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To See in Color

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Sarah Rebban

To See in Color

A man in tattered rags leans against a brick wall shivering as drizzle moistens his hollow cheeks. A carefully constructed violin of deep maple rests gently upon his gaunt shoulder as his fingertips grasp its dense neck of ebony. His hand holds the bow and hesitantly rises and falls against the strings. A melancholy hum echoes into the clouds of smoke and ash. Notes screech into the camp and the haunting aura strays into a rich harmony. Footsteps linger into the mud and people trickle out from the barracks. As a crowd gathers around, colors flow from his cracked hands into the desolate skies: ruby, fire, gold, emerald, aqua, sapphire, amethyst, and rose illuminate the darkness. In man's darkest hour, a glimpse of hope.

During the Holocaust, Jews suffered the consequences of Germany's loss in WWI. Unwilling to accept defeat, the Jews' "long history of anti-Semitism and religious prejudice made them the perfect target" to blame for Germany's postwar socio economic dilemma (The Jews as Scapegoats). With only a sense of national pride left through music, Germany executed several laws banning 'degenerate' literature. Nonetheless, music was often the difference between life and death. The violin, specifically, played an important role in Jewish culture, producing some of the world's finest violinists.. In James A. Grymes' *Violins of Hope*, Israeli violinmaker Amnon Weinstein restores violins of the Holocaust as a memorial and symbol of hope for the future. Several accounts go on to illustrate why Nazis enforced threats of persecution, the circumstances in which music was reconstructed, and the lengths musicians went through to survive. Amongst the midst of evil, music left its legacy as a glimpse of color only present amidst the storm.

Jewish musicians were primarily affected when minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, consulted the Reich Chamber of Music to place limits on who was to keep their jobs. Jews were excluded. The Jewish Culture League was eventually formed in 1933, but only under harsh conditions: “the staff and presenters would be composed exclusively of Jews, their activities would be reported only in the Jewish press,” audiences may only consist of Jewish monthly subscribers that would fund the organization (unlike the “government subsidy” given to Aryan associations), and repertoire must be approved by the Interior Ministry a month in advance (Grymes 23). The culture league, however, was disbanded in 1941 by Germany’s involvement in the war rather than Jewish society.

Although the wings of the Expressionist era were clipped, some managed to break free and fly to magnificent new heights. Jewish violinist, Bronislaw Huberman hoped to recruit Jewish musicians into the Palestine Philharmonic, but when his requests were denied, he was determined to create an orchestra of his own. Through funding, difficulty acquiring visas, and the straining selection process, the Israel Philharmonic was born. Huberman not only saved over a thousand lives during the Holocaust, but also formed one of the best orchestras in the world, “the crown jewel of Israeli culture” (56).

Huberman was lucky enough to defy all odds during a time of musical prosecution, but the majority were not. A handful of Weinstein’s Violins of Hope were the only thing left of the lives lost during the Holocaust. One man brought in a violin damaged from snow and rain. It had been played in Auschwitz. Ashes dusted the inner walls of the instrument with the deceased lives that departed through the chimneys of the crematorium. Hope was concealed in the lingering shadows of death. What ignited as only a gentle flicker of light quickly grew into a fatal disaster. Germany was enflamed in propaganda that claimed degenerate art as a threat to

mankind. During the period of Entartete Musik, music that put Germany's success at risk, including jazz, atonal, and operetta, were vandalized through public recordings, pictures, and texts: "What was collected represented an effigy of wickedness" (Berg). Composers included in this censorship were either forced to leave the country or killed. This instantly rid Germany of talent that had any chance of creating dispute between Nazi reign and belief. Music fell silent under the swastika. Hitler found aspects of contemporary music provocative and as a subspecies to the human race. Jewish music was described as noise rather than the organized sounds formed in traditional song. Goat trills, cat howls, and hordes of bees, were often analogized with Jewish cries — deaf and hostile to beauty. Propaganda coined a distorted reality of degenerate art: incapable of communicating, expressing emotion, and maintaining a level of consciousness. The fire was fueled until burnings of books turned to burnings of people.

As Nazi power advanced through Europe, the heart of Jewish music had undergone drastic measures. Since Jews had always been overrepresented in the string section, their absence was immediately noticed. Many found refuge in America and brought along Jewish traditions such as Klezmer, atonal, and jazz music. Unfortunately several musicians' careers ended due to the lack of travel funds, tax clearance certificates, and exit passports (21).

Rumours of the atrocities within concentration camps rapidly spread causing surviving Jewish artists to unofficially ban anything associated with Germany. From the works of German composer Richard Wagner, "whose anti-Semitic writings and nationalist compositions had become powerful symbols of the Nazi regime," to the playing of German-made instruments, a boycott was their only way to protest against the Holocaust (57). A violin, for example, engraved with the name "Wagner," although unrelated to the German artist, would have been thrown out or burned, had not luthier Moshe Weninger (Amnon's father) been able to handle an

innocent violin being destroyed. The Wagner violin marked the first offstage Violin of Hope that would inspire Amnon and generations to come.

Prisoners naturally continued to rebel by feeling entitled to do exactly what they were told not to. Despite threats of persecution, Jews often jeopardized their own lives to produce music. Through altered rhythms, prewar material, or in rare cases, original compositions, music was present. When prisoners expressed images of camp life in song, it was mellow enough to blend between the lines. Composer Arnold Schoenberg plants meaning in his piece, *Survivor from Warsaw*, as only a seed. What is conceivable on the surface must be given time to grow. From an awkward, unpleasant first impression cultivates a ballad, a story. Although the first squeals, clashing notes, and random rhythms create a sense of unorganized sound, it was later discovered that Schoenberg intended for his work to be a “traumatic reenactment of accumulated experience.” Dissonant chords were Schoenberg’s way of showing the chaotic thought process going through prisoner’s minds as their lives were turned upside down. Through trembling trumpets and violins, flashbacks of bone shivering moments, and the final panic shown in excruciating volume as prisoners were marched to their deaths, the legacy of the survivor from Warsaw lives on. The Holocaust was turbulent, excruciating; and so it shall be remembered, for what it truly was.

In an era of ambiguity, turmoil, and terror, the only means of understanding left were through music. Having risked torture, even death, violinist, Erich Weninger’s journey began performing in the communal latrines of Dachau concentration camp. Transported to Buchenwald, Erich was rescued by his sister-in-law, a member of the German Emergency Committee. As emigration laws became stricter, Erich’s only option was to follow Berthold Storfer, director of Transportation of Jews Overseas, to Palestine. The journey was far more

difficult than planned however. Once reaching Bratislava, detainees were held captive by Hlinka guards in accommodations no more luxurious than those in concentration camps. Their trip was delayed six months when the Danube River froze over, and their ship had sunk. With additional unnecessary fees, prisoners were boarded onto another ship. With crowded, unsanitary conditions, many lives were lost on the voyage from starvation and outbreaks of typhus and dysentery. As the ship approached Mauritius, “lagoons of blue, fringed with thick green vegetation” were a temporary relief to the detainees (95). Their first stop however was in front of two large cell blocks with barred windows: a prison, their home for the next four and a half years (96). As routined life eased, leisure time was spent participating in educational, social and cultural activities. In February, 1941, instruments were donated and used as entertainment. With Erich’s violin and “Papa” Haas’ piano, a jazz orchestra was formed: the Beau Bassin Boys (99). From English music, to folk dances, and satirical poems about camp life, the group became a big hit and even performed at dances, weddings, and festivals. Six years later in August 1945, the 1307 remaining prisoners were granted permission by the British to sail to Palestine. Erich renewed his career as a butcher and continued to play his violin. In 1988, he passed away and his violin was handed down to his son Ze’eo on to his daughter Tova. In 2012, Tova’s son considered selling the violin and Amnon was the only one who could appraise it. Although it was damaged from exposure to heat and water, Amnon promised to restore it for free as long as he could retain Erich’s violin as a Violin of Hope.

Man’s true colors were exposed by the lengths they were willing to go to to preserve what was left of humanity. A common theme developed in music of the Holocaust was the desperate hope and “togetherness in suffering” (Gilbert 197). Conceptions of how people dealt with the dehumanizing effects of the concentration camps were often overlooked by the

complexities and unspoken words in music. Songs however covered wide ranges of human experience, issues, and attitudes towards camp life. When communication was demolished, music became an alternative. Through shared interpretations, comments regarding the Nazis, and the connection it provided with life outside of the barbed fences, music was the only sense of normalcy left. Rather than epitomizing death, music exposed the “hope, optimism, antagonisms, and contradictions” experienced by prisoners in a new light. Music brings us closer to unearthing the root of evil that unleashed the Holocaust in the first place.

Threats of persecution only marked an era that enlivened a piece of the human soul not yet known to mankind. Death was only a physical limit. Spiritual remains transcended through song. A comforter, liberator, avenger, and memento, music reigned over Nazi power. Whether it saved lives directly or carried on a legacy, music was the only thing that made sense when nothing else seemed to. As his song came to an end, everything was silent. Clouds drifted back into their spots over the peaking rays of sun. The show was over, for now at least, but the audience left with the slightest blush in their cheeks, the faintest gleam in their eyes. For they had been reminded of what it was like to see in color again.

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