



MUSICAL SHADOWS OF THE WARSAW GHETTO A "New Haggada" and the Sanctity of Memory

by Neil W. Levin

MUSICAL ABUSES OF THE SHOAH—Overshadowing Worthy Artistic Reflections

Several decades ago, one of America's most distinguished composers—a culturally committed Jew, only some of whose music pertains to Jewish experience either directly or indirectly—had written a non-programmatic, brilliantly conceived and expertly crafted abstract cello concerto that had failed to ignite much interest in its performance. He received a telephone call from a well-meaning (also Jewish) colleague, urging him promiscuously to attach "Holocaust" to the concerto as a title or subtitle, even though there was absolutely no connection either by design or subliminally. That way, suggested the caller, not only would the concerto suddenly be in demand by cellists and audiences alike, but the new title or subtitle would generate substantial, beneficial publicity. Needless to say, the concerto's composer, an artist of implacable integrity, had all he could do to restrain himself from the undiplomatic reply that first came to mind. But as for the point of this story? *Res ipsa loquitur*, to invoke the Latin maxim ("The thing speaks for itself.").

When, in the mid-1990s, the Editorial Board of the Milken Archive of Jewish Music and I, as its artistic director and editor-in-chief, were deliberating about suitable titles for our volume of recordings that would be devoted to Holocaust-inspired music, we gave thought to avoiding the "Holocaust" terminology altogether and to titling the volume instead, "The Music of Destruction".

For one thing, despite a respectable number of related works of unquestionable artistic and moral merit, references to Holocaust-related music or "music of the Holocaust" were already coming to suggest or encompass unfortunate instances of self-serving exploitation, tacky and offensive trivialization, career-boosting strategies, outright concoctions, and mawkish entertainment. And the complete fabrication of music having been written in the death camps as evidence of some sort of imagined "spiritual defiance" or, worse and even more absurd, "spiritual redemption", was becoming tantamount to an academic discipline of musicology and the subject of theses and dissertations. "Music of the Holocaust" classes were already being offered in a vacuum, nearly always without a single course in the same department devoted to core Jewish music studies. Even more disturbing was a well-meaning professor's boast that his Holocaust music class at a major university was "the most popular class in the music department." POPULAR, no less! That characterization as "popular" would appear to vindicate in part those critics who long ago warned against "the Americanization of the Holocaust".

In turn, the fiction of music composed or sung in death camps (not to be confused with ghettos, forced or slave labor camps, or transit or holding camps such as the cruel hoax of Terezin, with its sadistic, diversionary encouragement of music), together with morbid fascination, popular vulnerability and easily manipulated appetites for so-called "connectedness", was already spawning what would soon become a virtual "cottage industry" of recordings and video products. Thus, by now we have such travesties of kitsch, opportunism and gimmickry as CD cases that exhibit images of 1940s German railroad freight carriages, stretches of railroad track, barracks surrounded by barbed wire, and starved prisoners; reenactments of so-called female concentration camp orchestras or other ensembles with the players in full period costume; CDs that include songs titled "The Prisoner Rises", "In Buchenwald", "The Train", and "The Striped Ones"; lyrics that read "What is this prison to us? The strength of our spirits will conquer the tortures", "In Buchenwald the birch trees rustled sadly", "Running still behind the train in fool's futility, farewell my love", or "Their striped clothes veil the pride that now slumbers inside"; and entire compositions titled *Holocaust Symphony*, *Holocaust Oratorio*, or *Holocaust Cantata*.

Moreover, by the mid-to-late 1990s, in addition to the effusion of third-rate (at best) pop songs and entire CD albums of that nature, cabaret-type entertainment, and even full-length, Hollywood-infused extravaganzas claiming to describe the death camps and to recall their liberation—all popularizing and "Americanizing" the Shoah—the Holocaust association itself was being tapped promiscuously as a clever blanket strategy for selling anything to which it could be attached artificially. That sales maneuver was being applied not only to completely unrelated pieces of classical music, but also to entirely unrelated public events. At one of our Milken Archive meetings, two of us shared an experience we had with the chief officer of a respected Jewish educational-cultural institution who had attempted to persuade us to alter the billing of a straightforward cantorial concert we were producing so as to include the word, "Holocaust". And we were urged to add "accessible" songs about the camps to this fund-raising gala. In view of the financial urgency of the cause and the need for greater ease in attracting a paying full house, he shamelessly reminded us that, "There's no business like Shoah business." With no stomach for prostitution, we both bowed out.

Sad to say, however, there was more than a kernel of prescience in that remark. For, some twenty years later, a local Holocaust museum in another city would send out brochures advertising a full Sunday of "Holocaust music", complete with so-called "klezmer" and rock bands, and promising to be "a day of fun for the whole family to enjoy."

We might think it difficult to imagine any greater insult to the memory of the victims than all of this, except that now we have been presented with the ultimate obscenity: a touring multimedia "concert-drama" in the form of a vulgar circus-like spectacle arrogantly titled *The Defiant Requiem*—but more aptly identified and labeled *THE DEFILED REQUIEM* (my term). The brainchild of a Jewish conductor with, shall we say, too much time on his hands, and regrettably if unwittingly supported by oblivious Jewish organizations as well as major symphony orchestras and choruses that have been duped—or duped themselves—into participation, this abomination purports to replicate one of the sixteen performances of Verdi's *Requiem* by inmates at the Terezin concentration camp in what is now the Czech Republic (or Theresienstadt, the German equivalent assigned to rename the camp and town during the German occupation). Performances typically include tasteless, grisly overhead projections of film depictions of death camps, gas chambers and the like, banal narration, and superimposed sounds of train whistles.

In some cases, performers have been dressed in striped pajamas (though of course the singers were not so garbed at Terezin, and they were accompanied by piano, not an orchestra).

We are told that the justification for this concocted replication celebrates those Terezin performances as exhibitions of the interned performers' "spiritual defiance and redemption". And we are supposed to take additional pride in the fact that at least one of those performances was attended by upper echelons of the Nazi regime, including, reportedly, Adolf Eichmann, all of whom leapt to their feet in a standing ovation with resounding cheers and applause—saluting the very Jews of the "inferior race" whom they had already destined for extermination. Yet, how many among audiences for this defiled *Requiem* catch that, in addition to reinforcing deliberately the camp population's distraction from and delusion about its already sealed fate—and contributing further to the deception successfully aimed at supposedly neutral, ready-and-happy-to-be-deceived investigative agencies—those ovations were nothing more than analogous to admiration for animals at a zoo or circus? Or reminiscent of enthusiastic approval and applause by bigotted "white" segregationists in the South for black entertainers whom they might be ready to lynch a week later? Or, for that matter, 17th-century Polish nobility applauding the forced singing and dancing of subservient court Jews (*mayofisniks*)? And does anyone in the audience for these contemporary defilements know of the once-common custom whereby a *shokhet*, or kosher slaughterer, would give an affectionate, fatherly pat on the neck of a lamb just before slaughtering it?

The controversial and much-maligned albeit in some views misunderstood philosopher Hannah Arendt might have called all this at Terezin yet another form of cooperation with the murderers. And the equally controversial academic Freudian psychologist Bruno Bettelheim (himself a Holocaust survivor) might have suggested that perhaps the energies and efforts of the performers would have been better spent divesting themselves of the delusion and, instead, acquiring arms and making plans for future self-defense and true (not "spiritual") defiance and resistance when that day would surely come. In his thinking, even if only one German casualty would have been sustained, but with not a single Jew surviving the fight when the first transports began, the Jewish lives would have required at least that much higher a price—which itself might have accorded their deaths a small measure of meaning. But each of those propositions requires a lengthy analysis with argument and debate, which is beyond the scope of this discussion—and for which this is not the suitable medium. Then, too, we owe it to the victims to be reminded of Elie Wiesel's dictum about retroactive judgment, that "only those who were there will ever know, and those who were there can never tell."

This dog-and-pony show is duplicitous on another front as well, which cannot be ignored or go unchallenged. For, contrary to its implication about dynamics of defiance surrounding those performances at Terezin, which we are now asked to include together with the *Requiem* under a liberal umbrella of Holocaust-related music and memory, by far not everyone at Terezin endorsed the appropriateness of a Christian, in fact Roman Catholic, liturgical work. And as I observed in 2012 in a lecture at the Jewish Theological Seminary on the entire episode and its context, doing so to the delight of the Nazi organizers of the Jews' incarceration and impending doom was not only subservience and cooperation, but the polar opposite of defiance.

A measure of defiance might have appertained had the piece instead been a large-scale Jewish liturgical work, a secular work by a Jewish composer, or—a bit more defiant, although the Germans could not have cared less about what music Jews performed in a non-German venue—a work by a Jewish or non-Jewish banned composer such as

Mendelssohn. We should acknowledge, however, that scores for any music in those three categories probably would not have been so readily if at all available in the camp. (In fact, during the life of the *Jüdische Kulturbund in Deutschland*—which, for Jews, substituted in part until 1939 for their forbidden public participation in the arts within German arts organizations or at any venues other than specifically Jewish ones—the only restrictions placed upon it concerning composers applied to so-called Aryan ones, so that Wagner was off-limits to Jews; yet, strangely enough, Bach, for example, was permitted.)

This is in no way to condemn the cast at Terezin or whoever conceived the project there, only the current defilement of Verdi's masterpiece. The *Requiem*, which some Verdi aficionados call "his greatest opera" (often unknowingly echoing Hans von Bülow's dismissive assessment as Verdi's "latest opera in Church vestments") is, after all, a major work of the Western concert music canon more so than Church music per se—written against the backdrop of sympathies with the Risorgimento and its patriotic Italian nationalist spirit in tribute to the memory of one of the greatest Italian novelists, Alessandro Manzoni, who was an active advocate for both Italian liberalism and the Unification. By most accounts, Verdi was more-or-less a non-believer, at least vis-a-vis Church orthodoxy, with little use for the papacy or historical Church doctrine and policies.

Yet, inasmuch as the established *Requiem* Mass text was unaltered (Verdi seems to have read it for its drama, delicate as well as formidable and frightening climactic moments, and possibilities for furtherance of the perceived ideal of the paramountcy of sung text in Italian music), one is tempted to wonder why the organizers of the Terezin project did not consider instead a religiously neutral work of equal greatness within the canon—in particular, perhaps Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* (A German Requiem), which, as a "German" rather than a Roman Catholic or other religious requiem, is free of overtly or explicitly Christian content, however one might choose to interpret certain references, and leans heavily on the Book of Psalms. In fact, Brahms emphasized both that the subject went beyond Germans to include all humanity and that *his* requiem was *for* the living in terms of how mankind remembers its departed ones.

Nonetheless, given that the Terezin cast members poured their hearts and energies into the preparation and performance of the Verdi *Requiem*, we can imagine that they would have been horrified had they known that some seventy years later it would be polluted not only by the cheap gimmickry cited above, but by the absurdly attached singing at some performances—accompanied by vigorous audience clapping in rhythm—of an admittedly infectious, upbeat Hebrew quasi-pop song that won second prize at the 1969 Hassidic Song Festival in Israel. The song was first popularized in America through commercial recordings and via youth programs, summer camps, and school song fests.¹ The lyrics just happen to have been taken from the final passage of the *kaddish* text (which would never be sung to any tune in its version for mourners, *kaddish yatom*), which optimistically anticipates an era of world peace. Thus the implied but perverted message we are supposed to take from this defiled replication is some notion that the Holocaust as a whole, exemplified by the Terezin episode (along with a theological text that is antithetical to Judaism), has now been accorded a beneficial capacity to bring us to a promised future of worldwide brotherhood. Verdi would have abhorred that twisting of his art to provide superficial audience gratification. And, in the end, the Requiem liturgy is a Mass for the *dead*, praying in Christian terms for the salvation of their souls through the Christian Savior, not for future earthly generations.

In his insightful observations and comments about what he prefers to identify as the "Terezin reenactments" of a "traveling revue" in his 2013 article, in which he appropriately disparages the offensive notion and false *raison d'être* of a newly-manufactured genre under the label "Holocaust music", James Loeffler raised yet another valid point. Acknowledging that both the wider context of the entire Terezin episode and, more specifically, the *Requiem* performances *there* should indeed be remembered and studied as part of history, he nonetheless properly disparages the perpetuation, celebration and glorifying of Jews as *Jews* performing a Roman Catholic Mass to commemorate a Jewish catastrophe perpetrated by the Third Reich and its collaborators—all with roots in a Christian Europe. He sees that travesty as fueling the long-running anti-Jewish canard that Jews are inherently and genetically incapable of creating worthy art of their own, relying necessarily for participation in true artistic expression on "borrowing and corrupting European Christian music."² Although that premise is famously (or infamously) attributed most widely to Wagner's ravings and diatribes, we might add both that it goes farther back in European musical history and, although promulgation of that resentment reached new heights and probably its most transparent publicity at Wagner's instigation, he had no monopoly on that malignancy—which may account in part for its ready acceptance, and not only in Germany. (Yet, the première of *Parsifal*, which some argue is the most symbolically Christian work of all Wagner's operas or music dramas—at least on a mythic plane—was conducted by a Jew, with Wagner's blessing and even encouragement. This lends an added level of complexity to Wagner studies in general.)

That anyone can be lured into thinking of those Terezin performances as defiant, when in fact that type of activity was encouraged and even aided by the Germans, defies any sense of reason. It defies intelligence. And especially for Jews among audiences at these replications, who are moved emotionally, it defies both knowledge and grasp of the Holocaust. These events are, as Professor Loeffler aptly asserts, an insult both to music and to the victims of the Shoah. It is fair to ask if the Verdi *Requiem*, with its Latin liturgy, is now to be considered "Holocaust music".

Some choral preparers for these events (some of them Jewish) have acknowledged to me privately that they are aware that they are "controversial". My response is always the same. Controversy implies some degree of reason on both sides of an issue. This project is not controversial. It is obscene.

Perhaps most dangerous about all these vulgarities, fabrications and trivializations is their eclipsing of the respectable number of honestly-conceived, tasteful and artistically as well as morally meritorious musical works that have been inspired by profound considerations of the Holocaust—works such as the one discussed at length below. And this is precisely what the Milken Archive sought to prevent with a designated volume that lends a deaf ear to anything unsavory or populist.

To that end, some of our Editorial Board even had reservations about the minimizing, misleading, and linguistically as well as philologically incorrect "Holocaust" rubric altogether, an issue I have confronted elsewhere in a bit more detail than is possible here. The Hebrew *sho'a* (lit., disaster), which, with reference to the Germans' genocidal war against the Jews, dates in Israel to 1953, is far more apt; but not completely so, and not unalloyed. It is probably true that no single word or phrase in any language is capable of any more precise or more full evocation. And it may be worth recalling Winston Churchill's warning lament as early as 1941—even before Germany's official decision of the "final solution", which Churchill now seems eerily but keenly to have seen coming—that, "We are in the presence of a crime without a name."

In the end, we decided to jettison the suggested volume title, "The Music of Destruction", but only because we felt that it might be too transparent an echo of David G. Roskies's landmark 1989 anthology, *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, which embraces the biblical era and Jewish antiquity through the Shoah and its aftermath. Instead, we chose the current title, "Out of the Whirlwind", drawn from one of the volume's pieces, a moving song cycle by Bruce Adolphe. But after further discussion about the subtitle, we accepted the fact that the term, "Holocaust", had become too institutionally entrenched to dispense with it. As even Elie Wiesel once grudgingly acknowledged, we are irrevocably saddled with it. But though it may seem a fine line of difference, the inane designation, "Holocaust music"—which we would have found both foolish and belittling—is a far cry from the subtitle we chose, "Reflections on the Holocaust".

We took great care to exclude anything even remotely smacking of romanticization, reduction to sentimentalism or manufactured nostalgia, or any interpretation of the Shoah in universalistic, humanistic terms. For legitimate repertoire related to or inspired by responses to the Holocaust is not an artistic metaphor for the music of diversity, the music of the human spirit, the music of inter-ethnic or interfaith amity, the music of social injustice, the music of redemption, or the record of mankind's cruelty and suffering. There is no ultimate redemption, whatever that actually means, no truth, no spiritual elevation to be expressed in music reflective of the Shoah—no measure of hope of faith in mankind, no messages, and no artistic expression of lessons to be learned—which would accord the Holocaust some measure of benefit. All such fantasies must be relinquished, leaving the primary focus on the sanctity of memory. And Holocaust-related or inspired music, whatever the *legitimate* genre to which any one piece may belong, is certainly not the music of so-called Jewish identity, for which it is now so frequently but misguidedly hijacked. It is indeed the music of destruction.

A SERIOUS CHORAL REFLECTION ON THE SHOAH

One of the most arresting artistic expressions among the corpus of truly legitimate Holocaust-related musical works, conceived and written with unimpeachable integrity, is Max Helfman's Yiddish dramatic choral tone poem-cantata about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, *Di naye hagode* (The New [Passover] Haggada, or narrative). It is based on a poem by the prominent, once internally favored but ultimately doomed and 'legally' murdered Soviet Yiddish poet, Itzik Fefer, *Di shotns fun varshever geto* (The Shadows of the Warsaw Ghetto). By the 1990s, roughly fifty years after its composition and only about thirty years after its last known or verifiable performance, this choral masterpiece had become all but forgotten, only to be rescued from oblivion at the turn of the century by the Milken Archive of Jewish Music.

Painstaking research among Helfman's papers, still scattered among various repositories, has revealed that he adapted Fefer's words both for the sung texts and for the connecting narration; and he took the title for the cantata from the several invocations of that phrase within the original poem.

Max Helfman (1901-1963) was one of the most significant, imaginative, and advanced albeit relatively conservative emigré American composers of Hebrew liturgical as well as secular Yiddish choral music, both original works and artistic arrangements.

Born in Radzyn, Poland, Helfman was only eight years old when he emigrated with his parents to the United States, where he distinguished himself as a boy chorister and soloist in New York area orthodox synagogue choirs and also acquired a traditional Jewish education. He was thoroughly exposed as a young man to the canon of Western classical music and classical compositional techniques as a student at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, where one of his teachers was the esteemed Hungarian-Jewish conductor, Fritz Reiner. But he chose to turn his attention to music of Jewish experience as well as Yiddish culture, and throughout much of his adult life he was appropriately recognized as a Yiddishist. Before he refocused his energies on modern Hebrew culture and the music of modern Israel, from about 1945 on, Helfman was much in the limelight on the East Coast, not only as a conductor of prestigious synagogue choirs and polished amateur Jewish concert choruses, but also—and perhaps more directly relevant to this discussion—as a conductor of specifically Yiddish choruses and a contributor to their repertoires.

Di naye hagode is sui generis not only in Helfman's opera, but in the entirety of serious choral literature as well. To this day, no other work on this level is known to have been written to commemorate and animate the heroic stand of the Jewish fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and to recall and depict the sadistic barbarity of the Germans' final demolition of the ghetto and the mass slaughter it entailed—typically minimized by their terminology of "liquidation". (The same euphemism for murder was commonly employed by Stalin and the Communist Party in the U.S.S.R. There, however, it referred to state-sanctioned and ordered murder of perceived political or ideological deviants as "enemies of the state", or of the Party or of the new order of the Revolution.)

The Haggada reference in the cantata's title gives heightened historical and moral moment to the piece, not only because the Uprising occurred during Passover in 1943, but also because of Fefer's admonition concerning the sacredness of its perpetual remembrance and recollection of its details—viz., the telling and retelling of the story, just as the traditional Haggada is recited anew each year. For the poet, that true defiance against insurmountable odds and the brutality of the Germans' suppression and ultimate obliteration had acquired a significance for the Jewish people as great as the annual traditional recounting of the exodus from Egypt. Both Fefer's poem and its musical expression with Helfman's musical gifts linked the two events for religiously observant and non-observant Jews alike.

Just as all Jews are required annually to recall and relive the ancient Egyptian enslavement and the Divine rescue from that bondage, and just as Jews are obligated to transmit that story to their children in every generation, so did Fefer exhort his people to tell this story perpetually—if for no other reason than to pay homage to the savagely murdered Jews of the Warsaw ghetto who died with the collective honor of resistance:

Forever blessed are they who remember the graves. . . .
And whoever does not maintain the wrath [against the Jews' murderers]
shall be forever cursed.

THE WARSAW GHETTO UPRISING

The events of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising are well known and do not require repetition here in full detail. Numerous readily available reliable sources can be consulted for meticulous accounts of the entire chronology, descriptions of the day-to-day and even hour-by-hour confrontations, and explanations of the complicated interactions among the ghetto's various incarcerated groups, whose particular ideological or political-ideological commitments and worldviews could sometimes set apart one from another. That lack of homogeneity could be troublesome in the initial phases of the Uprising, until all united for the common cause. What follows here is merely a summary of the heroic episode in order to provide the necessary context in which to appreciate this stirring, commemorative musical work.

When the German army entered Warsaw on September 29, 1939, there were nearly 400,000 Jewish residents of the city—about a third of its overall population. (Some estimates place the Jewish numbers even higher—perhaps significantly so—especially to account for many who had concealed or abandoned their Jewish birth, let alone those who had converted or whose parents or even grandparents had done so.) Initially, the Germans segregated the Jewish population by requiring identifying armbands, marking Jewish-owned businesses, and prohibiting Jewish use of public transport. Forced labor and confiscations followed soon afterward. Then, in April, 1940, the Germans began constructing a wall that, by the following October, would enclose the German-established ghetto into which all known Jews from other parts of the city were herded, and in which all Warsaw Jews (including those perceived as Jews by the Germans) were required to reside. At first, about 400,000 Jews were forced into the ghetto. By July, 1940, its population is estimated to have swelled to half a million. Intense overcrowding left thousands of families homeless, starvation and disease became rampant, and child beggars and smugglers roamed the streets. Leaving the ghetto without permission was punishable by death. By summer of 1942, more than 100,000 Jews are believed to have died within the ghetto itself, in addition to many thousands of others who had already been deported and subsequently murdered in slave labor camps—all prior to the outright deportation to death camps for wholesale annihilation.

A number of groups within the ghetto were involved in the active resistance—Zionist organizations representing various and differing shades of nationalist political ideology, along with the General Jewish Workers' Union (the Bund) and the smaller communist-leaning Spartakus. Political underground groups in the ghetto secretly disseminated information on German plans and strategies. They documented events for posterity; issued clandestine periodicals in Hebrew, Yiddish and Polish; and prepared for armed resistance. The first underground Jewish paramilitary organization, Swit, was formed in Warsaw as early as December, 1939, even before the construction of the ghetto, by Jewish veterans of the Polish army. Most of them were Revisionist Zionists and followers of Vladimir Jabotinsky's alternative Zionist philosophy, economic principles, and proposed strategies. Revisionist views departed from some of the mainstream Zionist movement's policies on several fronts—not least in terms of armed belligerence as it came later to apply to the British in Palestine. (The Revisionists also held certain opposing economic ideas for the sustainable establishment of a sovereign Jewish national home, as well as concerning the nature of a future state.)

In 1942, a second underground militant organization was formed by a coalition of four Zionist groups together with the communists. The Bund formed its own fighting organization, the Sama Obrona (Self Defense). But when

the mass deportations to the Treblinka death camp began, in July, 1942, none of those resistance groups had yet succeeded in acquiring arms.

The president of the *Judenrat* (the Jewish council in each German-created ghetto that was established to organize, regulate and administer life therein, and to carry out German directives), Adam Czerniakow, committed suicide rather than comply with the German orders to cooperate in the deportations. His successor, however, did obey the German orders.

In some reviews, the *Judenrats* and their presidents were subjected *in principle* to criticism if not condemnation as de facto facilitators. Whether or not—to what degree, and in which cases—it may be fair to attach any moral or other legitimacy to those criticisms, the entire episode is as complex as it is painful to confront. Undoubtedly, many if not most council members and their leaders were convinced that there was no alternative to cooperation; and there is evidence that suggests that in some cases they even secretly assisted resistance groups. At the worst, most councils and presidents were operating under what now, with the benefit of hindsight, might be characterized as a delusion. Since it was assumed, not altogether unreasonably, that resistance or even simple refusal would be futile, their acquiescence, so they thought, could buy time to save at least some Jews (especially, when possible, the younger ones along the lines of triage)—while hoping in the meantime for Allied rescue either in advance of, or along with, total defeat of Germany. Persuaded that this was the only possible course, following German instructions, however reluctantly—for selections for transports and for taking internal measures to ensure against belligerent resistance—would also forestall deadly, sadistic German reprisals that would kill more Jews sooner in order to deter opposition in all ghettos and to demonstrate the consequences of disobedience. After the war, those rationales came for the most part to be accepted as justification for the unavoidable procedures of the *Judenrats*.

As is well known, however, Hannah Arendt took issue with that accepted justification in her 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, which was cobbled together from her journalistic reports on the trial—and with insufficient editing. In that book and in subsequent lectures and interviews, she argued bluntly in the face of raw, flammable sensitivities that any and all such cooperation had been an ill-advised and mistaken strategy, even when selflessly pursued. She contended that the cooperation in which the councils had engaged, or to which they had submitted, had indeed contributed to the ease and efficiency with which the Germans were able to carry out their mission; and that, therefore, had there been no cooperation whatsoever anywhere and on any level, the eventual death toll of the Shoah—though still enormous—might have been lower by some number.

After nearly six decades, Hannah Arendt remains almost universally unforgiven by Jews both within and outside the academy—virtually "excommunicated", as Amos Elon wrote in his introduction to a subsequent edition of the book—for what has been perceived as "blaming the victims". And even now, anything that might only appear to be a defense of Arendt's position, even if only an attempt at a reasoned explanation, will provoke sharp rebuke.

Yet, even allowing for the likelihood (a certainty in some views) that Arendt's argument as well as her overall reporting on the Eichmann trial reflected both personal and inter-Jewish political agendas along with abstract jurisprudential projections, there are nonetheless those of us who are unconvinced that her contention concerning cooperation was entirely without validity—at least in theory. For those who are willing merely to entertain that possibility, her premise might still be worth revisiting for another objective if painful reconsideration. In that

connection, however, and without necessarily attempting to come to her defense, it might be pertinent to consider that she spoke primarily from within her own discipline of philosophy, viz., neither as an historian per se nor as a practiced, objective journalist. Then, too, whatever merit to her stance there might or might not be, there may simply be no way of stating her case—then or now—without causing anger and pain, only heightened by a perceived arrogance of retrospective judgment.

We should also take into account another intersecting plane of analysis: that the Germans' strategy vis-a-vis forced cooperation by the councils (and among inmates in their camps) was not always necessarily limited to a practical goal of efficiency, but also often a sport of sheer sadistic delight in setting Jews against each other—especially in life-or-death situations. (This tactic was well-learned and imitated in analogous guises by the North Koreans in their treatment of American GIs prisoner-of-war barracks and camps during the Korean War.)

Thus, apart from a few well-known exceptions among the councils or their presidents—and it can hardly be argued that non-Jews have some airtight monopoly on instances of deplorable behavior in general—benefit of the doubt has wisely been the guiding principle. For, much as one might wish after the fact to know how he *would* have behaved under those unparalleled circumstances, it is impossible in hindsight to *know* that with certainty, viz., without having been there to be put in those positions—positions and circumstances that were entirely without precedent in modern history.

Under the German orders imposed upon the council of the Warsaw Ghetto, the number of deportees is now estimated to have ranged from 5,000 to 13,000 daily. By September, 1942, the combined number of Jews who had either been murdered in the ghetto or deported to Treblinka is estimated at 300,000—out of about 370,000 incarcerated residents prior to those deportations less than two months earlier. After that, the Germans restricted the number of remaining inhabitants to 35,000.

The leaders of several underground groups then created the combined Jewish fighting organization known as Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa (ZOB) to resist further deportations. By that time the Germans' genocidal plans (as opposed to excuses of harsh but "necessary" wartime measures or unavoidable wartime casualties) had been exposed—no longer successfully hidden behind purported exaggerations or rumors—since a few escaped Treblinka inmates had managed secretly to return with the news of the intended annihilation. As 1942 drew to a close, the ZOB, joined by the Bund, scrambled to intensify preparations for armed resistance. Some weapons were smuggled into the ghetto with the aid of Polish underground organizations on the outside; other arms were acquired on the black market. Homemade arms were also manufactured in secret underground workshops, tunnels were dug and bunkers were created.

When the Germans entered the ghetto in January, 1943, for their next round of deportations and their final "liquidation", they now encountered actual armed insurrection. They destroyed the hospital and shot its patients, and then resumed deportations. This time, however, the German units were forced by the underground organizations into four days of intensive street battles. Eager to forestall the potential contagion and encouragement that might result in similar resistance in other cordoned Jewish populations elsewhere under German occupation—and throughout Poland—once word would reach them of the spirit of the Warsaw Ghetto fighters, the Germans temporarily retreated to a tentative suspension of deportations, relying instead on the

trickery of "voluntary" recruitment to putative labor camps. During that period, about 6,000 additional Jews were sent to Treblinka nonetheless, and about 1,000 more were murdered within the ghetto.

Meanwhile, life within the ghetto was all but frozen. Unauthorized Jewish presence in the streets was punishable by death. The ZOB, along with the other underground organizations—twenty-two fighting units in all—continued to prepare for full armed engagement in anticipation of the Germans' inevitable return. That moment arrived on April 19, 1943, on Passover, when the Germans—this time arriving with armored vehicles and sufficient artillery—moved in for a final assault. At first they were repulsed, even sustaining casualties. When they resumed their advance—only to fail to prevail in the open street engagements—they set fire to the houses, block by block. Large numbers of Jews were burned to death, while many hiding in the bunkers met their end by grenade and gas attacks. The Jewish underground force continued on the offensive, attacking German units at every opportunity, until the ZOB headquarters fell to the Germans on May 8, 1943, in a battle that took the lives of at least one hundred Jewish fighters. Eight days later, General Jurgen Stroop, who had changed his name in 1941 from Joseph so as to be perceived as "more Aryan" and who had commanded the so-named "Great Operation" (*Grossaktion*) since April 19, reported the successful "liquidation" of the ghetto. To mark his victory, the grand synagogue on Tlomackie Street—one of Europe's most famous and most elaborate synagogue structures and a symbol of upper-middle class modernized Jewry—was blown up and leveled. (Following a death sentence by an American military court at Dachau, Stroop was extradited as a wanted war criminal to the new Polish Peoples Republic, where he was tried in Warsaw and hanged on the site of the former ghetto.) In the ensuing months, some Jewish units continued to fight sporadically nonetheless, while the Germans attempted to pursue and kill any remaining Jews hiding among the ghetto's ruins. By August, 1943, however, the fight was over. In the last two weeks of the full-blown resistance (from April 29 until the date of the reported German victory), the Germans acknowledged their losses at sixteen dead and eighty-five wounded. Obviously, those figures were fictitiously low, and historians now suspect that their casualties were significantly greater. The official German report also stated that they had killed and deported a combined total of 56,000 Jews in the final months of the Uprising.

* * * * *

THE POEM THAT INSPIRED THE MUSIC

Soviet Yiddish poet Itsik Fefer (1900-1952) fashioned his homage to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and its victims in the form of an extended poetic work centered around the story of a lone boy who miraculously survived the battle. In Fefer's telling, however, the boy wraps himself in what appears to be a Zionist flag in the manner of a *talit* (prayer shawl) and flings himself to almost certain death from high atop a flaming building—as the poem proclaims, "Death is his life."

How quickly has his childhood ended!
And what are the worldly possessions now left to him?
Only two hand grenades, a gun, the torn flag of his people.
He climbs up the broken wall of the tower.
He wraps his body like a high priest in his prayer shawl,
And clinging to its folds in everlasting embers,

He fires two bullets and leaps into space.

The boy takes the fluttering banner,
And wraps together its broad folds,
And throws it like a light shawl,
Over his shoulders — the shoulders of the Warsaw boy;
And tosses himself from high atop the flaming building.

Death is his life. The banner — his will and testament.
It is his heritage, his faith, his hope.
With it his way to eternity is open!

The poem did not appear in print in the Soviet Union until 1946, but a year earlier it was published in the United States by the Left-leaning Yiddishist organization, Yidisher Kultur Farband—the Yiddish Cultural Organization.

Ironically, that was just about the time when Helfman embarked on his enthusiastic reorientation towards modern Hebrew culture and the optimistic musical idioms of the Zionist enterprise by then in full swing in Palestine. In that same year (1945) he was appointed artistic director of the newly-established joint Jewish Arts Committee of the Histadrut Ivrit of America and the American Zionist Youth Commission, as well as conductor of its choral ensemble, the Hebrew Arts Singers. Those positions were followed by his engagement as music director of the culturally Zionist but officially apolitical Brandeis Camp. That unique institution was born out of the efforts of the profound idealist educator, Shlomo Bardin, whose concern—like that of Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, who influenced his thinking directly—was how to find a way to sustain and invigorate the new generation(s) of American youth's commitment to Judaism and Jewish life without their having to forego full participation in American Society, education and culture. The answer for Bardin, followed by Helfman, lay in the youthful spirit of a Hebrew national cultural expression, not only in music, but in all the arts.

Thus absorbed with his new endeavor, Helfman left the Yiddish musical idiom pretty much behind him, but only after he had completed *Di naye hagode*—his last significant effort in the Yiddish language. Except for an already dwindling albeit tenacious number of Yiddish cultural devotees who continued to maintain schools and summer camps for their children mostly in the Greater New York area, but also in a few other cities across the country, Yiddish was perceived as no longer relevant for the vast majority of the youth of the postwar era. And it was jettisoned as "the old giving way to the new and current". Apart from diehard, intransigent anti-Zionist circles, that "new and current" could find its expression in relation to the spirit, culture and *Zeitgeist* of modern Israel and its pioneering generations. The late-20th/early 21st-century renaissance of interest in things Yiddish, which would excite young generations with new-found, exuberant curiosity and pride as well as a measure of artificial nostalgia, was unimaginable by the early 1950s.

But until after the war, a large part of Helfman's efforts was devoted to the direction of Left-leaning Yiddish choruses and their often politically-charged repertoires. That major phase of his musical life began with his conducting a chorus of the Socialist-oriented but fervently anti-Communist and fully patriotic *Arbeter Ring* (Workmen's Circle), which had adopted an unmistakable anti-U.S.S.R. stance as early as 1929. Then,

beginning in 1937 and for many years, he directed Far-Left Yiddish choruses such as, most notably, the naively communist-sympathizing and frequently communist-professing *Frayhayts Gezang Verein* (lit., Freedom song/Singing Association), which was later combined with some smaller choral groups of similar ideological leanings to become known in English as The Jewish People's Philharmonic Chorus.³ That New York-area chorus was loosely federated under the vehemently anti-religious national umbrella of the Jewish Workers Musical Alliance, which Helfman also headed, and which encompassed *Frayhayts* choruses as well as mandolin orchestras in nearly thirty cities.⁴ In that national supervisory capacity, Helfman oversaw the editing and distribution by the Alliance's publication department of choral arrangements of Yiddish folk and workers' songs—many of them dating to the 1905 Russian Revolution or otherwise tinged with Russian elements. And between 1937 and 1940 he published serially his own compilation, *Gezang un kamf* (Song and Struggle), which included his arrangements not only of labor movement songs, songs of international proletarian class struggle, and popular folksongs, but militant curiosities such as *Di royte armye balade* (the Red Army Ballad), *Oktober* (referring to Lenin's Bolshevik coup in 1917, known in the U.S.S.R. as the October Revolution), *Birobidzhan* (the attempted Jewish autonomous region in the U.S.S.R.), *Zhankoye* (a utopian commune in the U.S.S.R.), and *Gezang fun ershtn may* (the annual May Day celebration of the International Workers' Order).

The *Frayhayts* choruses were also sometimes known as the *Ordn-Khorn* because of their collective affiliation with the *Ordn*—the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, which, from its founding in the late 1920s, was unabashedly aligned with the Soviet Union and with Communist Party thought, ideals and programs; and, at least in its early stages, it is known to have received some funding from Moscow, directly or indirectly.⁵ It should be stressed, however, that we know nothing of Helfman's own personal political beliefs one way or the other, apart from his commitment to Jewish survival, and, probably, social justice in general. It is entirely possible that, unlike some of his colleagues in both the Yiddishist cultural milieu and the classical music world in America at the time, his musical involvements with the Far Left were simply musical.

All those activities were about to become Helfman's past when *Di shotns fun varshever geto* was published in America in 1945, and, though he was beginning his new path in a very different cultural direction, the Yiddishist in him could not be suppressed. (Had he wanted to do so, he could have chosen to compose his cantata in an English or even modern Hebrew translation, once Fefer's poem had come to his attention.) Fefer's reputation and some of his poetry were familiar to his Yiddishist world, especially his wartime, corner-turning poem, *Ikh bin a yid* (I am a Jew). Written during a temporary relaxation of restrictions against overtly Jewish literary expression—partly, in Soviet assumptions, to facilitate cooperation in and support for the "Great Patriotic War"—the poem was at once a proclamation of Jewish pride and an assurance of Soviet-Jewish patriotism. Also, together with the famous Soviet Yiddish actor and de facto spokesman for Soviet Jewry, Solomon Mikhoels, Fefer had been to New York in 1943 on behalf of Stalin's bogus Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (EAK). They were dispatched with the aim (among others) of encouraging Stalin and the Party's erroneously assumed significant number of influential, pro-Communist and pro-U.S.S.R Yiddish-speaking American Jews to lobby in Washington for the opening of a second front in the eastern theater of the war in Europe.

That call for a second front became the mantra of Soviet sympathizers in the West. Typical of entrenched anti-Jewish attitudes, resentments and related conspiracy fantasies, Stalin—hardly the first or the last to indulge in the myth of Jewish conspiratorial domination—is thought to have assumed that Jews exercised disproportionate

"capitalist" financial as well as political control in Washington (when, of course, they had neither); and thus, by extension, influence over wartime military strategy. That seemed obvious in light of President Roosevelt's appointment of Jewish cabinet members and a Supreme Court Justice, along with the presence of Jewish administrative employees in Washington in unprecedented numbers. Some of the President's arch enemies on the Far Right not only referred to him as Rosenfeld on occasion, but even suspected that he was secretly Jewish. Not that Stalin went that far, but there persisted a highly inflated perception of the numerical strength of Yiddish-speaking and other Jewish Communists in the United States, which somehow seemed not to be in conflict with the charge of capitalist control (and, of course, despite deceptive appearances in the New York area and later, after-the-fact romanticizations, the number of actual Jewish Communists in the United States was even less than inconsequential, even at the height of the Great Depression).⁶

There was yet another underhanded motive behind the EAK tour that brought Fefer and Mikhoels to America (as well as to Mexico, Canada, and England). If they could alert the Jews in person to the reality and extent of Germany's war in progress against European Jews—confirming the truth of reports and rumors that many found unreliable, unimaginable and perhaps exaggerated—American Jews might then be moved to use their supposed influence in support of Western Allied resolve to aid the U.S.S.R. in its war effort. During the war, the progress of what we now know as the Holocaust was deliberately not much mentioned by the mainstream Jewish press or leadership, nor by the mainstream general press (including the Jewish-owned New York Times)—and it was judiciously as well as strategically avoided or at least played down by President Roosevelt, in part so as not to provide ammunition to Far Right suspicions about why the United States was in the European war in the first place, something strangely missed or omitted by revisionist assessments.⁷

If Stalin and the Party found the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee a distasteful enterprise in its embrace of Jewry, they nonetheless thought it useful for a while. The degree to which, if any, Fefer personally bought in to Stalin's purposes of the EAK tour and the assumptions that motivated it is questionable, and assessments vary. But on that tour he did speak out against the Germans' war against the Jews and the possible annihilation that Europe's remaining Jews were facing.

The gatherings in New York culminated in a mass "peace rally" at the Polo Grounds, the since-demolished home stadium of the New York Giants baseball team. Fefer spoke dramatically, and the celebrated but avowed pro-Communist, pro-U.S.S.R. and even pro-Stalin black singer and actor, Paul Robeson, also made an appearance on behalf of the EAK and its mission. It could not have been predicted then that only several years later—after the appearance of *Di shotns fun varshever geto* and the turn of events in which the poet was trapped—Robeson would be a witness to, and a part of, the story surrounding Fefer's ultimate fate.

It was probably not chance that dictated the Polo Grounds as the venue for that rally, since a large concentration of communist-sympathizing, Yiddish speakers and other Jews to the Far Left lived in the general area or not far off. Among the large crowd of pro-communist Jews and workers' groups in attendance were many singers in Helfman's *Frayhayts* chorus as well as many he knew from other departments of the *ORDN* and the Alliance, all of whom were deeply impressed by Fefer—as was Helfman. So it was only natural that two years later, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Helfman was immediately attracted to Fefer's poem about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

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As with *Ikh bin a yid*, Fefer came to write *Di shotns* via a circuitous and ultimately suicidal route. One of the most prominent Yiddish poets of the Stalin era, he was also among the group of Jewish poets—David Bergelson, Peretz Markish, David Hofshtein, and others—who were arrested, tortured and murdered by the NKVD in Stalin's anti-Jewish purges of the postwar terror.

But Fefer was no dissident per se. A native of the Ukraine, he joined the Bund when he was seventeen, but left it two years later to join the Communist Party. His writings then began to appear in the Kiev Yiddish periodical, *Komunistishe fon* (Communist Flag). In general, his poetry has been characterized as "simple language" (*proste*), or "common speech"—literature that spoke to the masses of Yiddish readers following the 1917 Bolshevik coup who could not relate so easily to the more sophisticated, avant-garde writings of the smaller Yiddish-speaking intelligentsia of that time. He spoke in proletarian-tinged terms about "organizing the blossoming worker-writers" and of "the worker soldiers in the artists' army".

Fefer actively promoted the official Party line and the proletarian cause in nearly all his writings, as well as in his extra-literary activities as an apparatchik involved in state-sponsored and state-sanctioned committees and organizations. Much of his poetry—its artistic merits aside—directly served the interest of Soviet Communist ideology, the Stalin regime, and the "cult of personality". His poem *Stalin*, in which he glorified the de facto megalomaniacal dictator as a teacher and visionary, became one of his best-known creations: "When I say Stalin—I mean beauty / I mean everlasting happiness . . ."

As a Jew under a regime that we now know to have been violently anti-Jewish on various levels and at various times, Fefer's political and ideological alignment must be understood not simply as personal and professional survival, but in the context of the natural leanings and loyalties of many if not most of the mainstream of Soviet Jewry—especially in the years prior to the end of the Second World War. For a long time—despite the Great Terror of the 1930s as well as other periods of restriction and forced abridgement even of secular Yiddish educational and cultural activity—much of that Jewish mainstream, which included indoctrinated proletarian circles, remained committed to the professed ideals of the Party, and to Stalin as their leader.

For those Jews, Fefer among them, Stalin and the Party represented the bulwark against the Fascist threat; assurance that the "new order" would continue in its presumed advancement; an almost messianic antidote to the perceived ills, decadence and built-in inequities of Western bourgeois societies; protection from so-called nationalist-imperialist and capitalist regression; and a defense against alleged plots to undermine Soviet security and the Communist cause.

Given all the above areas of indoctrination coupled with understandable fear, the vitality and continuation of Yiddish literature itself was inextricable from the Communist cause for the proletarian Yiddish writers. Fefer's work is typically permeated with collective rather than personal concerns, and with the prevailing principle and tone of continuing revolution. Serving the revolution was inseparable from serving its authorities. For most of the world—including much of Soviet Society—the undiluted, unattenuated truth about Stalin did not emerge

until after his death; and then, publicly, only after Premier Nikita Khrushchev's revelations in the 1950s of the grisly details, beginning with his famous "secret speech" to the 20th Party Congress in 1956.

Even well before those revelations, however, during the last five years of Stalin's life, word of a renewed and deadly anti-Jewish campaign—indeed another terror—had begun to spread abroad. But many Party loyalists—including sympathizers in the United States—refused to reconsider past assumptions and were inclined to lend a deaf ear to what they had been indoctrinated to view as anti-Soviet propaganda. Often in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, many such Jews (as well as non-Jews) both in the U.S.S.R and in America remained loathe to condemn the very regime they had championed for so long—and now, for Jews, as the regime whose army had, in the end, saved Soviet Jewry from the possibility if not the certainty of complete annihilation. And that gratitude applied as well to the Red Army's liberation of camps beyond the Soviet Union in its westward sweep. It was, after all, the Red Army that had inflicted roughly eighty percent of all German casualties in the war, notwithstanding the valuable, heroic role of the Western Allies in weakening German forces as a whole and diverting them from total focus on the eastern front. If "strong internal measures" had been necessary, so be it. Whatever else might be said or known about him, for Jews as for Soviet citizenry in general, it was Stalin who had defeated "the Fascists".

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At least on its surface, *Di shotns fun varshever geto* contains no hint of anti-Stalin sentiment or any defiance of internal policies and practices. To the contrary, the enemy in the poem is the same as that of the Soviet Union. But like *Ikh bin a yid*, and then his 1946 poem, *Epitaph*, in which he wrote of being buried in a Jewish cemetery and of his hope of being remembered for having "served his people", *Di shotns* did articulate or at least represent Fefer's awakening—perhaps intensification—of Jewish consciousness. The extent to which the poem can be considered among those that contributed to his fall from grace, persecution and eventual murder is not entirely clear, although there has been some suspicion to that effect. For one thing, it could be read as espousing Jewish resistance *in principle*, viz., against any regime of real or perceived subjugation. It is known, however, that *Ikh bin a yid* was quoted in 1952 in connection with the prosecutorial proceedings against the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee—as evidence of "nationalist deviation".

In 1948, despite official Party-line denials of "antisemitism" and its technical constitutional illegality, Stalin had come to fear any thriving Soviet Jewish culture as a serious threat—ranging from furtherance of the Yiddish language (now deemed far less necessary to the Party in view of the vastly reduced readership) to Jewish cultural preservation or, worse, solidarity. And those who, like Fefer, had had contact with the West during the war were now suspected of being irrevocably tainted potential recruits as "enemies of the state". Now considered a liability as a perceived representative of Soviet Jewry, EAK was disbanded in 1948; and many of its leaders were executed.⁸

By then, with the establishment of the State of Israel that year, followed by its recognition by the Soviet Union, Fefer had embraced the Zionist cause as an appropriate concern of *world* Jewry; and he even credited Soviet heroism during the war with contributing to the ultimate realization of Zionist political aspirations. This could only have magnified the precariousness of his situation. As a foreign policy strategy, the U.S.S.R. had supported Israel's statehood as a reduction of British imperial influence and, in that sense, as a potential ally. But within the

U.S.S.R., Zionist sympathy and enthusiasm for the new state were read more clearly than ever as dangerous Jewish nationalism, which could become disloyalty. Having already lost his benefit to the regime, Fefer's combination of Yiddishist *cultural* nationalism and Zionist sympathy had to have signaled a sense of Jewish particularity that might only impede the mandated acceleration of assimilation.

Fefer was arrested in December, 1948, and held at the infamous Lubyanka Prison. When Paul Robeson visited the Soviet Union in 1949 for one of his periodic concert tours, he insisted on seeing Fefer. The two had become personal friends on Robeson's earlier tours as well as in New York during the EAK mission. Although it is assumed that Robeson did not yet know for certain of Fefer's arrest, he had begun to suspect that his friend might be in danger. Mikhoels had been brutally murdered and his tongue cut out on Stalin's orders, although, at the time, Stalin's role was only suspected. Through silent hand signals, Fefer let Robeson know of his impending execution. But on his return to the United States, Robeson refused to acknowledge—to the press or anyone other than his son—not only that certainty, but the fact that he had learned both that a new wave of anti-Jewish attitudes, policies and measures had already begun their sweep in the Soviet Union and that many prominent Jews were already in grave danger. Since all this was categorically and mendaciously denied by Robeson—then the only possible first-hand source for revealing such confirmed information to the West—the truth about Fefer's situation remained unknown in America; and therefore there was no lobbying there on his behalf. Fefer was shot, probably on August 12, 1952, after accusations of Jewish nationalism as well as spying for America. His murder was not even substantiated until later, and it went relatively unnoticed in America outside Yiddishist circles.⁹

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THE DRAMATIC CHORAL TONE POEM: The New Haggada

Di naye hagode does not, as the title might infer, take the form of a refashioned or alternative Haggada for use at an actual seder, analogous, for example, to those that have been devised over the years for non-traditional and even non-religious, ideologically reinterpreted seders in Israel as well as in North America—and to some extent in England.¹⁰ It does, however, seize upon and develop—musically and dramatically—Fefer's proposition that the Germans' war of annihilation against the Jews and the heroic resistance of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising mark a seminal turning point in the history of the Jewish people. And, as a result, that history has become forever altered so as to demand that Jews address new heroes and adopt a new (though not necessarily a mutually exclusive) focus in connection with the annual Passover observance. In that sense, the piece might be understood as a poetic reconsideration and reinterpretation of the conventional Passover narrative—an expansion of the role of collective memory.

Like Fefer's poem, Helfman's work emphasizes solemn celebration of Jewish heroism over the centuries-old perception of Jews as helpless, submissive victims, over whose fate of persecution future generations merely agonize. And it proposes that a fitting memorial to all of the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto is perpetual outrage at the perpetrators rather than mourning for the murdered resisters. Unlike reliance on Divine rescue in the biblical account, this work extols human courage and resoluteness both as a path to liberation and as a worthy subject for commemoration.

For Fefer and Helfman, as for many nonreligious or religiously disaffected but culturally committed Jews, this type of recollection seemed more relevant, more real, more galvanizing, and more worthy of annual repetition than the events of the Torah and the traditional Haggada. It could be assumed from a theoretical-historical perspective, for the sake of argument, that the ancient Israelites could have chosen to remain slaves in Egypt while still surviving physically. In the Holocaust, however, the Jews' doom was sealed not by what they agreed or refused to do, and not by their beliefs, practices or actions, but simply by virtue of the fact that they were Jews—or so designated as Jews by Nazi definitions. In that context, upon which *Di naye hagode* focuses, only heroic armed resistance—even despite the obviousness of its certain eventual failure—could have even a chance of modifying that doom and paving the way for the possibility of ultimate Jewish survival. "Death will overtake us in any event," rang the call to arms of the United Partisans Organization, "but this is a moral defense; better to fall in the fight for human dignity—to die as free fighters—than to live for a little while by the grace of the murderer."

Many if not most in the Resistance knew they could not prevail. But as one survivor recalled, "There is great honor to be celebrated in this resistance without victory—in the decision that requires the strongest moral convictions."

Di naye hagode reflects some of the formal structure of the traditional Passover Haggada—most overtly in the first musical number, *Ma nishtana* [*halayla hazeh mikol haleylot*] (Why/how is this night different from all other nights?). This corresponds to the commencement of the annual retelling proper (*maggid*), preceded in the established order, or *seder*, by four mandated ritual components. Commonly but erroneously called "the Four Questions" (*fir kashes* in Yiddish)—traditionally posed by the youngest person at the table to represent the youth of each generation—this is an invitation to the recounting of the Passover story along with its amplified implications, insights, and traditional as well as creative and even original commentary and interpretations. This initial part of, or prelude to *maggid*, however, is not and does not comprise *four* questions. It is **ONE** question with four examples of the many questions that can and should be asked by everyone at the table as participants in pursuit of the Socratic method of enquiry—the quest for knowledge, wisdom, truth, and intellectual discourse. For much of the seder ritual is known largely to have been based upon, or influenced by, the format of the Greek symposium.

In a haunting introduction, Fefer recalls for us:

. . . that fateful evening, when Jews were huddled in the frightful subcellars of the ghetto to read again the Haggada . . . and when the brutal hordes of the enemy came into the ghetto with their tanks and their poison gases to exterminate them, the Jews left off reading the Haggada and rose and met the enemy empty-handed and head-on, writing a new Haggada in their blood . . . This is the story of the New Haggada . . . those ghostly columns of marching shadows—these are the shadows of those who have perished. Aimlessly they wander . . . wailing over the fate of mothers and children. They cannot find their last resting place. They have not even spoken their last prayers yet. Thus begins the New Haggada, the new Exodus.

Fefer transformed the *ma nishtana* into a central question to be asked on every anniversary of the Uprising, prompting the recollection of its events. And to the question comes the reply, in place of the usual *avadim hayinu* (We were slaves [of the Pharaoh in Egypt]), with an introduction reflecting on the desolation of the ghetto's ruins:

They roam through the streets and alleys,
They knock in darkness on wide-open doors,
They mourn near ruins, they sleep on hard floors,
They fall upon dark, cold dirt roads,
They rise once again and wander exhausted
.....
They have not yet recited their confession,
They cannot yet find their rest,
Early in the morning, late at night,
They roam the shadows of the Warsaw Ghetto.

For the opening central question, Helfman employs the most widely known chant pattern of Ashkenazi tradition for *ma nishtana*—the modal formula known as *lern-shtayger* (study mode), which is used in talmudic learning and recitation to facilitate the memory of passages of text. The question-answer element is cleverly set up with the response of women's voices at different pitch levels, infused with a starkly ominous, foreboding tone.

Performance or fulfillment of Divine commandments (whether those so stated specifically among the 613 *mitzvot*—commandments—in the so-called "written" Torah, or Pentateuch, or those rabbinically derived and legislated with authority and therefore part of the "oral law") is one of the several occasions introduced and accompanied by an anaphoric formula known as a *b'rakha*, which is commonly but both erroneously and incorrectly rendered in a number of languages as "blessing".¹¹ Although the *maggid* section of the actual, traditional Haggada is not preceded or introduced by a *b'rakha* of its own, Fefer nonetheless seized on that theme of "blessing" in principle to continue his preamble with a poetic, partly metaphorical description of the ghetto and the Uprising. But here it is we who remember who are blessed—first in the narration, and then with a choral response that mirrors the congregational or group response to the first three words of a *b'rakha* if pronounced by an individual in most (but not all) situations:

Forever blessed are they who remember the graves,
The graves wherein lie our people so great and so tormented,
Blessed are they.
 Blessed are they who remember the graves
 Where our people lie, our great, our poor.

Those lines are delivered musically with a combined flavor of psalmody and biblical cantillation.

The words at the end of the sixth musical number, *A linder april* (A Mild April), refer back to the beginning of *maggid* with its opening phrase in the traditional Haggada, *avadim hayinu*. But here the ancient condition of Egyptian enslavement translates to the Warsaw Ghetto incarceration.

The prophet Elijah, who, according to tradition, will arrive to herald the coming of the Messiah, is an important element of the traditional seder ritual. He is said to visit every seder and take a sip from the special goblet of wine reserved for him at each table; and the door is opened for him as the participants express the hope that he will arrive soon. Thus in the seventh number, *Vet kumen?* (Will he come?), the chorus asks whether a savior ("the prophet") will come soon to the ghetto. The "white-robed fathers" in an ensuing passage of the narration refer to the *kitl*—a white garment representing holiness, which is worn in many customs by the heads of the households, who preside over the seder. And the phrase, "the queens of each house", refers to their wives, traditionally described as the Passover Queens. Both are recalled as meeting the Germans "with lightning and thunder", now from each home as a fortress from which they shoot.

After opening the door for Elijah at the beginning of the second half of the traditional seder, following the conclusion of the feast, those gathered around the table pronounce the words, "*shfokh hamatkha el hagoyim asher lo y'da'ukha . . . ki akhal et ya'akov*" (Pour out Your wrath on the nations that have rejected You . . . for they have sought to devour/destroy the people Israel!). This is a natural expression in the context of this work, and it occurs a few times: in musical number eight, the continuation of *Vet kumen?* ("May the wrath burn for hundreds of generations, and whoever distances himself from maintaining the wrath shall be forever cursed!"); in number twelve, *Zey, zaynen gekumen* (They came), with the words, "Now the wind is saying, 'Pour out Your wrath.'"); and in number nineteen, when the chorus sings, "Pour out Your wrath on the enemies . . . upon all the enemies." And these calls for eternal wrath are followed by a stirring admonition:

If not one hundred, or even fifty, but only ten shall survive, then let the power strengthen the arm of this *minyan*, this quorum [of ten], not to shed bitter tears on our graves, not to weep on our tombs, but to let the conscience of ages burn in the hearts of men for now and forever. Then, only then, from our graves shall we give them our eternal blessing.

"And so begins the New Haggada," proclaims the narrator after the chorus sings of the ghetto fighters' shining "glory and heroism", carefully acknowledging other battles of the Red Army against the Germans ("from the battle on the Volga, from Russia's bayonets"), with echoes of familiar Russlan tunes:

Because on this seder night we remember them all,
those nameless shadows who have died so that we may live
Such is the command,
Such is fate:
To die in order to be reborn.
So begins the New Haggada.

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Di naye hagode received its world premiere in 1948 (in its unorchestrated form, with piano accompaniment) at New York's Carnegie Hall. The occasion was the twenty-fifth anniversary concert of the Jewish People's Philharmonic

Chorus, conducted by the composer. Although by then he had redirected his efforts to the Brandeis Camp, he was appropriately invited to conduct the chorus for that celebration, which also included other works of his. (Inexplicably, the chorus was billed for that night as the People's Philharmonic Choral Society, although it had not changed its name and subsequently continued to use its previous one.)

That performance also featured an important dance component and staging by Benjamin Zemach, the eminent choreographer and creator of modern Jewish dance forms who was also on the faculty of the Brandeis Camp. Dance was also part of subsequent performances in Montreal (1949), in Los Angeles at the Wilshire-Ebell Theater (1950), where it was sung by the local Jewish People's Chorus, and, with full orchestra, in Santa Monica, California, among other cities. The work was featured by the Jewish People's Philharmonic Chorus (this time with its established name) in its 1964 memorial tribute to Helfman, performed at New York's Town Hall.

Helfman was essentially a miniaturist as a composer, excelling in smaller forms. More than once he expressed to close associates and friends his regret that he had never written, nor had the patience to complete, a magnum opus. Of all his opera, however, *Di naye hagode*, with its overall structural arch, its sense of inspired artistic unity, its sophisticated melodic invention, expert choral writing, and its judicious balance, probably comes closest to that wish. Indeed, the consensus among those intimately familiar with his music has long been that this is Helfman's most ambitious and most powerful work.

It is all the more frustrating, therefore, that following the 1964 Town Hall performance, *Di naye hagode* was allowed to sink into obscurity—only to be rescued at the dawn of the 21st century by the Milken Archive of Jewish Music. During the intervening decades, it was mentioned or recalled only occasionally by a few Helfman aficionados—primarily those who had been his students or choristers at the Brandeis Camp, or a number of important composers who had spent summers as students in residence at the short-lived Brandeis Arts Institute (1948-1952), also in Santa Susana, California. (The institute was a separate enterprise that Helfman conceived and directed.) But, insofar as we have been able to determine, after 1964 there were no serious efforts aimed at another performance of *Di naye hagode* in the United States.

It is surprising that in all the years of heavily attended annual mass commemorations in New York of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising—through the mid-to-late 1980s if not later at capacious venues such as Madison Square Garden, and then for a number of years at Temple Emanu-El—it appears that no one thought to consider including a performance of *Di naye hagode*. It is likely that already by the 1970s an authoritative performance score and the orchestral parts were no longer available, so that a professional, historically-informed reconstruction project would have been required. But had there been interest, that could have been accomplished; and the necessary financial resources were not lacking. Given the proper performance materials, at least one New York Yiddish chorus that remained relatively viable for a good while could have found a way to meet the challenge of learning the work. As an alternative, any number of first-rate college choruses in the Greater New York area would have been able and ready to take on the task if provided with adequate Yiddish language and diction coaching: and several remain ready to do so today.

At one time, there may have been another factor at play in ignoring or bypassing *Di naye hagode* for such events. Over the years there has been occasional but unsubstantiated speculation to the effect that despite his having been a victim of Stalin and the Party in the end, for some in the United States during and throughout the climate of the Cold War at its heights, Fefer remained unconsciously, subliminally or vaguely linked to Soviet Communism—even if few could cite anything more specific. It was not only his poem, *Stalin*, and his position in the EAK that might have sustained that impression, but also the fact that his reputation was tarnished by the rumor that he had been an informer for the NKVD for a number of years. Although the truth behind that rumor is now widely accepted, the circumstances surrounding his role in connection with the NKVD were extraordinarily complex.¹² Yet, beginning in the early 1950s and for quite some time, even the slightest inadvertent suggestion of possible Communist taint was something to be carefully avoided in public events of mainstream American Jewry. But if any such perceived linkage with regard to Fefer was a cause for concern in the three decades or so following his execution—and there is no documentation let alone proof to that effect—any such fear was no longer warranted by the mid-1980s and certainly the 1990s, when the context of his situation was better understood, and when public commemorations of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising were still being held on a large scale.

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By the late 1990s, when *Di naye hagode* was identified as one of the recording priorities of the Milken Archive of Jewish Music, we still could not locate a full authentic score, much less an *ur*-manuscript; and only the Yiddish narration script could be found. Extensive research in various archives and among scattered collections of Helfman's papers yielded only fragments, partial scores, drafts, and sketches, all of which had to be compared and reconciled as part of our reconstruction project. With the resulting performance score and an English translation of the narration commissioned from Eliyahu Mishulovin, *Di naye hagode* was recorded in Los Angeles in June, 2001, by the Choral Society of Southern California together with the Los Angeles Zimriyah Chorale, accompanied by the Young Musicians Foundation Debut Orchestra—conducted by Nick Strimple, with the narration spoken by Theodore Bikel. In 2006, that recording was issued as a Milken Archive CD on the NAXOS label, along with a booklet containing Eliyahu Mishulovin's English translation of the sung texts as well as the narration, both of which are quoted herein in all examples.

"In effect, the poet and composer have issued a 'wake-up call' to the Jewish people," wrote one press reviewer of the CD recording, "to be vigilant and take responsibility for their own survival."

Although *Di naye hagode* focuses specifically on the Uprising, its vivid, graphic depictions of the Germans' war of annihilation against the Jews and the poem's demanded perpetual remembering for the sake of remembering apply as well, by extension, to the Shoah per se. And to paraphrase Fefer, blessed are all of us, Jews and non-Jews alike, who remember the graves—wherever they are. But condemned be all who would rather forget.

"So begins the New Haggada"—for the righteous of all humanity.

Now, unlike the shadows of the Warsaw Ghetto, the shadows of Max Helfman's music and those of Itzik Fefer's poetic gift need no longer roam or wander aimlessly.

NOTES

¹ In its festival debut and initial publication, the song was credited to Nurit Hirsch, who later explained that she had recalled the melody as a quasi-folksong—having heard it through her grandparents' singing within Hassidic circles. But it was never sung for liturgical purposes in synagogue contexts.

² James Loeffler, "Why the New 'Holocaust Music' is an Insult to Music—and to Victims of the Shoah", *Tablet*, July 10, 2013.

³ One can only guess at the rationale behind the German *Verein* (and spelled as in German) in the name of that chorus, although various explanations have been proposed. It could have been a matter of following a contemporaneous fashion of peppering (some would say corrupting) Yiddish with German equivalents, as a pretense to elevation, known as *daytshmerish*, or it might have been thought to place the perception of the chorus on an equal footing with the many German folk choruses across the country.

⁴ The Jewish Musical Workers' Alliance should not be confused with the unrelated Educational Alliance in New York City, which was a thriving philanthropically-supported, religiously as well as ideologically neutral Jewish *community* institution in New York City. It offered educational, cultural, social and sport programs, classes and activities to all who wished to benefit—and, in its earlier decades, it provided guidance for immigrant generations in adjusting to American ways and norms without detriment to Jewish life. The word of caution here is necessary to avoid confusion, because for many years there were several other Jewish organizations and associations in the United States of various stripes and purposes that also used the terminology of "alliance" in their English names. But for the largest number of New York-area Yiddish-speaking or other Jews of eastern European backgrounds, simple reference to "the Alliance" automatically signified the Educational Alliance. The same abbreviated reference could signify any of the other, more circumscribed (even if national) entities primarily when used either by their members or followers or by those casting aspersions on them—viz., when the context was already understood or assumed.

⁵ Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s—in connection first with a student project and then with my book, *Songs of the American Jewish Experience* (Chicago, 1976) followed by other research projects—I interviewed many dozens of people who had sung as far back as the 1930s in *ORDN* as well as other Far Left and/or openly communist-sympathizing choruses. Some informants felt still *emotionally* if vaguely connected to the earlier political-ideological leanings of those choruses, and some even defended the defense of the U.S.S.R. that late in the game; while others were clinging by then primarily to nostalgia. But not a single one in either category could actually define communism, fascism, Marxism, Marx-Leninism, Maoism, socialism, or, for that matter, capitalism—nor the basic differences among these "isms". In interviews by the end of the century with a few veterans in their late nineties who were both highly intelligent and completely lucid, the communist association of those choruses was usually conveniently (and understandably) forgotten until prodding revived the memory; and they preferred otherwise to remember those choruses, and the *ORDN* itself, as "humanistic".

⁶ For a scholarly and nuanced study of American communism, its origins, varieties, ideological interactions with other leftist groups, and seductive powers (including but not limited to Jewish involvement) see, Irving Howe and Lewis Coser (with the assistance of Julius Jacobson), *THE AMERICAN COMMUNIST PARTY: A Critical History (1919–1957)* (Boston, 1958).

⁷ Notwithstanding the valiant, patriotic and heroic selflessness of Americans during the Second World War—correctly and gratefully acknowledged by journalist and newscaster Tom Brokaw in both the title and content of his book as "the greatest generation"—it has been estimated that, by 1944, had there been a binding referendum, a frightening number of voters (some estimates are as high as forty percent) might have voted in favor of negotiating or opting out of the war in Europe and concentrating completely on the war in the Pacific rather than continuing to back the Allies' policy of pursuit to unconditional German surrender at all costs. The last thing the President or American Jewish leadership needed—especially with the heightened anti-Jewish attitudes that had been rampant since the 1930s and could easily be exploited by both politicians and radio preachers on the Far Right—was a charge that the "real cause" for which American boys were continuing to give their lives in Europe was primarily the rescue of Europe's Jews. While the issue is of course complex, many in authority were genuinely convinced that those dangerous flames might only be fanned by the bellows of revelations of the Holocaust in progress, and in any case that the only salvation for Europe's remaining Jews was winning the war as quickly as possible. See, for example, in Robert N. Rosen, *SAVING THE JEWS: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust*, passim, and especially the Afterword by Alan M. Dershowitz (New York, 2006); and Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2013).

⁸ See Joshua Rubinstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, eds., *STALIN'S SECRET POGROM: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (New Haven and London, 2001; translated by Laura Esther Wolfson).

⁹ According to his son's account, Paul Robeson later admitted to him that he had sensed "antisemitic" vibrations in the Soviet Union even before leaving on that trip, from what he had heard about local press reports to that effect, and that he had already become concerned before the trip about the fate of his friends among the Jewish literary and artistic circles there. When Robeson asked to see Fefer, he was taken out of the Lubyanka Prison for a day, dressed in civilian clothes, and brought to Robeson's hotel room for an unguarded visit. Knowing that room was bugged, the two spoke neutrally, but Fefer made it clear to Robeson—through handwritten notes (which Robeson later destroyed), coded gestures, including running his finger across his throat, and body language—that reports of the new terror were true, that many other Jewish cultural figures had been arrested, and that he himself was doomed to eventual execution. When Robeson returned to the United States, however, he refused to acknowledge that there might be any "antisemitic" campaign in the Soviet Union, much less that Fefer was in trouble: "I met Jewish people all over the place," he told the press, "[and] I heard no word about it [anti-Jewish danger]". Robeson told his son all the details of his hotel room meeting with Fefer and what he had learned about what WAS IN STORE FOR MANY OTHER Jews, but only on condition that it be kept secret until well after his death. So even after Krushchev's "secret speech" in 1956, he refused to sign any statement concerning Fefer's death and their visit.

Despite his genuine feelings for Fefer, Robeson was one of those who could not bring himself to criticize the Soviet Union, or even Stalin, regardless of the undeniable revelations—clinging to the dogma that, on balance, both still represented a force for universal peace and justice. (Moreover, Robeson held the unsupportable conviction that the

Soviet Union somehow represented the hope of the future for American blacks and the key to reversing their subjugation, predicting publicly in the midst of the Cold War—in a tone almost calmly suggestive of incitement—that American blacks would therefore refuse to fight in any war with the Soviet Union. Many years later, some important, responsible American black leaders, such as the head of the Urban League, questioned his sanity.) "He believed passionately that U.S. imperialism was the greatest enemy of progressive mankind," wrote Paul Robeson Jr. "In such a context Paul Robeson [Sr.] would not consider making a public criticism of antisemitism in the U.S.S.R."

By the time of Krushchev's revelations, Fefer could still be viewed by those who wanted to do so as just one of the many victims of Stalin's *personal* paranoia rather than as an indication of any inherent fault in the Soviet system. Following the rejection of Stalinism in the U.S.S.R., Fefer was "rehabilitated", and parts of his works were published there in Russian translation.

¹⁰ For example, the Third Seder of the Workmen's Circle or, perhaps originally, of the Labor Zionist Farband; or, in Israel, the secular kibbutz seders. See my essay on the Third Seder in connection with a musical replication of a typical one of the Workmen's Circle in Volume 12 of the Milken Archive of Jewish Music, "The American Experience", on the Milken Archive website: <https://www.milkenarchive.org/>

¹¹ Simply put, this is the liturgical formula whose original, familiar incipit is the phrase *barukh ata adonai* (You are worshipped, *adonai* [the source of blessings]). The remaining words (or those of preceding passages considered part of a *b'rakha*) vary, depending on the occasion, type or category. Like many foreign words or expressions that are properly kept in their original languages in spoken or written English usage, the Hebrew *b'rakha* in the context of this formula has no acceptable English equivalent. All imprecise compromises, e.g., "blessing" or "benediction", fall far short of the mark and risk misleading unintentionally, for it is obviously not in the domain of mankind to bless or offer blessing on God—which such erroneous English labels might inadvertently imply.

¹² It is also now known that, as a defendant himself in the postwar inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, Fefer cooperated with the state in implicating fellow EAK members at their trials. But the entire episode is intertwined both with the paranoia of the times and with what we know to have been state and secret police duplicity and fabrication. For one thing, Fefer, like the other defendants—who confessed and then retracted—was subjected to torture. For another, although archives have been unsealed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, documents such as those that purport to describe Fefer's role with the police and in the trials are highly questionable, as they were created *by* the secret police. In any event, it is now generally believed that Fefer's death sentence had already been determined before those trials began.

For a gripping study of the wider, deadly campaign of persecution and death against Soviet Jewry during the Stalin era, see: Louis Rapoport, *STALIN'S WAR AGAINST THE JEWS: The Doctors' Plot and the Soviet Solution* (NY and Don Mills, Ontario, 1990), which contains much detailed information about Fefer in the context of the state incarceration and/or murder of immense numbers of Soviet Jews on a variety of twisted pretexts.

About Jewish involvement in the secret police, Zvi Gitelman's paper, "The Rise and Fall of Jews in the Soviet Secret Police", delivered at the November 5-6, 2017 academic conference, "Jews In and After the 1917 Russian

Revolution"—organized and produced by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and held at the Center for Jewish History in New York—can be accessed as a video online at:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLtPOkhh8R4wxIxnIsZNB8vWEzKWTQ9PM_

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