

Poetry and Readings on Resistance During the Holocaust

Lesson 4 Handout



Faces of the Uprising

By Haim Guri and Monia Avrahami

Resistance is. .

To smuggle a loaf of bread - was to resist.

To teach in secret - was to resist.

To gather information and distribute an underground newsletter - was to resist.

To cry out warning and shatter illusions - was to resist.

To rescue a Torah scroll - was to resist.

To forge documents - was to resist.

To smuggle people across borders - was to resist.

To chronicle events and conceal the records - was to resist.

To extend a helping hand to those in need - was to resist.

To dare to speak out, at the risk of one's life - was to resist.

To stand empty-handed against the killers - was to resist.

To reach the besieged, smuggling weapons and commands - was to resist.

To take up arms in streets, mountains and forests - was to resist.

To rebel in the death camps - was to resist.

To rise up in the ghettos, amid tumbling walls,
in the most desperate revolt humanity has ever known ..



The Story of Amnon Weinstein and Motele Schlein

Excerpted from “Crafting Beauty from Despair: Violins of Hope” by Peter Duffy



Soon after landing in Tel Aviv a few years ago, I found myself in the [workshop] of Amnon Weinstein, a renowned violin maker on Shlomo Hamelech Street. . . . I couldn't help but be enchanted by the aura of Weinstein's workshop: the scent of varnish, the instruments in various states of construction, the steady succession of friends and musicians. At the center of it was the distinctive figure of Weinstein himself. With his bushy mustache flecked with bits of wood shavings, and glasses perched at the end of his nose, he looked every bit the master craftsman.

..

Indeed, his credentials as an artisan are impeccable. He learned his art at the side of his father, Moshe, who was born in Vilna and began servicing Bronislaw Huberman's newly established Israel Philharmonic Orchestra when he arrived in Tel Aviv in 1938. Moshe Weinstein provided the first violins for [famous violinists] with names like Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zukerman and Shlomo Mintz. Amnon then went to Europe, where he was tutored by such masters as Étienne Vatelot of Paris and Pietro Sgarabotto of the northern Italian city of Cremona, birthplace of the Stradivarius violin. He took over his father's shop the day the old man died.

When I met him, Weinstein was in the midst of a project, begun in 1996, to locate and restore violins played by Jews in the ghettos, camps and forests during the Holocaust. . . .

“If you have very good ears and you are listening, it's unbelievable what you can hear when these violins are played,” Weinstein said. “You can hear the suffering.”

Perhaps the most celebrated of Weinstein's violins is one that relates to the tradition of resistance embodied by his wife's family. It was brought to him in 2000 by Seffi Hanegbi, a tour guide in the Negev desert who is also of celebrated partisan lineage: He is the grandson of Moshe Gildenman, the Jewish partisan commander in Ukraine renowned as “*Diadia* Misha” or “Uncle Misha.” Gildenman, a native of the town of Korets, led a unit with his son (Seffi's father), Simcha, primarily in the Zhitomir region, conducting a wide variety of guerrilla missions against the German occupiers and their collaborators.

Hanegbi arrived at the workshop with an unremarkable German-made violin in a battered case, an artifact that had been gathering dust in the family home for decades. “It was a common instrument for all the Jewish people,” Weinstein said. “Simple, not expensive, nothing special.”

Hanegbi described to Weinstein how the violin belonged to a partisan, the youngest member of Goldenman's group, a blond-haired boy known as Motele.



Motele Schlein's violin: before and after. Images: LEFT: AMNON WEINSTEIN; RIGHT: YAD VASHEM ARTIFACTS, GIFT OF YOUSEF HANEGBI, ARAD AND ZAHAVA SHANNI

Motele's story is the stuff of legend. Goldenman's fighters discovered him one day, sleeping in the woods. The 12-year-old son of a miller from the village of Karsnovka, Mordechai Schlein had fled to the forest after his parents and younger sister were killed in an *aktion*. After joining the Jewish outfit — one of several detachments within a 1,500-strong Soviet partisan brigade — Schlein was selected by Goldenman to travel with several other partisans into the village of Ovruch on August 20, 1943, according to Goldenman's memoirs.

Armed with false papers in case he was questioned, Schlein was instructed to join a crowd of beggars in front of the church and to play Ukrainian folk tunes on his violin. His mission was merely to keep an eye out for his fellow partisans and alert his commanders if anything happened to them.

But the boy had talent. Soon a crowd gathered to hear the melodies he remembered from his neighbors back home. Among the spectators was a German officer, who plucked him from his spot and took him to a restaurant favored by the occupiers. He was told to perform with an elderly piano player, who spread out sheet music for Paderewski's Minuet, a popular but difficult piece written by the Polish composer. Schlein played so well that he was offered a job to perform there every day.

One day, he noticed large cracks in one of the restaurant's storage rooms, and he hatched a plan to place explosives in the fissures. Since it was now harvest time, and there was frequent traffic between village and countryside, Schlein was able to sneak into the woods and, using his violin case, gradually transport 18 kilograms of incendiary material into the building, shoving the explosives into the cellar walls during breaks in his playing schedule.

Then he waited for the opportune moment to strike. It came when members of an SS division visited on their way to the front. After playing deep into the evening with his accompanist, Schlein adjourned to the basement as the drunken Germans took over the piano. "In the dark he found the end of the bomb wick and ignited it," Goldenman wrote. "When he came to the exit, he slowed down and approached the German guard and allowed himself a joke. He held up his right arm and called out, 'Heil Hitler!'" Schlein was 200 yards away when the bombs detonated,

killing an unknown number of Germans. Upon reaching his fellow partisans, Schlein raised a clenched fist to the sky and said, "This is for my parents and little Bashiale."

Schlein would not survive the war. He was just 14 when he was killed during a German bombardment in 1944. Gildenman took possession of his violin, carrying it with him to Berlin, then Paris and finally Israel, where he died in 1958.

After Weinstein completed restoration work on the violin — it was in relatively good shape, he says — Hanegbi donated it to Yad Vashem [Israel's Holocaust memorial museum] with the stipulation that it be available for performances. Last September, a teenage boy named David Strongin played what is known as "Motele's violin" during the concert at the walls of the Old City, joining the great Mintz on "*Hatikvah*" [the Israeli national anthem] to conclude the evening. On Monday, April 20, Strongin played it again during the opening ceremonies for Yad Vashem's commemoration of Yom HaShoah [Holocaust Remembrance Day].

"I cry," Hanegbi said when asked how he responds to hearing the instrument produce music. "It's true, really. Every time I hear the violin play, I have tears in my eyes."

Music in the Vilna Ghetto

Excerpted from [the Music and The Holocaust website](#)

In June 1941, German soldiers marched into Vilna. One of the cultural and intellectual centers of European Jewry, it was known as the 'Jerusalem of Lithuania'. At the beginning of July, Nazis drove a group of Jewish men to the nearby forest of Ponar and murdered them, beginning a cycle of killings that spanned the summer months.

In September, the remaining Jews in the city (almost 40,000) were driven into two ghettos, which had been established in the old Jewish quarter. Massacres continued in September and October, and the smaller second ghetto was soon closed. As elsewhere, the ghetto was massively overcrowded, food was inadequate and disease was rampant.

Despite the conditions, the inmates of the Vilna ghetto established a vast array of cultural, intellectual and artistic organizations. This cultural vitality in many ways marked a continuity with the pre-war years: for centuries, the city had been a center for Jewish arts, theatre and publishing. In addition, the socialist Bund had been founded there in 1897, and this tradition of Jewish radicalism continued through the war years in the activism of the ghetto's underground resistance group, the *Fareynigte Partizaner Organizatsye* (United Partisans' Organisation, FPO). The ghetto housed its own symphony orchestra, chamber groups and Yiddish and Hebrew choirs. There were also religious and secular schools, orphanages, a large public library, and even a music school with more than 100 students.

Vilna's renowned theatrical tradition also continued in the ghetto, where several theatres existed during its two-year existence. In January 1942, the first ghetto theatre was opened on Kanska Street, which employed many local writers and artists. Many of the productions were revues: mixtures of short skits, poems and musical numbers, which dealt directly with the situation in the ghetto and the concerns and fears of its residents. Most of the new melodies composed in the ghetto were in fact created in the theatre. . .

The first concert of the symphony orchestra, conducted by Jacob Gerstein, took place on 18 January 1942 under the sponsorship of Jewish Council leader Jacob Gens and the ghetto police. It was a memorial tribute to the murdered Jews and included many songs of loss and mourning, such as 'I am moved to weep' by Chaim Nachman Bialik, works by Chopin and singing by the soprano Lyube Levitski. The performance was a great success, and the money raised was donated to social welfare causes in the ghetto. Just a few days later, the FPO was founded, uniting youth of diverse political persuasions under the motto of 'not dying like sheep to the slaughter'. The partisan movement was also a rich site of song-writing. Probably the single most famous song to come out of a ghetto during the Holocaust was the Vilna resistance fighter Hirsh Glik's song 'Zog nit keynmol az du geyst dem letstn veg' (Never say that you are

walking the final road). The song was an instant hit, and spread quickly amongst partisans and through ghettos and camps; it was being sung widely in Europe before the war had ended.

While the FPO relied on songs to arouse political awareness and build community, they were also some of the harshest critics of organized musical entertainment programs within the ghetto. Many political and religious organizations in Vilna, including the Bund, boycotted concerts, distributing leaflets that declared: 'Theatrical performances should not be held in cemeteries.' Eventually, however, as the scale of daily suffering persisted and the success of music in inspiring and comforting the people became clearer, most came to accept the concerts. Ghetto inmate Hermann Kruk, originally bitterly opposed to concerts, wrote in his diary on 8 March 1942: "The pulse of life begins to beat again in the Vilna ghetto ... the concerts, which were at first boycotted, have been accepted by the public; the halls are full."

In general, the populace of the Vilna ghetto strongly supported this variety of cultural activity. In particular the many new songs composed about Jewish life in the ghetto were sung by inmates at work, at small impromptu concerts, in street performances and at schools and community centers.

On 15 January 1943, the Jewish Council sponsored a celebration of the cultural achievements of the ghetto. At that concert, Council leader Gens proclaimed proudly:

We wanted to give people the opportunity to free themselves from the ghetto for several hours, and this we achieved. We are passing through dark and difficult days. Our bodies are in the ghetto but our spirit has not been enslaved ... before the first concert it was said that concerts should not be held in graveyards. True, the statement is true, but all of life is now a graveyard. Our hands must not falter. We must be strong in body and soul.

On 23 September 1943, the Vilna ghetto was liquidated, the last survivors either killed or sent to camps. Several thousand of the younger and healthier inhabitants were selected to survive temporarily as slave labor, the men sent to Estonia and the women to camps in Latvia. At the liberation of the city by the Soviet army in July 1944, there were only a few hundred Jewish survivors.

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Birkenau Men's Camp Orchestra

Excerpt from *Violins of Hope* by James A. Grymes, pages 120-128

In August 1942, Johann Schwarzhuber, the camp commander of Birkenau, decided to form his own ensemble. . . .

. . . The main task of the Birkenau Men's Camp Orchestra was to perform for the parades of work details leaving camp every morning and returning every night. At dawn, the musicians would line up outside the music barracks in rows of five, just like every other work detachment. The trumpets would stand in the first row, followed by the horns, accordions, clarinets, and the saxophone. Bringing up the rear would be the tuba, the snare drum, the bass drum, and the cymbals. At the front of the ensemble, proudly holding his baton, would be Franz Kopka, a drummer who in addition to being the capo of the orchestra managed to have himself named its conductor. . . .

"Forward, march!" Kopka would shout, followed by the title of the march the band was to play. The snare drum would establish the tempo with a brief cadence, accompanied by the boom of the bass drum and the crash of the cymbals. The band would join in as the ensemble marched toward the stage that had been erected next to the camp gate. On their way, they would pass the capos who were busily lining up their detachments for an orderly march out of the camp.

When the band reached the stage, Kopka would cut off the music and bring the formation to a halt. The musicians would scamper to their places on the stage, spread out the music on their stands, and await their next command. Instead of launching immediately into another march, Kopka would often indulge himself by calling for a tango. This would allow him to emulate what he thought a great conductor should look like, waving the first two fingers of each hand in the air while contorting his entire body in ridiculous gestures. The musicians would simply play on, ignoring the antics of their pretentious conductor. Sometimes, the SS guards would interrupt Kopka's selection to make a request of their own, with which Kopka would readily comply.

"Come on! Music!" the guards would shout once the detachments were in formation and once their requests had been performed. Both sides of the gate would swing open while the orchestra performed "Old Comrades." The detachments would march out of the camp for their work details while a functionary counted each row of five to make sure every prisoner was accounted for. The process of marching all the detainees out of the camp could last two or more hours, during which time the orchestra would play without interruption.

After the last detachments had passed through the gate, the orchestra would reassemble in its parade formation and march back to the music barracks. The performers would stow away their instruments and begin their daily work. . . . Although they were not exempt from forced labor, they did have the advantage of working slightly less, since they were the last ones to leave camp every morning. They were also the first to return in the evening, at which time they would perform marches for the exhausted workers hobbling back into the camp.

. . .

[The orchestra's work was] complicated by the fact that the ensembles kept changing. Its members continued to fall victim to disease or grow so weak from exhaustion and starvation that they were sent to the gas chambers. Others committed suicide.

Among those who decided to take his own life was Leon Bloorman, a former violin professor at the Jewish Conservatory of Music in Rotterdam. Just a few days after arriving in Birkenau, Bloorman approached his old violin student Louis Bannet, who had since become a virtuoso trumpeter.

"Louis, do you know what they made me do today?" he asked. "They made me play my violin while they hanged a man. He was a Frenchman. Other than being a Jew, I don't know what crime he committed.

"They pulled him on a cart to the gallows. I had to stand behind him and play La Marseillaise," Bloorman continued, referring to the French national anthem that he was forced to perform to mock the executed Frenchman. "Can you explain such a thing to me?"

"I don't have an answer," Louis simply responded. "There are no answers here."

"Louis, you are stronger than me," the elder violinist tearfully admitted. "I don't think I can go on like this much longer."

"Try to think of this," Louis suggested. "The man they hanged today, the last sound he heard was your beautiful playing."

This was not enough to console the violinist. A few nights later, Bloorman tried to kill himself by running into the electric fence. Before he got that far, he was gunned down by SS guards who were sparing themselves the trouble of scraping his body off the fence. The next morning, when the orchestral musicians took their seats, they found Bloorman's dead body tied to his chair. Around his neck hung a sign that explained why he had been shot and why his body had been positioned there as an example. The sign read, "I tried to escape."

From pages 146 – 147

For the musicians who played in the orchestras, music often provided a welcome escape from the thoughts that were otherwise filled with despair and death. "For all of us in the orchestra it was our music making that served as our most important life preserver and stimulant during this period," documented a former member of the Auschwitz III orchestra. "We derived so much satisfaction and joy from performing in concert that we found ourselves forgetting for a moment that we were condemned souls living in a hell that the uninitiated could never even imagine."

Music offered the performers opportunities to live a little longer, if only for one more day. While participation in an orchestra did not guarantee survival, it did protect musicians from the harshest of labor assignments and sometimes offered warmer uniforms and slightly better food. In many cases, these advantages offered just enough benefits to allow musicians to outlive the Nazi regime. "Music has kept me alive," Henry Meyer later confirmed. "There is no doubt about it."

Some of the musicians who played in the Auschwitz orchestras continued to make music after the Holocaust. . . . But many of the musicians never played again. Survivor's guilt, combined with a deep regret over having been forced to exploit their art to save their lives, rendered making music too painful.

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Birkenau Women's Camp Orchestra

Excerpt from *Violins of Hope* by James A. Grymes, pages 137-140

The orchestra in the Birkenau Men's Camp had a counterpart in the Women's Camp. Like the ensembles elsewhere in Auschwitz, the Birkenau Women's Camp Orchestra provided marching music for the work details as they marched out of camp every morning and back in every evening. The musicians also played at camp inspections, at the arrivals of transports, at the infirmary, and during Sunday concerts.

The women's orchestra was founded in April 1943 by Maria Mandel, who was the commandant of the women's camp. In its first month of existence, only female Aryans were allowed to participate. Jews were soon added to complete the ensemble. The orchestra started with just a bass drum and cymbals, but gradually grew to include mandolins, guitars, a few violins, a cello, a piano, and a few singers.

The absence of winds, specifically brass instruments, gave the women's orchestra a more intimate sound than the orchestra in the Birkenau Men's Camp. Despite the rivalry that emerged between the two ensembles and their Nazi patrons, the members of the orchestras regularly interacted with each other. Heinz Lewin, a Jewish violinmaker from Germany who was equally proficient on clarinet, saxophone, and double bass, would go into the women's camp twice a week to give bass lessons. The orchestras eventually adopted a practice of performing in each other's camp on alternating Sundays.

No examination of the Birkenau Women's Orchestra would be complete without discussing its most famous member, Alma Rosé. Rosé came from one of the most distinguished families in Austro-German music. Her father was Arnold Rosé, the concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and the leader of the famed Rose String Quartet. Her uncle was the composer Gustav Mahler. Alma was herself a virtuoso violinist of great renown, for her solo playing as well as for her leadership of the Viennese Waltz Girls, a popular all-female ensemble that she had founded.

Rosé fled to London with her father after the German annexation of Austria in 1938, but naively left for Holland to resume her career as a performer. After Germany invaded the Netherlands in May 1940, she found herself trapped in Nazi-occupied Europe. On December 14, 1942, after being ordered to report to the Westerbork Transit Camp, Rosé tried to escape to Switzerland by slipping through Belgium and France. She was arrested in Dijon four days later and was sent to the Drancy Internment Camp, where she was imprisoned for several months before being deported to Auschwitz in July 1943.

After reaching Birkenau, Rosé was appointed conductor of the Women's Camp Orchestra. Because of her stature within the classical music world, she was held in high esteem by the SS guards, who reverentially called her "Frau Alma". Rosé was able to exploit her exalted status by recruiting Jewish musicians into the orchestra and by making sure that all of her musicians enjoyed special privileges such as permission to shower daily and new uniforms weekly. They also received more food and better accommodations, as well as lenient work assignments. As did Szymon Laks in the men's camp, Rosé was able to convince the administration of the women's camp to exempt the orchestral musicians from performing outside during inclement weather.

Rosé was even able to convince the Nazis to spare her musicians from selections. When mandolin player Rachela Zelmanowicz was in the infirmary with typhus – a death sentence for any other prisoner – Josef Mengele was prepared to send her to the gas chambers.

“What’s with this one? he asked during his rounds.

“She’s from the orchestra.”

Mengele continued on his way without any further discussion. As a member of Rosé’s orchestra, Zelmanowicz was untouchable even by him. Her life was spared.

Given the low percentage of female orchestral musicians in the early twentieth century, it is not surprising that there were fewer professional musicians in the women’s orchestra than in the men’s orchestras of Auschwitz. To compensate for the relatively low levels of ability, Rosé rehearsed her ensemble tirelessly to improve the quality of both their performances and their repertoire. In addition to performing at the camp for two or three hours a day, the orchestra rehearsed eight hours a day, six days a week. Rosé knew that the fate of the musicians rested in the reputation of the ensemble.

Rosé died of mysterious causes on April 4, 1944. After ten months of dedicating herself to protecting all of the women in her orchestra, in the end she was unable to save herself. It is suspected that her death was caused by alcohol poisoning, but it is not clear whether the poisoning was accidental or intentional.

After Rosé’s death, the orchestra’s repertoire and duties were scaled back and its members were put back to work.

The orchestra was dissolved in November 1944, when the non-Jewish members of the orchestra were transferred to the former men’s camp. The Jewish performers were deported to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

From pages 146 – 147

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