Musical Expressions of Incarcerated Jewish Composers during the Holocaust

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Introduction

There are many ways to tell a story. There are stories told to us by our parents. There are stories printed in books. And there are stories told in music. The stories presented here give their audiences not so much of a *plot*, as an *atmosphere*. Hints of trauma, snippets of chaos, and movements of grief: songs borne of the Holocaust are more felt in the body than understood in the mind. Nevertheless, these compositions have occupied the attention and enthusiasm of music historians and scholars since their inception. They connect us, viscerally, to our past. They are puzzles that today we are privileged to piece together while we consider the lives of the composers and the circumstances in which they lived.

Soon after the Nazis rose to power in 1933, the first actions in their process of formal discrimination against Jews and other minorities began.[1] Led by the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebles, the arts (in all of its expressions) aligned with a Nazi ideology of discrimination.[2] In the same year, The Reich Chamber of Culture (Reichskulturkammer) began an insidious campaign to control every aspect of German culture.[3] They empowered and encouraged the performance

1 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Antisemitic Legislation, 1933-1939." *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, 2020. https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitic-legislation-1933-1939

2 "Reichskulturkammer & Reichsmusikkammer." *Music and the Holocaust*, 2020. http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/politics-and-propaganda/third-reich/reichskulturkammer/

3 Heiber, Helmut. "Joseph Goebbels: German Propagandist." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 25 Oct. 2020. https://www.britannica.com/biogra-

and distribution of music and other works of art that glorified Aryan idioms, while suppressing and banning art and music originating from people of different races and ethnicities. Modern styles, such as jazz and the avant-garde, which were gaining attention across the globe, were banned as "degenerate." Myriad expressions in musical and visual arts were publicly labeled by the Reichskulturkammer as works of shame and obstruction. Similar acts of crude censorship and radical discrimination gradually gained momentum throughout Europe, serving as an effective weapon against countless Jewish musicians and composers. While many banned musicians fled Europe at this time, others remained without any promise of professional future.[4] Many of those who stayed in Europe were later deported, incarcerated, and murdered, leaving only their music as testimony. This essay presents several works from select composers of this era, and considers elements of musical resistance from their early compositions, before the Holocaust, and then later, while incarcerated in ghettos and concentration camps.

Music in the Holocaust has long occupied the attention of scholars across disciplines, and continues today as a focus of inquiry and appreciation. In considering the general phenomenon of music-making, researchers posit that the act of composing or performing music is both cathartic for the artist, reflecting the circumstances of the musician, and convocative, fostering a sense of community.[5] In the extreme circumstances of the

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4 Haas, Michael. *Forbidden Music: The Jewish Composers Banned by the Nazis*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

5 "Music in the Vilna Ghetto." *Music, Memory, and Resistance during the Holocaust.* Facing History and Ourselves, 2020. 21 Feb. 2017. https://www.facinghistory.org/music-memory-and-resis-

Holocaust, however, new functions of music emerge, both practical and ethereal. The music that comes out of the ghettos and concentration camps reflects a triumphant artistic spirit and firm resistant posture against ethnic hate and genocide. "Through fostering a sense of community," scholar Guido Fackler writes, "music served…as a form of cultural resistance, as practical assistance in the struggle to survive."[6]

In light of the Reich's discriminatory acts against the arts, their persistent antisemitic action and legislation against the Jewish people in Europe at this time, and the communal, cultural, and survival dreams of incarcerated artists, I consider the works of three musicians: Mordechai Gebirtig, Gideon Klein and Pavel Haas – all of whom were imprisoned in ghettos and camps, and murdered by the Nazis. While their circumstances differ, their music shares elements of coping, resistance, and survival. A Yiddish song by Gebirtig, three art songs and a piano sonata by Klein, and a choral composition in Hebrew by Haas all vary in scope, literary style, and musical composition. Some are lively and hopeful, others prophetic, and yet each reflects the human experience of unspeakable tragic suffering. This essay seeks to illuminate these works by considering the unique circumstances which brought them to life and the stories of the men who composed them. In so doing, I explore these selections as an enduring record of sentient composers who found expression, against all odds, before murder. It is my hope that by listening to their musical messages, readers might find pause to reflect

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6 Fackler, Guido. "Music in Concentration Camps 1933–1945." *Music & Politics,* vol. 1, no. l, 2007. https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0001.102

upon both their torment and heroic, resistant response to outrageous hate and discrimination. Their compositions tell the story of a Jewish world destroyed, and never to be again.

Es Brent (1936)
Mordechai Gebirtig (1877-1942) and Pogroms in Poland

The early works of poet and songwriter Mordechai Gebirtig most often reflect Jewish life in the Shtetl,[7] his family relations, and friendships. In contrast to these, his 1936 song, *Es Brent* (It is Burning) expresses resistance to the Nazis years before the waging of the Second World War. Born and raised in Kraków, Poland, Gebirtig was a carpenter by trade. His life and work in Kraków was dedicated to the Jewish theater and to songwriting. After serving five years in the Austrian army during World War One (where Gebirtig continued to write and compose), his first book of poems, *Folkstimlekh* (In the Folk Mode) was published in 1920. Having captivated readers in Poland and throughout Europe,[8] Gebirtig followed up with a second volume out of Vilna entitled, *Mayne Lieder* (My Songs), in 1936.[9]

Of the events in Gebirtig's extraordinary life, few proved more influential on his writing than the pogrom

7 Zollman, Joellyn. "What Were Shtetls?" *Modern Jewish History*. My Jewish Learning, 2020. https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shtetl-in-jewish-history-and-memory/

8 ORT: Obchestvo Remeslenogo Truda [Association for the Promotion of Skilled Trades].
"Mordechai Gebirtig." *Music and the Holocaust*. http://holocaust-music.ort.org/places/ghettos/krakow/gebirtigmordechai/

9 Pasternak, Velvel. *The Mordechai Gebirtig Songbook*. Tara Publications, 1998.

in Przytyk, a small town located in east-central Poland.[10] The town of Przytyk was home to 1930 inhabitants, 1852 (96%) of whom were Jewish. Its residents were craftsmen, traders, and farmers who struggled for livelihood. Business in Przytyk principally involved bakeries, slaughterhouses, and shops of common trade and services. Together, town merchants would organize markets to attract buyers from nearby areas. In February 1936, Polish authorities suspended the market out of fear of antisemitic rioting. The pogrom began after several weeks of suspended trading, with a small dispute between Jewish and Polish merchants. Likely incited by antisemitic party politicians, Polish peasants rioted against Jews in Przytyk. In defense, Jewish townspeople organized an armed group to fight back. In his historical analysis of Polish Jewry and politics, Emanuel Melzer emphasizes the brave Jewish resistance in Przytyk in years preceding the Second World War.[11] And yet, despite their brave acts against the rioters, the incident nevertheless proved disturbing and frightening to the Jewish community in Europe, that it gained international attention in the press; the *New York Times* reporting "anti-Semitic excesses"[12] as "mob violence" and "mournful."[13]

Among Gebirtig's resistance songs, *Es Brent* is his

10 Polonsky, Antony. "Przytyk Pogrom." *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe.* Translated by Rami Hann, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 2010. https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Przytyk_Pogrom

11 Melzer, Emanuel. *No Way Out: The Politics of Polish Jewry, 1935-1939*. Hebrew Union College Press, 1997, p. 56.

12 Special Cable to the New York Times. "Poles Again Attack Jews: Six More Nationalists are arrested for Przytyk Rioting." *New York Times*, 3 Jun. 1936, p. 14.

13 Wireless to the New York Times. "Polish Jews Depressed: Mourning Prevails over Conviction of Ten Jews in Rioting Case." *New York Times*, 28 Jun. 1936, p. 8.

most remembered and recited. In it, Gebirtig expresses what can only be understood in hindsight as a prophecy of wrath, predicting the horrific form of antisemitism yet to come. Today, modern performances of this Yiddish original continue to populate streaming services and archival collections.[14]

ES BRENT

Es brent, briderlekh, es brent.
Undzer orem shtetl, nebekh, brent!
Beyze vintn irgazon,
Brekhn, brenen un tseblozn,
Un ir shteyt un kukt,
Azoy zikh, mit farleygte hent.
Oy, ir shteyt un kukt
Azoy zikh, vi undzer shtetl brent.

Es brent, briderlekh, es brent.
Undzer orem shtetl, nebekh, brent!
Es hobn shoyn di fayertsungen
Dos gantse shtetl ayngeshlungen.
Alts arum shoyn brent,
Un ir shteyt un kukt
Azoy zikh, vi undzer shtetl brent.

Es brent, briderlekh, es brent!
Di hilf iz nor in aykh gevent,
Az dos shtetl iz aykh tayer,
Nemt di keylim, lesht dos fayer,
Lesht dos fayer mit eygn blut,
Shteyt nit brider
Ot azoy zikh mit farleygte hent.
Shtetyt nit brider
Lesht dos fayer, vayl undzer shtetl brent.

14 Peerce, Jan. "Es Brent." Provided by Universal Music Group, *YouTube*, Vanguard Records, 2006, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jfkbG5drFM

IT IS BURNING

It is burning, brothers, it is burning.
Our poor little town, a pity, burns!
Furious winds blow,
Breaking, burning and scattering,
And you stand around
With folded arms.
O, you stand and look
While our town burns.

It is burning, brothers, it is burning
Our poor little town, a pity, burns~
The tongues of fire have already
Swallowed the entire town.
Everything surrounding it is burning,
And you stand around
While our town burns.

It is burning, brothers, it is burning!
You are the only source of help.
If you value your town,
Take up the tools to put out the fire,
Put out the fire with your own blood.
Don't just stand there, brothers,
with your arms folded.
Don't just stand there, brothers,
Put out the fire, because our town is burning.

Mordechai Gebirtig's "Es Brent." Translated by Mindle Crystel Gross.

In this song, Gebirtig watches the horror of the pogrom from a distance, foreshadowing what is to come. Depicting the horrors of hateful acts that precede the Holocaust, these illustrious prophecies become influential poetic and musical predictions of the Holocaust. The lyrics in *Es Brent* are uncharacteristic blunt expressions of anger,

frustration, and calls for action.[15] Although many consider this song to be Mordechai Gebirtig's direct response to the pogrom on the Jews of Przytyk, it is an expressive outpouring of many violent acts against Jewish people at this time.[16] In other songs, too, Gebirtig raises his poetic voice in a call for action and resistance. One such song is, *Chanale* (Hannah), which gives the urgent plea for action: "Brothers, we shall not be silent! / It's the blood of our sister! / We'll pay them back / with bombs and grenades / and the red flag in our midst."[17] Themes of action, fidelity, and hope resound in Gerbirtig's compositions. His song, *Minutn Fun Bitokhn* (Moments of Confidence), appeals to the power of faith and redemption: "Jews, be merry! / Their end is coming / and the war will be over. / Be merry and do not worry. / Have patience and confidence / and hold these close at hand. Our spirit is our weapon / and it will keep us together!"[18] Describing Gebirtig's life and work, Professor Nathan Cohen[19] writes:

> Until 1940, Gebirtig lived in Kraków with his wife and family and continued to write songs that reflected the dark mood of the time, although his songs still contained a note of hope for a better future. In October

15 Gebirtig, Mordechai. "Es Brent." Translated by Mindle Crystel Gross. Performed by Dudu Fisher, Helicon Records, 2003. *Jewish World Life Online*. http://www.hebrewsongs.com/?song=esbrent

16 Gebirtig, Mordecai, and Gertrude Schneider. *Mordechai Gebirtig: His Poetic and Musical Legacy*. Praeger, 2000. Musical score.

17 Ibid., 11.

18 Pasternak, 114.

19 The Joseph and Norman Berman Department of Literature of the Jewish People. Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 5290002, Israel. Nathan.Cohen@biu.ac.il

> 1940, his family was expelled, along with other Jews, to a village on the outskirts of the city, where Gebirtig, whose health was deteriorating, continued to write. One of the songs he wrote then was called *A Tog fun Nekome* (A Day for Revenge), a song of solace and encouragement about the future downfall of the persecutors. In April 1942, the Gebirtig family was transported to the ghetto, where Mordkhe still continued to write. On 4 June 1942, while being marched to the Kraków train station on the way to the Bełżec death camp, Gebirtig was murdered by random Nazi fire. [20]

Mordechai Gebirtig was shot and killed during the liquidation of the Kraków Ghetto, leaving a treasure trove of brilliant Jewish musical expression in his wake.

Three Songs Opus 1 for Voice and Piano (1940) Gideon Klein (1919-1945) and Uncertainty in Prague

Months before the deportation of Mordechai Gebirtig and his family to a small ghetto on the outskirts of Kraków, atrocities were spreading in other parts of Europe. Such was the case in Czechoslovakia, where German troops invaded on March 15, 1939 and immediately enforced the discriminatory Nuremberg Laws. Israeli historian and archivist, Livia Rothkirchen writes: "The

20 Cohen, Nathan. "Gebirtig, Mordkhe." *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe.* Translated by Rami Hann, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 2010. 16 May 2013. https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Gebirtig_Mordkhe.

German occupation of Bohemia and Moravia brought about an instant change in the life of the Jewish populace… the Gestapo marched in and immediately launched a wave of mass arrests…"[21] Jewish people were forced to leave their jobs, subjected to devastating social and professional discriminations. Jewish musicians, for example, were banned from all public performances. Jewish students were expelled from their schools. It was this untimely aggression that led Gideon Klein - a young, talented pianist, composer, and music scholar at the height of his career – down a tragic line of professional derailment. In a very short time, he lost each of his accomplished roles one after the other.[22]

Born in 1919, Klein's exceptional musical talent prompted his parents to enroll him in piano studies at the best Czechoslovakian schools. At the age of eleven, Klein moved several hours from his hometown in Přerov to Prague.[23] Accompanied by his older sister, Gideon began a new life in the city at a young age. Under the tutelage of a renowned professoriate, young Gideon studied piano, composition, and musicological research. He enrolled in university studies in Prague, and took classes at the Prague Conservatory. By 1939, with much of his time devoted to concert performance, his pianistic career took off.[24] At the same time, he completed twelve compositions for piano and strings and sketched numerous pieces, all of which would remain unfinished due to political circumstance.[25] Because

21 Rothkirchen, Livia. *The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia: Facing the Holocaust*. University of Nebraska Press, 2005, p. 103.
22 Slavický, Milan. *Gideon Klein: A Fragment of Life and Work.* Helvetica-Tempora, 1996, p. 14.
23 Ibid., 13.
24 Ibid., 14.
25 Ibid., 15.

of the German invasion, and the resultant uncertainties it brought to the Czechoslovakian city, Klein accelerated his studies to complete his master class in a single year. In the spring of 1940, he was forced to leave the Conservatory. Forbidden to leave the country, Gideon then declined an invitation to study at the London Royal Academy. Klein's legacy is limited to those 1939 compositions and the others he produced while incarcerated in Terezín. These are the only testament of his great talent in composition and artistry.

In response to political and military circumstance, Klein began to espouse musical resistance as early as 1939. Cornered and discriminated, he consciously refused Nazi abominations by adopting the non-Jewish stage name, Karl Vránek. As Vránek, he secretly performed concerts at private residences. It was at this time that Klein began setting a melancholic song cycle for voice and piano. Although Klein composed these songs shortly after his expulsion from higher education and the subsequent ban of his work, music historians still do not know if these were written in direct response to the discriminatory Nuremberg Laws.[26] As all three songs (*Vodotrysk*, *Polovina Zivota, and Soumrak Shury Sesouvá Se)* feature thematic elements of solitude and despair, it is natural to assume that their compositions originate in the unclear and hopeless crisis with which Klein was coping.

Vodotrysk (The Fountain) was composed on May 25, 1940. Klein set his music to a poem by Johann Klaj (1616-1656), a priest who was reviving German literature. Its soothing springtime scenes may have given Klein much-needed solace. In an atonal style reminiscent of Klein's twentieth-century milieu (honoring the styles

26 Ibid., 15.

of Schoenberg and Berg), Gideon incorporated rapid melodies to resemble the flow of water fountains in the text. Shifting lively, vibrant sounds to the melancholic when Klaj's text changes, Klein challenges his singers with high notes. While Klein's youthful exploration of art-song does not fully grasp the demands made on the human voice, his choice of text is intriguing.[27] Klein brings to life a text which begins with a beautiful description of a fountain and its serene landscape and then gradually prepares the reader for a change of season: "The running springs murmur and whisper / From them this green expanse has run / They shiver, deplore and fear already / The snowy time."[28] The youthful, generative scene is met with a fear of an unknown snowy time which threatens to stop their springs of pleasure by bringing cold and ice.[29]

While Klein composed *Polovina Zivota* (The Middle of Life) a few weeks before *Vodotrysk* (May 6, 1940), he decided to place it in the middle of the two outer pieces in the cycle. It is not the only composition in which Klein wrote movements within a certain chronology and later changed the order of things to retrofit across a cycle.

27 NAXOS of America. "3 Songs, Op. 1: No. 1, Vodotrysk." Spiritual Resistance: Music from Theresienstadt. Performed by Wolfgang Holzmair, baritone, and Russell Ryan, piano. *YouTube*, 11 Mar. 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0NnANklRm6U&-feature=youtu.be

28 For a complete reading of *Vodotrysk* (Czech, German & English) see: Gertsenzon, Galit. "Gideon Klein's Songs Op. 1 for High Voice and Piano." *Music and the Holocaust*, 15 Feb. 2020, http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/places/theresienstadt/klein-gideon/gideon-kleins-songs/

29 Gertsenzon, Galit. "Gideon Klein's Songs Op. 1 for High Voice and Piano." *Music and the Holocaust*, 2020 Feb. 15. http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/places/theresienstadt/klein-gideon/gideon-kleins-songs/

For this piece, Klein turns to another important German author, the celebrated Friedrich Hölderlin. The text begins with a symbolic description of springtime: "With yellow pears / and full of wild roses / the land hangs over the lake." Pears, swans, and roses are often used in poetry to depict idealized nature, love, purity, and virility. The text continues: "You fair swans / and drunk with kisses / you dunk your heads / into the sacred, neutral water." Again, this beautiful nature scene transforms to a dark, brooding atmosphere, seething melancholy throughout the text by a speaker who mourns the solitude of winter. In the poem's musical setting, Klein evokes slow-walking steps through whole-tone passages, reflective of the contemporary musical trends of his time.[30] These reverberations signal an inward voyage – an introversion toward an ambiguous destination. The final lines suggest sad self-reflection, confusion, and despair: "Woe is me! where, when / it is winter, will I get flowers / and where the sunshine / and the shade of the earth? / The walls stand / mute and cold / in the wind the weathervanes / rattle."[31] Once again, Klein sets his music to a text rich with light and shadow, stone and wind. For the second time in the cycle, intonations and allusions of solitude and hopelessness seem to signify Klein's extraordinary personal circumstances.[32]

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30 Slavický., 22.

31 For a complete reading of *Polovina Zivota* (German, Czech & English) see: Gertsenzon, Galit. "Gideon Klein's Songs Op. 1 for High Voice and Piano." *Music and the Holocaust*, 15 Feb. 2020, http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/places/theresienstadt/klein-gideon/gideon-kleins-songs/

32 NAXOS of America. "3 Songs, Op. 1: No. 2, Polivina života." Spiritual Resistance: Music from Theresienstadt. Performed by Wolfgang Holzmair, baritone, and Russell Ryan, piano. *YouTube*, 11 Mar. 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DoaRVGA6mU&-feature=youtu.be

Klein completed the third and final song in this cycle, *Soumrak Shury Sesouvá Se* (Dusk has Fallen from on High) on June 30, 1940. While poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe presents the text in two distinct stanzas, Klein scripts three musical sections each with a different musical atmosphere and interesting piano solo passages to precede the vocal parts. The song begins with a quiet interlude, as the piano plays a main melody which the voice will later repeat. The singer commences with the sentence: "Dusk has fallen from on high / All that was near now is distant." Albeit foreboding and minimalistic, this phrase combines sparse descriptions of landscape, time, and personal testimony. Supported by a simple chordal texture and meditative sonorities, the first phrase is followed up with piano changes. Soon, the mood shifts, and a solo section envelopes a tense atmosphere, accelerated tempo, and repeated notes and rhythms to prepare the singer for the next phrase, a sign of hope: "But there the evening star appears / Shining with its lovely light!" The piano follows this text in a rather meditative, reflective mood, as if trying to convey the shimmering star with a series of ascending notes and flickering sounds. A descendant melody follows, preparing for yet another shift: "All becomes an uncertain blur / The mists creep up the sky." The piano's melodic imitation is trailed again by accelerated, repeated tones which amplify the unease about to come: "Ever blacker depths of darkness / Are mirrored in the silent lake." Again, the piano gives yet another solo section enhanced with a chromatic chordal passage and repeated notes which gradually become louder, then descend, almost lost, into broken chords. The effect is an active seeking for a resolved, reassuring chord. Within this musical grappling,

the piano plays throughout many registers, as if blindly looking for an answer in the dark. Eventually, a chord is settled from which another phrase turns to prepare the voice. It reaches a new sonority, but does not stop. The piano speaks on its own, changes course, and returns to an accelerated tempo and repeated notes. Here, the text, "Now in the eastern reaches I sense the moon's light and glow / The branching hair of slender willows frolics on the nearby water" conveys a sense of wholeness. The piano responds to the voice in complete and broken chords. While the final phrase of the poem creates a sense of hope, there is a cold calmness to it: "Through the play of moving shadows / The moon's magic light quivers down / And coolness steals through the eye / Soothingly into the heart."[33] The song concludes with a piano solo section that aligns with the text to articulate parallel emotion - pulsing creeps through the chordal repetitions, as the heart beats, while slow melody in the bass gives way to a calm, dark ending. The bass melody gradually silences as the chords slowly repeat and die.[34]

While in Prague, Gideon Klein became acquainted with Czech translations of German poetry, perhaps at the encouragement of family friend and prominent translator, Erik A. Saudek. Klein made many friendships, in fact, with members of Prague's literary establishment, and he

33 For a complete reading of *Soumrak Shury Sesouvá Se* (Czech, German & English) see: Gertsenzon, Galit. "Gideon Klein's Songs Op. 1 for High Voice and Piano." Music and the Holocaust, 15 Feb. 2020, http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/places/theresienstadt/klein-gideon/gideon-kleins-songs/

34 NAXOS of America. "3 Songs, Op. 1: No. 3, Soumrak." Spiritual Resistance: Music from Theresienstadt. Performed by Wolfgang Holzmair, baritone, and Russell Ryan, piano. *YouTube,* 11 Mar. 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZdXK-M8Hu0&-feature=youtu.be

was thus inspired to read, and later set music to, various German texts. Klein's literary selections have prompted scholars to question his interest in German texts during such an uncertain time in his life. Klein's music reflects a melancholic idiom that is indeed unusual, and this has led many to consider his sentimental identification with the spring and summer months following his expulsion from formal training. Some posit that, by setting music to these German poems, Klein exercised his creative impulse toward musical resistance. It is fascinating to consider how empowering this might have been. On the topic of the Verdi *Requiem* in Terezín, musician Raphael Schächter, a contemporary of Klein's and his collaborator at the camp, is known to have aptly stated: "It was possible to sing to the Germans what it was impossible to say to them."[35] Perhaps this was Klein's calling, to smuggle the words and transmute their meaning so to create lyrical resistance in song.

Of the music that came out of the Terezín camp, scholar David Bloch noted that, "this was, in effect, a direct continuation of private cultural events in Prague which had already been instigated as a consequence of the Nazi-occupation and of the Nuremberg racial laws. Jewish artists were no longer allowed to appear in public and Jews were not permitted to go out after eight o'clock in the evening."[36] It is my strong belief, therefore, that given his personal circumstances in 1939-1940, Gideon Klein's songs are a musical reflection of the time preceding his

35 Beckerman, Michael and Naomi Tadmor. "'Lullaby': The Story of a Niggun." *Music & Politics*, vol. 10, issue 1, 2016, p. 5. https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0010.101

36 Bloch, David. "Hidden Meanings: Musical Symbols in Terezín." *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 32, issue 4, 2006, pp. 110-124.

deportation to the Terezín concentration camp – a place from which he would never return. With the engagement of powerful text, Klein expresses a variety of melancholic and nostalgic moods characteristic of the uncertainties in Prague and in his life. Roughly two years after composing his *Opus 1* song cycle, Klein was deported to Terezín. Here he dedicated the last years of his life to music education, music composition, and performance. In 1945, Klein was transferred to Auschwitz, then to the Fürstengrube concentration camp where he was killed just weeks before its liberation. He was twenty-five.

Music in Terezín (1942-44)

Less than an hour's drive north of Prague, the Terezín concentration camp and ghetto (also known as, "Theresienstadt") served several functions during the Second World War. It was established in 1941 by the Schutzstaffel (SS) in a fortress town. With its adjacent prison, Terezín functioned as both a concentration camp (receiving 144,000 deportees, bound for labor camps and the gas chambers of Auschwitz) and a retirement settlement for older Jews, many of whom were quite prominent. In its first year (1941-42), Jews from across Europe began arriving. Unlike other camps, Terezín inmates were held for long periods of time before deportation to other sites. As such, the camp community was able to establish its own administrative committee to help create and encourage a rich cultural life there, including concert performances, lectures, and education for youth and adults.[37]

While many musical compositions and performances emerged from the Terezín camp in the course

37 Adler, H. G. *Theresienstadt 1941 - 1945: The Face of a Coerced Community*. Cambridge, 2017.

of only two years (1942-44), Gideon Klein's *Piano Sonata* (1943) is of particular interest for its energy and imagery. Composer Pavel Haas, too, created pieces in Terezín that reflect the struggles and hopes of imprisoned Jews at this time in this place. Arriving in Terezín sick, depressed, and grief-stricken, young Klein motivated and supported his older compatriot and fellow inmate, Haas. His 1942 male choral composition, *Al S'Fod* (Do not Lament) is another noteworthy piece, long admired for its unique testimony of exile through melodic fragments of both the Chorale of the Hussites and original Hebrew text. Although different in scope and stylistic language, both composers achieved (through mutual admiration and support) extraordinary musical expressions of identity, pride, and love for one's country while imprisoned in Terezín.

Gideon Klein's *Piano Sonata (1943)*

Shortly after his arrival, Gideon Klein became a productive figure among the musical intellectuals in Terezín. His charismatic personality, knowledge, and natural talent drew people to him, and his music kept them close. An acquaintance at the camp, pianist Truda Reisová-Solarová, described Klein in this way:

> tall, slim, with black hair, vivid but controlled…of extremely impressive and well-groomed appearance. …His outstanding intelligence, his great interest from many different branches of art, for literature, and especially for music, so impressed all who knew him that it seemed as if some strange magic emanated from his personality. All of us, without reserve,

> admitted the superiority of Gideon Klein, maybe just because he did not try to be better than we were: he was.[38]

Another inmate in Terezín, Michael Flash, was so inspired by a particular performance that he wrote a poem entitled, *Concert in the Old Scholl Garret (Played by Gideon Klein)*:

> And this man yesterday cut all the veins,
> Opening all the organ's stops,
> Paid all the bird to sing,
> To sing
> Even though the harsh fingers of the sexton
> Sleep heavy upon us.
> Bent in his manner of death, you are like
> Beethoven
> Your forehead was as heavy as the heavens
> before it rains.[39]

Klein's *Piano Sonata* is an enigma of sorts, and when I teach music of the Holocaust to university undergraduates, I play it for its historic backdrop and dizzying array of melodious meaning. With eyes closed, I ask students to listen for Klein's different movements throughout the piece. With eyes open, we examine imagery and rhythm as both an individual and collective experience. Only after we've exhausted the *Sonata* on its own terms do I introduce Klein and the context for his

38 Karas, Joza. *Music in Terezín 1941-1945*. Pendragon, 2009, p. 76.

39 Beckerman, Michael. "Composers: Gideon Klein." *The Orel Foundation*, 2020. http://orelfoundation.org/composers/article/gideon_klein.

composition. This piece faithfully serves contemporary audiences, young and old, as an exemplar of the beauty that can be borne of tragedy – transcending the horrors of the Holocaust in pulses of rich, harmonic triumph.

Klein takes the very classical, traditional, and methodical sonata form and, in atonal language (similar to that of composer Arnold Schöenberg, a bellwether of the expressionist movement), turns it on its head. His *Sonata* is a relatively short piece, with three movements coming together to a whole – the result is a mix of elements, tossed together and competing, coming together again and melting. It is not a peaceful or calm composition. Instead, it carries energy and strength from its background, balanced with Klein's superb choices in melody, harmony, and rhythmic pattern. A sense of drive and energy occupies much of the piece - an agitated atmosphere ranging from energetic dissonance to irresoluble tension to unrestrained climax – before the final movement ends in a fit of total chaos and hammering brutality on the piano's lowest key (A). Yet, in its entirety, Klein demonstrates an excellent sense of form, intention, and order. His rhythmic motifs tell only *some* of his story, by providing not so much of a *plot* as a *palette*. The "what" and "when" is instead a well-organized, colorful panoply of wide-ranging emotion. Klein worked on this *Sonata* in 1943, from June to October. By that time, he'd endured nearly two years of incarceration at Terezín, witnessing starvation and disease, inmate transports out to the East, and a steady influx from all regions beyond. These experiences inform the piece, a composition considered today to be one of his greatest.[40] Recognized by Klein's first biographer, Milan Slavický, as, "the most striking result of Klein's

40 Along with *Fantasie a Fuga* in 1943.

composition activity during the Terezín period, and in fact, the best of all his works…,"

A careful listening to the first movement reveals that perhaps the rhythmic moments, as well as its lyrical passages, tell a story that might otherwise lay beneath the surface. In the classroom, sections with strong rhythmic chords and harsh-moving ostinatos, in particular, challenge the listener and raise certain questions. What is Klein attempting to express in these moments? What feelings emerge from certain sounds? How do they manifest in the body? Impressions of violence, chaos, and triumph are often articulated by students. Images, such as trains signals and gunshots, flood their imaginations.[41] Acknowledging and honoring the *Sonata*'s origin, students come to appreciate their own unique listening experience and interpretative authority. When I play the second movement for students, a sense of solace spreads across the classroom; and yet, what begins with a sense of calm (in contrast to the first movement) quickly transforms into a chaotic swirl ending in a dark, ominous pessimism.[42] Klein's third movement often elicits a range of reaction and interpretive response. Some students see it as a sarcastic dance of skeletons, others sense a triumphant (albeit dissonant and violent) sound that ends very assertively, thus demonstrating the spirit of the strong person behind it. When listening to the dark passages throughout the *Sonata*, the troubles under which Klein composed this particular piece are apparent.

41 Gertsenzon, Galit. "Gideon Klein Piano Sonata, Second Movement: Adagio." *YouTube,* 24 Feb. 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vjsiv6eA288. Listen at: 2'35'' (measure 59); 3'14'' (measure 77); and 4'15'' (measure 99).

42 Gertsenzon, Galit. "Gideon Klein Piano Sonata, Second Movement: Adagio." *YouTube*, 24 Feb. 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vjsiv6eA288

Perhaps its composition was an attempt to communicate his incarcerated state of mind. Nonetheless, it is quite different from the songs Klein composed in 1940.[43]

Michael Beckerman, a leading scholar in Czech music, offers several important characteristics of works composed in Terezín. Each bear dark, depressing elements, create "musical allusion" by incorporating elements of other composers, are encoded with secret communication, and reflect images of death.[44] In all of his works, Klein utilizes many such elements, but when listening to each of the *Sonata* movements, dark moments are prescient; depressing elements can be heard; and musical allusions to something outside of sound all conspire to attest that this piece grew out of indescribable trauma and despair. The piece is thus at once heroic and cathartic; as biographer Slavický notes, "This strain naturally affected even somebody who normally was a shining example of how to overcome the burdens of life in the camp."[45]

In the *Opus 1* songs discussed earlier, Klein utilizes texts to assist in expressing an array of feelings and emotions. In the *Piano Sonata*, however, Klein relies on the instrument's ability to produce sound and thus convey meaning. The piano gives listeners a variety of raw images and feelings that go beyond the communicative function of words. Only in the imagination can the sounds in each of these movements present themselves, as different dynamics in variety, texture, and form occur in the music. Bringing all of these movements together is an expressive series of sound, affecting both intimate and

43 Gertsenzon, Galit. "Gideon Klein Piano Sonata Third Movement: Allegro Vivace." *YouTube*, 21 Jan. 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQsZwNuxhkI

44 Beckerman & Tadmor, 20.

45 Slavický, 44.

aggressive, even violent, moments. As Klein's 1940 songs allude solitude and melancholy, his Terezín compositions embrace steadfast resistance. Here, place and sound converge, as in Klein's subsequent piece, *Madrigal*. Completed in December 1943, *Madrigal* is derivative of Friedrich Hölderlin's poem, *The World's Agreeable Things*….[46] Klein set this choral piece to Hölderlin's text shortly after completing the *Piano Sonata*. Once again, Klein turns to the German poet's melancholic writing, as a man who faced his own struggles and also passed away at a young age.[47] Klein's choice to set music to the following phrases once again reflect his mood and circumstance in Terezín:

> The world's agreeable things were mine to enjoy,
> The hours of youth, how long they
> have been gone!
> Remote is April, May, remote, July;
> I am nothing now, and listless I live on.[48]

Scholars regard Klein's musical compositions in Terezín to be his most accomplished and developed work.[49] While incarcerated, Klein composed a collection of work that demonstrates his mastery of composition while also telling the story of Terezín in rich and varied

46 Hölderlin, Friedrich, Michael Hamburger, and Jeremy D. Adler. *Selected Poems and Fragments.* University of Michigan Press, 1967, p. 587.

47 Constantine, David. *Hölderlin*. Oxford University Press, 1988.

48 Believe SAS. "Madrigal after Friederich Hölderlin - Consort Vocale Diapente." KZ Muzik, vol. 14 [Encyclopedia of Music Composed in Concentration Camps], *YouTube*, 5 Nov. 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXgd174cTNU

49 Slavický, 28.

sound. He led concerts and motivated others to create and perform. Ill-fated for a tragic end, his musical work and partnerships in Terezín are his legacy. One such celebrated relationship is his friendship with an elder, prominent musician, Pavel Haas. A renowned Czech composer in a deep state of mental discord and depression, Klein is credited as having handed Haas pieces of staff paper with which to write. Klein's abiding encouragement led Haas to create some of his most beautiful compositions, most notably, his first and only work in Hebrew, *Al S'Fod*.

Pavel Haas' *Al S'Fod(1942)*

Pavel Haas (1899-1944) was a prominent Czech composer in his own right, a protégé of the renowned Leoš Janáček. In 1941, Pavel was deported to Terezín. Haas was in his early forties at the time, sick and heartbroken after divorcing his wife in an effort to save her from the camps,[50] and separated from his beloved daughter. It was the young and motivated Gideon Klein who was able to lift Haas from his misery and depression.[51] Eliska Kleinova, Gideon's sister and a Terezín survivor, lived to commemorate Klein's music and bear witness to the relationship between these two composers. Klein's insistent plea to Haas - that he take paper and start composing - is paramount in Eliska's memory.

Born on June 21, 1899 in the Moravian capital of Brno, Pavel was the eldest child in a relatively wealthy Jewish family of Czech and Russian origin.[52] In Terezín, Haas composed many songs and other music for strings.

50 Karas, 79.

51 Ibid., 76.

52 Sadie, Stanley and John Tyrell, editors. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. 2nd ed., Macmillan, 2001, p. 629.

He was especially attracted to Moravian folk songs, and he loved the chorales of St. Wenceslaus and the Hussite, *Ye Warriors of the Lord*.[53] He developed certain affinities for hopeful, faithful lines such as, "Let us not perish / us and our descendants / Saint Wenceslaus!"[54] In various Terezín compositions, Haas incorporates melodies from both the early chorales in Prague and those in the camp. While incarcerated, Haas composed a Hebrew choral piece for male voices entitled, *Al S'Fod* (Do not Lament). Completed on November 30, 1942, it assimilates a text dating from the 1920's, in the Land of Israel during the time of the third Aliya. The massive immigration (from 1918 to 1923) of European Jews to Israel necessitated the building of roads and infrastructure to prepare empty ground for the settlement of Zionist Jews. Poet, author, and translator David Shimoni (1886-1956) wrote the Hebrew text during this drive of Israeli pioneers; his uplifting verse is pure inspiration for those forerunners who worked hard to build a country from nothing: "Do not lament אַל סְפֹד / do not cry אַל בכות
/ at such a time בְּעֵת כָּזֹאת."[55]

The song was first set to music by Israeli composer Joseph Milt. According to Jože Karas, Haas was familiar with this setting.[56] Haas based this all-male chorus on the Czech folk Hussite Chorale melody, *Ye Who Are Warriors of God*. This is a famous chorale, sung in Czechoslovakia for hundreds of years, encouraging listeners to help those

53 Ibid., 79.

54 Ibid., 79.

55 *Haas, Pavel: A Song for a Male Choir on the Hebrew Words of Al S'fod, 1942*. Jewish Museum in Prague, 2020. https://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/1891/lang/en_US

56 Karas, 115.

in need, have faith in God, and fear not those who harm the body. In *Al S'Fod*, Haas combines similar male-choral voices, harmonic textures, and melodic fragments from both the Hussite Chorale and Milt's Hebrew text in order to blend pioneering Zionist ideas with his own Jewish roots and sense of national identity, pride, and love for his homeland. Indeed, Haas' Czechoslovakian roots, made manifest in the Hussite Chorale, were included in many other of his pieces as well. It is interesting to note that Haas had the opening page of this score engraved with musical notes that he, or perhaps someone on his behalf, arranged to form the Hebrew words: "מזכרת ליום השנה הראשון והאחרון בגלות טרזין" ("a souvenir for the first and last anniversary in the Terezín exile").[57]

Haas dedicated this composition to Mr. Otto Zucker, an engineer and former head of the Jewish community in Brno, and Deputy Chairman of the Terezín Council of Elders in the camp.

57 Jacobson, Joshua. "Music in the Holocaust." *Choral Journal*. December 1995, p. 17. https://acda-publications.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/choral_journals/December_1995_Jacobson_J.pdf

Do not Lament,	אַל סְפֹד,
Do not cry	אַל בְּכוֹת
At such a time.	בְּעֵת כָּזֹאת.
Do not bow your head down!	אַל הוֹרֵד רֹאשׁ!
Work! Work!	עֲבֹד! עֲבֹד!
Ploughman, Plough!	הַחוֹרֵשׁ, חָרֹשׁ!
Sower, Sow!	הַזּוֹרֵעַ, זְרַע!
In an evil moment,	בְּרֶגַע רַע
Labor twice	כְּפָלַיִם עֲמֹל,
Create double!	כְּפָלַיִם יְצֹר,
Plant and Tread,	וּנְטַע וַעֲדֹר,
Extract and fence,	וְסַקֵּל וּגְדֹר,
Level and pave,	וּפַלֵּס וּסְלֹל,
Freedom rail	מְסִלַּת הַדְּרוֹר
For the day of light	לְיוֹם הָאוֹר.
Plant and Tread,	וּנְטַע וַעֲדֹר,
Extract and fence,	וְסַקֵּל וּגְדֹר,
Level and pave,	וּפַלֵּס וּסְלֹל,
Freedom rail	מְסִלַּת הַדְּרוֹר
For the day of light	לְיוֹם הָאוֹר!
In the path of humility	בִּנְתִיב הָעֲנָוה
Moves redemption,	הוֹלְכָה הַפְּדוּת,
And Cries the Blood	וְזוֹעֵק הַדָּם
To the soul of the people	לְנִשְׁמַת הָעָם:
Look and act!	הִתָּנַעַר וּפְעַל!
Be redeemed and Redeem	הִגָּאֵל וּגְאַל!

Pavel Haas' "A Song for a Male Choir on the Hebrew Words of Al S'fod," 1942.

Conclusion

While from September 1939 to September 1945, the world was engaged in its second war, the foundations for mass annihilation of Jews in Europe were laid decades earlier. The musical pieces explored here represent only a small seed in a vast garden of music produced by many different kinds of composers during this time. Each of these composers express their struggles in their own unique musical language and style - from Gebirtig's Shtetl Yiddish and simple melodies, to Klein's sophisticated handling of musical themes, to Haas' affinities for his country and its folk. In these original compositions, which are so telling of the time, all three composers choose to adopt the words and melodies of others as their own; thus echoing the sentiments of their forefathers while chronicling a twentieth-century experience of unspeakable hate and torment. Through these transcendent musical gems, we come to understand each man's feelings, hopes, frustrations, and identities (religious, national, and musical) at a time in which they were forbidden to even speak. Their music reminds us that even in the darkest of times, one can find ways to express one's voice. More than merely notes on a page, these compositions tell each man's story in sound – sounds that collectively float above a temporary, physical experience of incarceration into the boundless reaches of memory and imagination.