Teaching the Holocaust Through Music and Camps Literature Written in the Camps

by

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The article discusses the social and cultural life among the Jewish prisoners at the Skarżysko-Kamienna forced labor camp in central Poland. The activities included organized observances of religious and national customs and creative arts and performances of many kinds. The activities served several functions for the artists and audiences. Whether as a source of income in the struggle for physical survival, or as a psychological escape from the terrible reality of daily life in the camp, or as a unifying element for the fragmented prisoner population, or as a form of political resistance, these social and cultural activities in the camp constitute a singular phenomenon in the history of the Holocaust.

The "cultural life" of the prisoners in the Nazi camps is a singular phenomenon in the annals of human civilization and barbarism. During the war, the German authorities forbade any sort of cultural activity among prisoners, and most particularly among the Jews who were destined for annihilation. If discovered, any such activity would mean immediate death. Indeed, this was an integral part of National-Socialist policy designed to turn the prisoner population into a drove of disciplined robots devoid of human spirit.

Yet, for the prisoners the songs and poems they wrote, plays and poetry readings they organized, and religious or national customs they observed could serve to counteract the Nazis' intentions and express opposition to the reign of terror. In point of fact, this was their primary form of resistance, both in individual and humanistic and in collective and national terms. The SS camp commanders were well aware that any cultural activity initiated by the prisoners strengthened their will to live, detracted from their blind obedience, enhanced their unity, and planted the seeds of rebellion. Thus, as "experts in social psychology," they sought to nip any manifestation of an independent cultural life in the bud.

A question that must be asked in this context is: To what extent can the prisoners' poems, songs and plays actually be considered "cultural" products? There is no doubt that the works were often poor in quality from a literary standpoint. Perhaps this is only to be expected in view of the impossible conditions under which they were created, by people who were not professional artists, but were merely seeking emotional comfort and who used them to express whatever cultural and intellectual capital they brought with them into the camp. Thus, despite the characteristically uneven, and often poor, quality of the output, it warrants consideration as "cultural activity."

The cultural life in Skarżysko-Kamienna was not unique to this camp. However, while similar activities in Auschwitz, Buchenwald and other concentration camps have been studied by the Polish historian Krzysztof Dunin Wąsowicz, virtually nothing
has been written of this aspect of life in the small forced labor camps in occupied Poland. The few references made in various diaries, testimonies and memoirs of camp survivors indicate that cultural activity in these camps was considerably more extensive and diverse than anything previously known. The relative scantiness of the information we have can be attributed to several factors: the underground nature of the activity, a total lack of German documentation of the subject, and the infrequent mention of it made by camp survivors themselves. Some of the witnesses were completely unaware of the importance of this activity; others deliberately chose to exclude any reference to a "cultural life" from their accounts for fear it would be interpreted as evidence of tolerable conditions in the camp, thereby blunting the atrocity of the Nazi crimes.

Social and Cultural Life

For the prisoners from Radom, who arrived at Skarżysko-Kamienna directly from their homes and villages, the initial shock on entry into the camp was traumatic. For those lucky enough to arrive together with other members of their family or to find a former neighbor, the process of adjustment was somewhat easier, particularly if they had managed to smuggle in valuables. But the systematic starvation soon exhausted whatever property they had, disease claimed their loved ones, and finally they were compelled to cope with the inhuman reality on their own.

Even the kaelniks and Plaszowites, despite their previous experience of camp life, were shocked at the conditions prevailing at Skarżysko. Yet what they faced in Werk A or B was nothing compared to what awaited those unfortunate enough to be sent to Werk C: red or yellow creatures, their hair red or green and their hands black, walking skeletons wrapped in paper sacks held in place by a rope knotted round their waists, struck terror in the hearts of each new prisoner and reinforced the sense that he had indeed landed on "another planet."

All the prisoners fought their daily struggle for survival on two fronts: in the plant and in the camp. In the plant, the backbreaking labor, constantly raised quotas, and blows rained on them by their German and Polish masters drained their strength; in the camp they fought hunger, crowding, filth, disease, and the officials of the internal administration. There was no time to think of "cultural activity," which seemed to evolve by itself out of the need to preserve one's sanity and strengthen the will to live. Instinctively, the prisoners sensed that the monotonous work at the machines was gradually erasing their memory of the past, their feelings, their personality.

The prisoners fought back in several ways. They reminisced with friends or prayed together; they sought to withdraw from the hopeless present by recalling songs they used to know and singing them together. Singing offered a release from their anguish and a moment of comfort. Many discovered unknown talents and tried their hands at composing verse, thereby rekindling their faith in themselves and their humanity. Some were even rewarded for a song with an extra soup ration from the barracks overseer, so that artistic creation became another weapon in the struggle for physical survival.

The social and cultural life evolved in two stages. The prisoners first gave expression to the cultural and intellectual values on which they had been raised at home and in
school. But mere nostalgia could not fulfill the prisoners' cultural needs for very long. The appalling conditions and contact with the autochthonous population of the camp and its many masters gave rise to frustrations and fears that demanded a different outlet. Thus the second stage began -- coping with the new reality by means of original creations. Nearly from the start, the cultural life of the camp was of two forms: relating to the past or to the present. This dichotomy was typical of all four types of cultural activity: religious life, community singing, original compositions, and spontaneous or organized shows.

Preserving Traditions and Folklore

As in other camps, in Skarżysko-Kamienna the authorities imposed a total ban on any form of religious observance. Nevertheless, the Radomites endeavored to maintain elements of their tradition, at great risk to their lives. Testimony indicates that several tefilin (phylacteries) and prayer books were smuggled into Werks A and C, and men gathered secretly to pray together when possible, particularly on Friday evenings. The women, too, attempted to preserve the sanctity of the Sabbath. Those who managed to get their hands on candle ends stood them on the edge of their pallets. The noise and arguments characteristic of the women's barracks were less apparent on the Sabbath eve, and the short free time before the curfew were devoted to visiting friends and occasional communal singing. The situation changed radically in Werk A with the arrival of Rabbi Yitzhak Finkler from Radoszyce, who was brought to the camp with his family in March, 1943 on a transport from Piotrkow Trybunalski. Rabbi Finkel turned his barracks, known as the "Rabiner Barak," into a center for prayer and religious study. Not only his hasidic followers gravitated around him, but also ordinary people seeking advice, answers or merely comfort. With the help of his friends, Rabbi Finkler was able to lead prayers and even conduct abbreviated holiday rites in his barracks. To the amazement of the prisoners, the German camp commandant himself, Paul Kuehnemann, treated the indomitable rabbi with a certain respect.

Some of the Jews brought from Majdanek and Plaszow were also observant. One of them, Jeshajahu Rechter described the heightened atmosphere that pervaded the camp on the eve of holidays: "As Passover neared, people were stricken by terrible longing for the home they no longer had and the family they had lost, longing for the holiday and the Jewish tradition." This led Rechter to organize a seder (holiday feast) for the occupants of his barracks on Passover eve, 1944.

We baked matzos on the stove in the barracks… and used coffee for wine, pouring it into tins. Potatoes and beets served in place of the haroset [a symbolic Passover dish] and all the holiday dishes… We "got hold of" a table and covered it with paper… Thirty prisoners were seated around it… We didn't have a haggadah [the litany of prayers and recitations read at the seder]. There was utter silence and then my son got up and began to sing "How is this night different from all other night?"… We never heard the rest. After those words, everyone burst out crying. That was our haggadah, the haggadah we Jews recited at that Passover seder in Skarżysko-Kamienna.

There were several leaders - rabbis and teachers - who became the centers of circles of followers. Periodically, they organized a minyan for public prayers. On Passover,
1943, the prisoner Eliezar Lewin, formerly from the town of Skarżysko, organized a seder for eight religious figures. They recited the haggadah from memory. They all sensed they were conducting a symbolic seder for all of the camp prisoners.

There was an awesome silence when the four questions were asked and we had no answers, just as there were none for the questions each of us carried in his heart and which remain unanswerable to this day. The candle flames burned like the souls of the thousands of Jews tortured in the camp of horrors, Hasag, and quiet weeping accompanied each passage from the haggadah.

Other testimonies similarly contain accounts of moving experiences associated with the prisoners' attempt to preserve their human spirit and their Jewish identity. In Rabbi Finkler's book, Yehiel Grantstein describes the High Holy Days of 1943 which the rabbi celebrated in his barracks: small groups came and went in order to hear the prayers recited by the rabbi and even the sound of the shofar his friends had obtained for him.

In Werk C, the Wolbrom rabbi organized a minyan in which members of the Jewish administration took part. A large number of prisoners gathered outside, and lookouts were positioned to watch for guards. The observant Jews among those brought from Majdanek and Plaszow also organized minyans for public prayer. David Schwarzmer writes: "I will never forget the Shavuoth holiday of 1944. A group of us men gathered to pray in secret. Yosele Mandelbaum, the famous cantor from Krakow, was there and he conducted the prayers and recited Yizkor [the memorial prayer]. It was an unforgettable experience which left a deep impression on me and all the others."

Some of the prisoners in Werk C tried to attach contemporary significance to the traditional rites. On Passover, 1944, a group celebrated the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising: "At night we recited a prayer for the memory of the heroes of the uprising and the cantor Mandelbaum recited 'El Maleh Rahamim' [the prayer for the dead]."

The efforts to preserve a semblance of Jewish identity also took other forms: groups of hasidim were interned in all three camps, particularly the large two, and they tried to organize themselves for communal life and prayer. There are accounts of several weddings performed, among them that of the Liberman's held in Werk B. The ketuba [marriage contract] was prepared by Rabbi Finkler in Werk A and surreptitiously conveyed to the young couple.

The yearning for the past and the home and family now gone also found an outlet in the evenings of "community singing." In point of fact, these began spontaneously at night, as the prisoners lying on their pallets began to hum familiar Yiddish folk songs.

The hunger for a modicum of consolation and entertainment also produced a number of "artists." In Werk A the singers Chaim Albert and his girlfriend Hannah went from barracks to barracks and were sometimes even invited to sing for the members of the Jewish administration and police. The reigning triumvirate in Werk A --- Elias Albert, who was popular with the prisoners, and the two well-hated police commanders Krzepicki and Teperman --- granted "its singers" special favors.
The "camp elder" of Werk C was Fela Markowiczowa, a complex individual mentioned in numerous memoirs and testimony. Young, feminine and courageous, she was noted for her exceptional pride, which, together with a sense of adventure, led her to risk her life and seize the reins of power in the "living hell." Although she came from a small town, she had high ambitions and knew just whom to bribe. She also understood that Hasag would give her a free hand in running the camp as long as production was not impaired. She succeeded in developing such unusual relationships that both the plant manager and the camp commanders would share a cup of tea with her in her barracks, known as "the White House." This was inconceivable to the other prisoners who had been brought so dismally low. Markowiczowa ran the camp as if it were her private kingdom, strutting about with a whip in her hand and earning herself the title "Katerina the Second."

Markowiczowa sold the posts of the various functionaries and police for large sums of money and indeed her greed was boundless. As "queen" she surrounded herself with a "court" consisting of her relatives and "intimates," totally ignoring the needs of the hundreds of starving prisoners. However, as "monarch" she saw it as her privilege to give her protection to artists. She is known to have saved the lives of the singer Zev Blusztajn and the writer Mordechai Strigler. Thus Markowiczowa encouraged cultural activity in her "kingdom" both out of a thirst for entertainment and a certain megalomania.

Staged Performances ("Concerts")

Within the heterogeneous society of Skarżysko, and particularly Werk C, each of the three groups devised its own form of cultural life in line with its language and mentality. It was in the staged performances that they all came together.

Testimony indicates that these performances, known in the camp as "concerts," first began in Autumn, 1943, in the wake of changes taking place in the camp. From the Polish workers, the prisoners heard of a large Russian offensive on the Eastern front, and this rekindled hope for a rapid end to the war. Before the arrival of the transport from Plaszow, the German authorities, in response to the high mortality rate among the Jews, reduced the frequency of "selections" and permitted the camp doctors to grant sick leave to prisoners. The punishments meted out to those who smuggled food into the camp were also less severe. Hasag, however, was in no hurry to improve the prisoners' living conditions, and the threat of death from starvation was still very real.

This combination of renewed hope and mortal danger intensified the struggle for survival. It was no coincidence that the idea of putting on shows began with prisoners from Majdanek, who were the most impoverished and the first victims to be marked for death in the "selections." Several kaelniks from Warsaw, who still remembered songs and skits from before the war, organized themselves into "entertainment troupes." The first shows were held in secret in the barracks out of fear of informers or raids by the camp guards. They offered the prisoners a few moments of amusement and encouragement, and were profitable for the performers as well who were paid in soup or bread.

In the small world of the camp, nothing could long be hidden from the Jewish officials. The attitude of the Jewish administration to the performers was ambivalent.
On the one hand, they were afraid to be held responsible should the Germans find out, while on the other they themselves were hungry for a bit of entertainment and consolation. During the relatively quiet periods, the Jewish functionaries would invite the troupes to appear before them at the "White House." In time, mixed troupes of men and women from all three groups were formed in Werk A. Noted performers included the singers Chaim and Hannah Albert and Leah Richter, and Maryla Tyrmand, who recited the poems of Julian Tuwim. The programs consisted of songs in Yiddish and Polish, poetry readings, skits, and couplets depicting camp life.

Very scant testimony regarding cultural activity in Werk B exists. Prisoners from the "Radom Period" recall only spontaneous community singing in the barracks. Here, too, the first shows were organized by inmates from Majdanek. With the arrival of the Plaszow transport, the circle of artists was expanded. Pawel Rosenblatt excelled at reciting Polish poetry, and Busiek Waksman from Krakow was famed for her singing. Some of the shows put on in the barracks were benefit performances. Thus, for example, Janek Leinkram from Krakow devised the idea of collecting an "entrance fee" in bread or money to be distributed to the neediest prisoners. Among the kaelnikes several outstanding singers were discovered, as was Warszawska who had a talent for writing feuilletons on camp life. In Summer, 1944, the girls from Majdanek organized a public performance which earned them the other prisoners' admiration.

In contrast to the little we know of the shows put on in the two "better" camps, a relatively clear picture of the performances staged in Werk C emerges from existing testimony.

They began with spontaneous get-togethers of Radomites in the barracks, which soon became a regular practice among the kaelnikes and Plaszowites as well. When the Bund members arrived in the camp, the nature of these occasions changed. Now the rallying songs of the Jewish proletariat in Warsaw rang through the barracks. The militaristic "O'er the Cannons" even crossed the camp fence as the prisoners sang it on their way to work with no regard for their escorts. It became the camp marching song, perhaps as a result of the huge gap between the prisoners' desperate condition and their ardent desire to witness vengeance exacted upon their German masters.

O'er the cannons we shall meet
Under the cannons shall be parted
Rifle to rifle, each other greet
Cannon roar to cannon roar, flashing lightning rumbling thunder
Cannons o'er and cannons under.

The transition from the intimacy of the barracks to public performances can be attributed to three factors: the emergence of a core of artists led by Mordechai Strigler and Hedzja Ross, who recited Yiddish poetry; the support of the camp elder, Fela Markowiczowa; and the establishment of the Rescue Committee.

In Autumn, 1943, Markowiczowa learned that one of the kaelnikes was the singer-dancer Halina who had appeared in Warsaw nightclubs before the war. She immediately ordered a "concert" organized for the camp elite, and had a stage and backdrop especially erected in one of the huts for this purpose. Halina and the singing policeman Najman prepared a two-man show of popular songs and dances.
That same autumn, a Rescue Committee was set up in the camp by members of the Bund and Poalei Zion. The Committee staged "concerts," collecting an entrance fee from the "well-to-do" in order to help the needy. When, in early 1944, the Committee received financial assistance from the Jewish underground organizations in Warsaw, the "concerts" served to cover up the true source of their funds. These shows were also held in the "theater hut." The benches were occupied by Jewish administration officials, policemen and the "monied" prisoners, with the "ordinary" inmates crowded around the walls. There was singing and dancing, and Strigler's poems were read. The evening reached its height as those listening from outside joined the audience in the hut for the singing of the camp anthem, "In Camp Skarżysko."

As we have seen, the former members of the Akiva youth movement's Krakow branch did much to further the "cultural life" of Werk C. Along with the musicologist and violinist Mosze Imber (who had led the movement's choirs in Krakow), this group included the three Szechter sisters (among them Maria Szechter-Lewinger), the poet Rina Kornblum, and others. They were joined by the surviving members of other Zionist youth movements, including the poets Ilona and Henryka Karmel and Helena Blumengraber, the singer Zvi Kanar and the three Blusztajn brothers, and Wolf Mor, Lunka Fuss, Reuven Zisskind, the Gotlib brothers, and Malka Cukerbrot who tried her hand at writing. The group became a close-knit unit, giving each other support, a true "oasis" in the brutal wilderness of Werk C.

The Akiva members sought to present an alternative to the dominant Yiddish culture created by the Bund members and Radomites. Whether consciously or not, this desire was undoubtedly motivated to a certain extent by the traditional rivalry between the Zionist movement and the Bund. Thus, Oneg Shabat evenings (Sabbath eve celebrations) of the type held by the Zionist youth movements were soon organized in the barracks. The program included the stories of Maria Szechter-Lewinger, poems by the Karmel sisters, and poems by Julian Tuwim, such as "Radio of Birds" or "The Locomotive," read by Fela Szechter and Helena Blumengraber. There was also community singing of Polish songs, hasidic melodies, and Hebrew songs of Eretz Israel. The camp marching song, "O'er the Cannons," became popular even among the Krakow girls who, although they knew no Yiddish whatsoever, sang it lustily.

Malka Hutner states: "Those were the best moments of my life in the camp. They encouraged us to continue to fight for our survival and carried us on the wings of imagination into a better, earlier world now lost to us... The will to express ourselves, to find an escape from the humiliation, pain and despondency, was very strong."

The driving force behind the Akiva group was Mosze Imber, who had managed to smuggle his violin into the camp. When the Jewish police discovered this, they invited Imber to appear "at court." (He invariably shared with his friends the bread and jam he received for these "command performances.") When Imber decided to set up a choir, he did not lack for volunteers and within a short time had brought together 15-18 boys and girls for the purpose. The typhus epidemic in the Winter of 1943-44, however, put this project on hold for a while.

Spring, 1944 was a time of radical change in Hasag policy. The epidemic had claimed the lives of a large number of prisoners, and there was no chance of any new
transports of Jews. In order to forestall a drop in munitions production, the Hasag management, with the consent of the district SS headquarters, decided to improve the prisoners' diet and living conditions. The bread and soup rations were increased and clothes were brought from Majdanek and distributed in the camp. Hidden in these clothes, which had been taken from the Jews marked for extermination, the Skarżysko prisoners found money and valuables. As a result, trade with the Poles, which had almost ceased completely during the epidemic, now again became brisk, enabling many of the debilitated to regain their strength. This new era was embodied by the newly appointed commandant of Werk C, the Wehrmacht officer Schulze, who decided to "clean up" Markowiczowa's rotting kingdom. The barracks were repainted, a new infirmary erected, the latrines cleaned, and even flowerbeds planted.

In May, 1944, two events rocked the camp. First, five Jews caught stealing leather belts (with which to sew shoes) from the plant were publicly executed, and second, an area of forest adjacent to Werk A, was fenced off and the patelnia (frying pan) constructed within. This was a mysterious place in which the Sonderkommando burnt bodies removed from mass graves. The rising columns of smoke struck terror in the hearts of the prisoners already fearful of their fate. It was at this very time that Schulze ordered the Jewish administration to arrange "public concerts" for the whole camp. To this end, a stage was thrown up in the forest and a small band was organized which the prominente even took advantage of for ballroom dancing.

Feverish preparations for the concert went on in the camp. The chorus and actors rehearsed endlessly after working hours. For both the prisoners, who were suspicious of the Germans' true intentions, and the Poles, who followed the Jews' activities from across the fence, this entire affair was a complete mystery. In retrospect, it seems clear that with the Russian forces drawing nearer the camp and rumors of evacuation flying about, the authorities were instituting a more liberal policy in order to ensure peace and quiet and prevent any signs of resistance.

The German managers and camp commandants were invited to the concert, and special front-row benches set up for them. The prisoners, including delegations from Werks A and B, sat on the ground. The program was full and diverse, and the quality of the performance was generally quite high. Dance troupes and chamber choirs took part. In honor of their guests, the Blusztajn brothers sang German marching songs and there was popular Polish music as well. "Live reporting" on camp life, loaded with satiric barbs, generated waves of laughter. A modern dance performed by one of the women to the music of "Kol Nidrei" (from the Yom Kippur liturgy) was a particularly thrilling moment. Israel Bien, a former chemical engineer, displayed rare talent as a mime.

The highlight of the program was the appearance of the professional-quality choir, led by Mosze Imber, which sang in Yiddish and Hebrew, and did not forget the camp song "O'er the Cannons." The final piece, "Horat Ha-Galil" was accompanied by the dancing of the hora (an Israeli dance) and completely swept up the audience, including the Germans, who responded with thunderous applause.

This cultural idyll, however, did not last for long. At night, the dull thuds of Russian cannons could already be heard. A rumor spread through the camp that the Germans were planning to blow up all the factories along with the three camps before beating
their retreat. In late July, 1944, following a large-scale "selection," some 600 ailing, debilitated and yellow prisoners were murdered on the spot. During the night between the 30th and 31st of July, 250 prisoners escaped from Werk C to the surrounding forest. Among them were Fela Markowiczowa, most of the Jewish police, and a group of Bund members, including Henoch Ross and his wife. Almost all were killed, either by the Germans and Ukrainians or by the locals. The prisoners remaining from the three camps were transferred to the Hasag plants at Czstochowa or to Buchenwald, from whence they were sent off to company camps at Hasag factories throughout Germany.

The cultural activities at the Skarżysko camp fulfilled several functions in the prisoners' life. For the creative artists and performers, it was often a source of income, that is, a weapon in the war for physical survival. Psychologically, it was a means of escaping from reality, an outlet for the constant frustration and fear, and a source of hope, strengthening the will to keep fighting to stay alive. In social terms, the joint activities constituted one of the few uniting forces in the fragmented prisoner society and encouraged a feeling of solidarity.

From a historical perspective, it might be said that this was the primary form of political resistance for the entire prisoner population. The prisoners were totally powerless against the German extermination machine, and no talent or "concert" could possibly alter their fate. The only thing they could do was to delay the end by helping each other and by devising cultural activities. Whether or not they were aware of it at the time, they sought to display their cultural heritage out of a profound sense that even if this was no more than their swan song, they had much to be proud of both as Jews and as human beings.