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A Resistance Requiem

“Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back to loneliness.” This quote by Maya Angelou explains how music can be an escape in a time of need. It can create a safe place and help restore humanity. During the Holocaust, Jews trapped in the ghettos used music as a form of social resistance. While the Nazis tried to strip them of their humanity, Jews used music to maintain it. Music is a powerful form of resistance that can fuel one’s emotions, unite people, and even be used as an escape from reality, and Jewish people trapped in the ghettos sought out music to defy their Nazi oppressors.

Conditions in the ghettos were grueling at best. The Jews’ rights were instantly taken from them once they entered these horrid places. The ghettos were overflowing with people, to the point where multiple families would stay in one apartment. In most ghettos, the plumbing was broken or nonexistent. In turn, the streets became littered with both trash and human waste. The Germans dictated a ration of food for the abundance of people and “the food rations were insufficient for supporting the ghettos’ inhabitants” (“Daily Life in the Ghettos”). Leyb Goldin, an inhabitant of the Warsaw ghetto, describes this starvation when he wrote, “The pangs of hunger are far more terrible, more murderous, more choking than any sickness” (“Chronicle of a Single Day”). Unfortunately, he perished due to starvation a few months after writing this. The residents that had money or valuable items could trade them for food that was smuggled in, although “the Germans employed brutal measures against the smugglers, including both public and private executions” (“Daily Life in the Ghettos”). Others had to beg or steal in hopes of

curing their unsatisfied hunger. They did not have heat during the winter and many “people weakened by hunger and exposure to the cold became easy victims of disease; tens of thousands died in the ghettos from illness, starvation, or cold. Some individuals killed themselves to escape their hopeless lives” (“Life in the Ghettos”). Large groups of people were also prohibited from convening but many still tried to pursue their education or practice their religion. Not even the threat of severe punishment could prevent the Jewish people from trying to carry on with their lives.

Despite all odds and the punishments they could face, the people of the ghettos still came together to make music. Whether it be an orchestra, a choir, a musical, or someone writing a song, people made music. In the ghettos, music was used as an escape as well as to instill hope and brighten people’s spirits. As group gatherings were banned, any time they would hold concerts or plays, they risked their lives. In Vilna, “music institutions were also set up in the ghetto” (“During the Holocaust: Vilna Ghetto”). They had a music school that taught piano, violin, singing, and music theory. They also had a children’s choir. The people trapped in the ghettos tried to “do everything possible that when the children come out of the cage they [would] be able to fly” (“Zenia Malecki”). Songs written during this time were often calls to action. In a song by Hirsh Glik, one of the lyrics says, “This song a people sang amid collapsing walls, with grenades in hand they heeded to the call” (“Zog Nit Keynmol”). This song became the anthem of the partisans. The notes of refuge and resistance also infiltrated concentration camps, as “victims responded to the catastrophe that was engulfing them through music” (“Music on the Brink of Destruction”). Music sparked hope and also strengthened people’s resolve so that they could continue to fight for their lives. (“Holocaust Music of the Ghettos and Camps”)

Dovid Beyglman composed many songs during his time in the Lodz ghetto. Beyglman was born into a family of musicians in March of 1887 in Poland. When he was a child, his family moved to Lodz. Beyglman and his father both played in an orchestra at the Zanderberg Theater. In 1912, he became a music director there. He would arrange music along with writing original songs. He also would arrange Yiddish operettas. When World War I broke out, he was touring with a few different performing groups but “when the Second World War broke out, he went back to Łódź. Together with Moshe Pulaver he established a small theatre in the ghetto where he composed prolifically, even writing his own lyrics” (“Dovid Beyglman”). In the ghetto, he continued to compose and arrange music. He also would perform and conduct concerts at the Culture House of the Lodz Ghetto. He would direct a dance group, choir, and ensemble. Belyglman’s wife, Andge Foderman, passed away in the ghetto, and in August of 1944, Belyglman was deported to Auschwitz. He took with him his music and violin, trusting that he would make it to the end of this war. However, soon after he arrived, he was killed, leaving his son as the only survivor of their small family. Beyglman was one of the many talented composers that contributed to 85 performances in the Lodz Ghetto, where over 70,000 people sought solace in music. (“Dovid Beyglman”)

Through music, Jews were able to resist the Nazis by staying united and preserving their humanity. Life in the ghettos was strenuous as they were given little to no food and disease ran rampant. Music provided solace from their everyday life and was an important form of social resistance. People like Dovid Belyglman were very influential in the movement directing multiple choirs and orchestras, resisting the Nazis’ attempts to steal their humanity. Resistance in the ghettos showed that, even in such dire times, hope still prevails, as does a person's will to live.

Early memorization of the Holocaust mainly focuses on armed resistance, but survivors and academics alike have shed light on other forms of resistance as well. While all other forms of resistance take bravery, I think that armed resistance took a whole new approach to the word. They had weapons and were fighting against the Nazis. They risked their lives in hopes that they could change something they knew to be wrong. They still fought even though they knew death was a likely outcome. Another form of resistance I think should get more recognition is spiritual resistance. The Jews were being persecuted because of their identity, yet they still clung to this identity as a way of maintaining their humanity. I would showcase music as resistance by having people perform the songs that still echo long after their creators were gone. All these different forms of resistance deserve to get the proper recognition and to be remembered because they show Jewish resilience while remaining true to themselves.

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