Performing Memory

SHIRLI GILBERT

To cite this article: SHIRLI GILBERT (2012) Performing Memory, Jewish Quarterly, 59:4, 42-46
To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0449010X.2012.10707219

Published online: 28 May 2013.
Performing Memory

Yiddish song and the Holocaust

BY SHIRLI GILBERT
Visitors to Auschwitz today encounter innumerable remnants from the Nazi era. The “Arbeit macht frei” gate is still intact, as are watchtowers and fences, blocks and barracks, the remains of gas chambers and crematoria, and the infamous selection ramp at Birkenau. The museum also houses personal objects belonging to some of the victims who perished there: tens of thousands of shoes, eyeglasses, suitcases, shoe-polish containers, kitchen utensils, prostheses, brushes and combs. These enormous, anonymous piles are moving symbols of the scale of the catastrophe that befell European Jewry. “By themselves,” however, writes James Young in his magisterial study of Holocaust memorials, “these remnants rise in a macabre dance of memorial ghosts. Armless sleeves, eyeless lenses, headless caps, footless shoes: victims are known only by their absence, by the moment of their destruction.” What, he implicitly asks, of the families these people raised, the languages they spoke, the traditions they nurtured, the lives they led? The fact that they are remembered primarily by their “scattered belongings”, Young muses, “may be the ultimate travesty. These lives and the relationships between them are lost to the memory of ruins alone — and will be lost to subsequent generations who seek memory only in the rubble of the past.”

But beyond these ruins lies a richer, if less obvious, source of memory. From the very earliest events organised by the survivors themselves, music was integral to the work of remembering the *khurbn* (catastrophe). The first official gathering of Jewish survivors held on 27 May, 1945 was a “Liberation Concert” performed by former inmates of Kovno and Dachau. Musical life flourished in the Displaced Persons’ camps of occupied postwar Germany, bearing witness not only to renewed hopes for the Jewish future, but equally to a powerful urge to remember the recent past. Music remains a significant mediator of Holocaust memory, although its use in recent decades bears little resemblance to these early events. A closer look at the motives and impulses of musicians and song collectors in the early postwar period reveals a powerful and largely untapped alternative memorial space.

Over the past few decades we have witnessed an explosion of Holocaust monuments and museums, with debates raging about how, where, and to what extent the tormented past should be remembered. The work of memorialising the Holocaust began long before this recent “memory boom”, however — long before the Allied armies had liberated the camps. The imperative to bear witness was widely heeded by Jews across Nazi-occupied Europe, its most famous expression being the appeal of the historian Simon Dubnow before his death in the Riga ghetto: “People, do not forget. Speak of this, people; record it all.” In the Warsaw Ghetto, Emanuel Ringelblum coordinated a secret archive code-named “Oyneg shabes” (Joy of the Sabbath), enlisting a wide array of people to report on culture and education, conduct interviews, record statistical data, collect folklore, and chronicle daily events. Similar efforts were initiated elsewhere: an underground archive in the Bialystok ghetto, another in Theresienstadt, an official chronicle in Łódź, and countless individual diaries. In the war’s immediate aftermath, survivors persevered with documentation work: the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland was established in December 1944, and similar institutions followed in central and western Europe.

Underlying the fervent collection of historical material was an urgently felt desire to preserve the memory of a destroyed people. No distinction, significantly, was made between the work of documenting and the work of remembering, since these activities were seen as synonymous. Documentation itself, in other words, was conceived of as a means of commemorating the dead. As an appeal to survivors in the American zone of occupation put it, “every document, picture, song, legend is the only gravestone which we can place on the unknown graves of our parents, siblings, and children!”

The materials that the early documenters were collecting — the songs, stories, photographs, and testimonies that they gathered from countless survivors across postwar Europe — were deliberately individual and intimate, portraits of diverse human experiences, responses, and lives actively lived in the face of catastrophe.

The context in which the collectors were working is worthy of emphasis. The vast majority of surviving Jews were officially “displaced persons” with few options for emigration, living in appalling conditions in camps on German soil, and facing the spectre of renewed antisemitism in Poland. Why, at such a moment of unparalleled crisis, did some of the most eminent and experienced Jewish historians in Europe devote precious resources to gathering songs? How did they see songs contributing to memorialising the events, and what did they consider important for us to remember? Those involved in documentation efforts prioritised gathering testimonies, but also consistently expressed interest in songs, stories, jokes, and other cultural remnants of their destroyed communities. Such artefacts, they insisted, were an integral part of the larger mission to document, and would fulfil a crucial role in writing the history of the Shoah and preserving the memory of its victims. Their voices have largely been forgotten, but their impassioned pleas for the importance of their work might encourage us to revisit the more fundamental question of how and why we remember the Holocaust in the first place.

Shmerke Katsherginski was a well-loved Vilna poet, songwriter, and activist whose collection efforts began during his internment in the Vilna ghetto. After the war he criss-crossed Europe in a fervent effort to gather...
any songs that had survived the ghettos and camps, and in 1948 published his monumental Lider fun di getos un lagern (Songs from the ghettos and camps), which remains the largest and most important collection of Yiddish songs from the Holocaust period. In the preface to his book, he expressed an urgent need to preserve “the voices of the departed, their simple, clear words that tell us about their lives until their deaths”, and hoped that his resulting collection would “help future history-writers and researchers as well as readers to fathom the soul of our people.” Moyshe Feigenbaum, a fellow collector working with the Tsentrale historische komisye (Central historical commission) in Munich, stressed that the materials being amassed for the upcoming Nuremberg trials represented “just a fragment of our tragedy”: namely, “how the murderers behaved towards us, how they treated us and what they did with us.” It was the duty of surviving Jews, he argued, to preserve the sources that would allow future generations to understand how Jews lived “in those nightmarish days”: “each testimony of a saved Jew,” he insisted, “every song from the Nazi era, every proverb, every anecdote and joke, every photograph is for us of tremendous value”.

For these collectors and many others like them, cultural artefacts offered distinctive insight into the inner lives of Jewish communities under internment. They revealed not how victims were acted upon as passive objects, but how they, as historical subjects with agency, lived under the Nazi occupation and actively responded to what was happening. As Katsherginski put it:

Few documents were preserved that would allow even a partial picture of the practical, official existence and the way of life of Jews in the occupied territories. Therefore, I think that the songs that Jews from ghettos, death camps and partisans sang from their sad hearts, will be a great contribution to the history of Jewish martyrdom and struggle... The daily Jewish life in the ghetto with all its accompanying phenomena, like arrests, death, work, Gestapo, Jewish power-mongers, internal way of life, etc. — are reflected in precisely this bloody folklore.

In seeking to gather the “bloody folklore” of Nazism’s victims for future generations, the collectors had an immense job before them. Although conditions in the ghettos and even more so in the camps were extraordinarily repressive, these places also played host to an enormous range of cultural activities. Most of the larger ghettos established theatres, choirs, and orchestras that existed for months or even years. Informal music-making also took place in many camps, and a strikingly large number of new compositions were created, chief among them songs. The songs took diverse forms and themes: loss, displacement, the separation of families, the shock of internment, nostalgia, intra-community struggles, hopes of rescue, calls for armed resistance, betrayal by the Jewish police or Jewish councils, critical satires, gallows humour. Hundreds of these songs survived the war thanks to the work of dedicated collectors, particularly in the Displaced Persons’ camps of postwar Europe.

Given the collectors’ overriding intention to preserve the memory of those who perished, it is ironic that the material they worked so zealously to gather has largely been forgotten. Katsherginski’s book has long been out of print, and many more collections are gathering dust in archives, almost entirely unused and unknown by those “future generations” for whose benefit their compilers laboured. Despite having survived in unusually large numbers, in other words, the vast majority of the Yiddish songs from the period of Nazi internment might be thought of as forgotten memorials, since they have never been used as memorial objects in the first place.

On the face of it this is surprising, given that music’s role in Holocaust commemoration has been central from the outset. The explanation lies in the particular aspects of the past that songs have been used to convey. In recent decades, as the Holocaust “memory boom” has gathered momentum, music has been seen as a natural opportunity for redemptive, hopeful discourse about the Holocaust, emphasising in particular the heroism of Nazism’s victims. The concept of “spiritual resistance” has become widespread in the public sphere, replete with celebrations of the triumph of the human spirit and affirmations of Jewish endurance and resistance. The music most often chosen to accompany Holocaust commemorations tends towards a core handful of songs, most of which emphasise these themes. The quintessential example is Hirsh Glik’s ever-popular “Zog nit keynmol az du geyst dem letstn veg” (Never say that you are walking the final road), better known as the “Partisan Song”, with its resounding refrain: “The hour we have been longing for will still come/ Our steps
will drum — we are here!” To be sure, the “Partisan Song” was one of the most popular among ghetto and camp inmates, and its affirmations of Jewish strength and survival resonated deeply with the victims as well as with their co-religionists after the war. But what of the experiences and responses that fitted less neatly into the parameters of early postwar memorial culture, when rebuilding the basis of Jewish national existence — in the diaspora as well as in the newly-created Israel — was paramount? In satisfying the need for hopeful messages, the kind of remembrance promoted through the discourse of spiritual resistance ultimately fails to engage with the complexity of the societies from which the songs themselves emerged.

Music, the early collectors suggested, can offer us a deeper insight into the inner lives of prisoner communities. What were their attitudes towards their oppressors? What were their attitudes towards one another? How did they make sense of what was happening to them? In short, they suggest, the songs themselves can lead us beyond narratives of heroism and resistance towards a more multi-dimensional understanding of what life under Nazi internment was like.

Like “Zog nit keynnol”, many of the songs created and sung by Jewish partisans encouraged active resistance and expressed a spirit of defiance and communal strength. Intended for communal singing, they tended to draw on revolutionary Soviet melodies with rousing march-like settings and catchy dotted rhythms. Their texts also echoed the mood of their Soviet counterparts, emphasising the partisans’ bravery and heroism. Katsherginski’s “Partizaner-marsh” (Partisan march), for example, called on the fighters to go “boldly and with courage into battle” to defeat the enemy, while the “Yugnt himn” (youth hymn), composed by partisans for the Vilna ghetto’s youth club, encouraged young people to “storm” forward with their bold song “although the enemy stands guard at the gate”.

Other songs, by contrast, turned their attention to the internal dynamics of imprisoned communities. In the Warsaw ghetto, a popular song titled “Moes, moes” (Money, money) offered a biting satire of corruption and moral decline. Set to a prewar American jazz hit — a caustic reference to the ghetto’s exclusive cafés and cabarets — the song exposed the ghetto as a place of economic and social inequality, criticising the ill treatment of the masses at the hands of the powerful and wealthy elite. The Jewish Council could impose taxes and provide nothing in return; the Jewish Police protected their positions by deporting members of their own community to the camps: “Money, money, money is the best thing..." The Jewish policeman is just a scoundrel. Puts you on the train and sends you away to a camp. Money, money, money is the best thing.” Those left without money could hope for little more than to “crawl into Pinkert’s little box” — Motl Pinkert being the head of the ghetto’s Khevre kadishe (burial society). Many other songs offered similarly candid portrayals of internecine community struggles, self-important ghetto leaders, and other challenging subjects that the immediate postwar generations, perhaps understandably, preferred to forget.

Among the few Jewish camp songs that were preserved, one of the most intriguing was the chillingly named “Jüdischer Todessang” (Jewish death song), created in Sachsenhausen by the assimilated musician Rosebery d’Arguto (aka Martin Rosenberg). It was based on the popular Yiddish folk song “Tsen brider” (Ten brothers), which recounts the fates of ten brothers whodie by one until only one is left; in keeping with the tragi-comic spirit of Yiddish song, the refrain playfully exclaims: “Oy, Shmerl with the fiddle, Teyve with the bass, Play a little song for me in the middle of the street!” In late 1942, shortly after receiving the news that he was to be transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau or Majdanek, d’Arguto wrote the new song, shortening “Tsen Brider” from ten stanzas to two, modifying the words, and translating it into German so that a larger number of prisoners — Jews as well as non-Jews — would be able to understand it. The German version played sardonically on the word “Gas”, which translates in Yiddish not as “gas” but as “street”. In the new version, the Jewish minstrels no longer sang for the brothers “in the middle of the street” but because they were now being forced “to go to the gas”, a phrase emphasised in the new musical setting:

We were ten brothers, we traded in wine
One died — we were left nine.
Oy-oy! Oy-oy!
Yidl [little Jew] with the fiddle, Moyshe with the bass,
Sing a little song for me, we have to go into the gas!
I am the only brother left; with whom shall I now cry?
The others have been murdered! Think of all nine!
Oy-oy! Oy-oy!
Yidl with the fiddle, Moyshe with the bass,
Hear my last little song; I also have to go into the gas!
We were ten brothers
We never hurt anyone

It is fascinating that the experience of the camp led someone like d’Arguto — a non-practising Jew who had gone so far as to de-Judaise his name — to write an explicitly Jewish lament. That d’Arguto and his fellow inmates found meaning in singing about the communal Jewish fate suggests that, as in the ghettos, Jews found meaning in forging links with their past, and situating their experiences within a Jewish historical trajectory. This phenomenon is all the more striking here because German Jews, who made up the bulk of Sachsenhausen’s Jewish population, were historically more assimilated than their eastern European counterparts in the ghettos.

Still other songs focused on documenting events...
and victims’ responses to them. “Aroys iz in Vilne a nayer bafe!” (A new command has been issued in Vilne) chronicled with understated emotion the liquidation of the shtetlakh around Vilna during the spring of 1943, and the spontaneous resistance mounted by several of the victims when they realised they were being taken to their deaths. A song entitled “Treblinka”, probably created when inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto had begun to discover the fates of deportees during the summer of 1942, described how Jews were chased out of their homes — by police and their Ukrainian helpers — and transported to the Treblinka death camp.

Many hundreds more songs were preserved, bearing witness not to the retrospective interpretations of victims when they realised they were being taken to their deaths. A song entitled “Treblinka”, probably created when inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto had begun to discover the fates of deportees during the summer of 1942, described how Jews were chased out of their homes — by police and their Ukrainian helpers — and transported to the Treblinka death camp.

One way in which songs might deepen Holocaust memorialisation is therefore to remind us of the diverse responses of millions of human beings to harsh and terrifying realities. This would go somewhere towards countering another set of persistent narratives that surround the Holocaust in the public sphere: those that insist on the Holocaust’s uniqueness, the impossibility of representation, and the impossibility or undesirability of understanding. Returning to the multifaceted, contradictory, and stubbornly varied perspectives reflected in these songs might help to re-orient Holocaust awareness back in the direction of concrete, complex human responses. In an era of increasing “Holocaust fatigue”, where the imperative to remember is less and less urgently felt, a shift is necessary towards a wider-ranging, further-reaching remembrance, which intentionally draws out “lessons and legacies” that remain relevant to the contemporary world. This is not an endorsement of what the historian Peter Novick calls “the sort of pithy lessons that fit on a bumper sticker”, exemplified by the ubiquitous but elusive “Never Again”. Rather, as he suggests, “if there are lessons to be extracted from encountering the past, that encounter has to be with the past in all its messiness; they’re not likely to come from an encounter with a past that’s been shaped and shaded so that inspiring lessons will emerge.” If increasing desensitisation to the Holocaust results in part from a memory that is proprietary and defensively sacrosanct, then remembering of a different kind may help to resensitise contemporary generations who witness genocidal events with depressing regularity.

There is another dimension to music’s potential use in the commemorative sphere: its very nature as a memorial object. In ways distinct from physical structures like stone memorials, statues, and graves, music is performative, enacting memorialisation primarily through time rather than in space. In addition, unlike artefacts such as camp uniforms or victims’ personal possessions, songs created under Nazi internment by definition cannot have survived as intact “original” artefacts. Initially, they survived in people’s memories as oral artefacts, and later were documented in transcriptions and reconstructed recordings. In short, in order to function as agents of memory, songs unavoidably have to be recreated.

This inherent performativity, however, is also the basis for music’s greatest potential as a memorial object. The songs are distinct in being simultaneously remnants of the events themselves and retrospective memorials, fulfilling the roles of both “original” artefacts from the time, and postwar commemorative imaginings. What is more, they encode the ongoing, dynamic ways in which succeeding generations choose to remember and forget. From the earliest commemorations in the 1940s until the present day, audiences have recreated and engaged with these songs — albeit only a small handful of them — and have thereby become involved in the ever-shifting process of shaping and moulding memory of the past in the present.

Beyond the “rubble of the past” with which we began, music offers a rich alternative memorial space for thinking about the Holocaust and its victims. As objects from the time that are simultaneously part of a continuing process of recreation, songs embody the process of negotiating between the remnants of the past and the needs of the present. We may no longer believe that songs will enable us to “fathom the soul of [a] people”, but they can help us to memorialise the victims more honestly by acknowledging their diverse humanness. In the immediate postwar period, survivors suggested that songs could offer insight into the victims’ lives and responses, rather than merely “how the murderers behaved towards us, how they treated us and what they did with us”. Their ideas offer a promising route beyond the discourse of uniqueness and spiritual resistance, towards refocusing memorialisation of the lived experience of genocide victims. Moreover, publicising and talking about their early collections might be a useful starting point for reintroducing a diversity of voices and perspectives into the memorial framework.

JQ