuses from 1944 onwards.⁵³ Numerous official orchestras were equipped with uniforms to be worn on special occasions such as Sundays and concerts in the presence of the commandant and his guests.⁵⁴

In camps where musicians had access to "privileges", conductors were aware that recruitment into their orchestra could save lives. This form of solidarity was in itself a means of resistance to a system of annihilation. Survivor Adam Kopyciński explained how the conductor of Auschwitz I orchestra Franciszek Nierychło, an acquaintance he had helped in Krakow before the war, rescued him from hard labour in the camp's construction materials yard (*Bauhof*) and accepted him as a member of the orchestra.⁵⁵ About Alma Rosé, head of the women's orchestra in Birkenau, Violette Jacquet-Silberstein recalled:

Alma rightly was not convinced of my talents and told me: "I'll take you on a one-week trial." [...] The third day, someone stole my galoshes. I arrived with cold, dirty bare feet from walking in the mud. [...] I began to cry. Coming onto the scene, Alma asked why the tears. When I explained, Alma said: "All right. I'll take you in the orchestra right now." That was the first time she saved my life.⁵⁶

Another form of cohesion was to play forbidden music after the rehearsals, and, in case of an intrusion, "to start playing another piece that had

52 Oswald Pohl, "Dienstvorschrift für die Gewährung von Vergünstigungen an Häftlinge", 13 May 1943. BArch, NS3/426, 62.

53 Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum/*Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau* – APMA-B, D-Au II-3a/1871-1888, vol. 19, 2665-2682; 1.1.5.1, G.C.C. 159, II B/55. ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives.

54 The presence of uniforms has been attested to in Buchenwald (where members wore them daily), Dora, Dachau, Mauthausen, Auschwitz I, Birkenau, Monowitz, and even in Treblinka death camp. Élise Petit, *La musique dans les camps nazis* (Paris: Mémorial de la Shoah, 2023), 28-35.

55 Account by Adam Kopyciński in Lachendro, "The Orchestras in KL Auschwitz", 16.

56 Violette Jacquet-Silberstein, quoted in Richard Newman and Karen Kirtley, *Alma Rosé: Vienna to Auschwitz* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 2000), 236.

been prepared in advance".⁵⁷ Whereas for the musicians, it was mostly a way of creating a space of conviviality leading to solidarity, it is interesting to see that playing forbidden music could be seen by others as a form of "active" political resistance:

During the next few days I harmonized all three polonaises and wrote out the parts for a small chamber ensemble, after which we began to practice the pieces in the barracks when conditions allowed. Some of my Polish colleagues congratulated me on this deed, regarding it as an act of the resistance movement. This surprised me a little, since for me this was an ordinary musical satisfaction, heightened by the Polishness of the music to be sure, but I did not see how its being played in secret could have harmed the Germans or had an effect on the war.⁵⁸

The *Lagerkapelle*: A musical "grey zone"?

The *Lagerkapelle* was, according to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, a "small community, which was to generate the warmest friendships and camaraderie as well as hatred in equal measure".⁵⁹ As Helena Dunicz-Niwińska noted: "Similarly, in the circles of former prisoners or even among people who had never experienced anything of the kind, we were frequently confronted after the war with unmasked opprobrium for having played in the orchestra."⁶⁰ For numerous survivors, and even for orchestra members themselves, the music played by the *Lagerkapelle* in the camps morning and evening was intertwined with the suffering of thousands of people in the *Kommandos*. For Halina Opielka: "Although we tried to concentrate on the performance, it was impossible not to think of the bodies of those beaten to death at work. Of the blows raining down, kicks, and shots into the ranks of prisoners."⁶¹

57 Laks, *Music of Another World*, 64-65.

58 Ibid., 65.

59 Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, *Inherit the Truth: A Memoir of Survival and the Holocaust* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2000), 74.

60 Helena Dunicz-Niwińska, *One of the Girls in the Band: The Memoirs of a Violinist from Birkenau*, trans. William Brand (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2014), 84-85.

61 Halina Opielka, quoted by Knapp, *Das Frauenorchester in Auschwitz*, 291.

The orchestra members were often perceived as people enjoying privileges, as many of them played for the entertainment of high-ranking prisoners, and even for the SS. As Szymon Laks writes about his activities in Birkenau: “The kapos and other dignitaries relished this kind of music and in the evenings would summon three or four musicians to their private Stube (room) for their own pleasure. [...] The musicians returned from their moonlighting loaded down with all sorts of goodies and cigarettes.”⁶² This additional means of resisting death by starvation, which also allowed them to share food with less privileged comrades, was seen by some inmates as a form of collaboration.

It has been reported by several survivors that SS officers from Birkenau, including the commandant Josef Kramer or the doctor Josef Mengele, regularly visited the men’s or women’s orchestra barrack, ordered that music be played for them, and sometimes cried.⁶³ Simon Laks wondered: “Could people who love music to this extent, people who cry when they hear it, be at the same time capable of committing so many atrocities on the rest of humanity?”⁶⁴ It seems that the regenerating power of music was used as such by the Nazi administration for the SS men. As the ethnopsychiatrist Françoise Sironi explained about the psychology of torture, “Torturers are made, not born; either by a violent deculturation process, or by a specific initiation using traumatic techniques.”⁶⁵ This form of deconstruction of identity was applied in SS training. In this context, spaces where a level of humanity could be restored were the SS barracks and the places around the camps where “camaraderie evenings” (*Kameradschaftsabende*), meaning concerts or musical evenings, took place. In these spaces of what we could call institutionalised conviviality, music played a very important role in the restoration of the “human” integrity of the torturers.

Through a process contributing to the “fragmentation of behavior,”⁶⁶ music enabled the SS to continue performing the inhuman tasks they considered as a “job”. In his Auschwitz diary from 1942, SS doctor Johann Paul Kremer alternated, in the same tone, between observations on the selections

62 Laks, *Music of Another World*, 55-56.

63 Fania Fénelon, *Playing for Time* (New York: Atheneum, 1977), 93; Olewski, *Crying is Forbidden Here!*, 28.

64 Laks, *Music of Another World*, 70.

65 Françoise Sironi, *Bourreaux et victimes. Psychologie de la torture* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1999), 129.

66 Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 139.

on arrival of convoys (*Sonderaktionen*) and accounts of camp orchestra concerts he attended with great pleasure in the camp garrison.⁶⁷ The music played to provide "troop care" (*Truppenbetreuung*) contributed to the SS's psychic restoration and ensured their efficiency within the concentration camp system. The fact that members of the *Lagerkapelle* contributed to this, and were rewarded with food and cigarettes, gave rise to a strong sense of guilt among them after the war.

* * *

Whereas music helped some of them survive in the concentration camp system, after 1945 most *Lagerkapelle* amateur musicians gave up their activity due to traumatic memories of music performance. For many of them, the simple act of touching their instrument or hearing music they had been forced to play in the camp triggered post-traumatic syndromes or panic attacks. In spite of this, some professional musicians continued their activities and chose to use their talent to bear witness and contribute to remembrance.

Music resonated in a wide variety of spaces in the concentration camps: while in the exterior spaces it was mainly used for coercive or even torturous purposes, the interior spaces, and especially the inmate blocks, were places where music was more often linked to various processes of standing up against the Nazi system. Acting as a coping mechanism, musical activities could, temporarily, help assert a sense of humanity, protect against moral disintegration, and provide spaces of solidarity where people could temporarily "escape" from the camp reality. Music provided a framework in which victims "could laugh at, express despair at, or try to make sense of what was happening to them."⁶⁸ It could, on certain occasions, perpetuate the energy of imaginative activity, and reaffirm or strengthen the prisoners' will to live. As the hymn of Buchenwald (*Buchenwaldlied*) put it: "We still want to say yes to life / Because the day will come, when we will be free!"⁶⁹

67 Johann Paul Kremer, Journal from 8 August to 24 November 1942, 4.2/82231223-82231236/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives, <http://www.npdoc.be/Kremer-J.P.>

68 Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*, 10.

69 "Wir wollen trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen / Denn einmal kommt der Tag: dann sind wir frei!" Lyrics: Fritz Löhner-Beda; Music: Hermann Leopoldi, 1938.

WER IST WALTER?

Resistance against Nazism, fascism, occupation and collaboration occurred throughout Europe during World War II. But how much do we know about this history in other European countries? Gathering 32 contributions and case studies on the history of this resistance, as well as on its transmission after 1945, especially in museums, the present book is an invitation to look at resistance in Europe in an interdisciplinary, international, transnational and comparative perspective. It is the result of the international research project “Wer ist Walter? Resistance against Nazism in Europe” which gathered historians, curators and other researchers mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France and Germany.



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