

Orpheus on his way to the gas chambers *

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We all know Simon Srebnik, the little man who crosses the River Ner, standing up in his rowing -boat, singing the "opening song" in Lanzmann's film *Shoah*.

As a child Srebnik was compelled by the Nazis to sing this Polish folksong, a song about a little white house. This happened in Chelmno, Poland, the first place where the Nazis started killing the Jews by gas. Thus nearly half a million of Jews were wiped out in Chelmno between 1941 and 1945.

Simon Srebnik, aged thirteen, was one of two persons who survived the massacre of 1945, being an *Arbeitsjude* who was charged with cleaning of the extermination chambers. Together with his companions, feet chained, the boy walked from the town to the camp every day. The Nazis admired the extreme suppleness of his body. Above all they were charmed by the sweetness of his voice. They picked him out to feed the rabbits in their zoo on the side of the River Ner, and they made him sing Polish folk-songs for them, and in their turn taught him some of their *Soldatenlieder*.

One of the songs Simon sang was about a little white house. The Nazis were fond of the child and kept him alive.

*A little white house,
I still remember.*

*About this little white house
I dream every night*

Of course he, Simon Srebnik, also had to be destroyed.

They shot him but they never noticed that though severely wounding him, they had missed the vital parts of his brain.

He hid himself and was rescued by an official of the Red Army and so "came back from the dead".

Many years later, with Claude Lanzmann, this little Charon, now aged forty-seven, made the journey back all the way from Tel Aviv to Chelmno. There he sang his song again initiating us in the world of eternal pain and suffering. He sang in his rowing-boat on the old River Ner, other name of Styx, and maybe of Lethe...

Thus he embodies for us the mythological personification of western civilisation, both Orpheus and the reality of the gas chambers...

What contradictions and deep ambivalences do we meet, when we listen to survivors' tales about singing in the Nazi death camps, when we read about the orchestras of Birkenau and Auschwitz, in the midst of extermination, when we hear about Sunday-afternoon-potpourris called *Erinnerungen an Schubert* ?

Is there a real contradiction, or do we have to conceive of this - the SS-man and the prisoner, both reduced to tears by the same Mozart- as the ultimate aim, a hidden destination of western culture?

What did Orpheus bring about in the nazi-camp?

Simon Srebnik's life story evokes two distinct biographical data: first, the song he sang when a boy of thirteen; and second, the same song afterwards, after he was shot at by the SS, after his recovery, after he had grown up and gone to live in Tel Aviv, Israel, and returned to Poland to play his part in the film *Shoah*.

His history also relates to two separate periods, two stages in musical meaning and communication.

The first period concerns the historical reality of 1945, the other one concerns the symbolical level of Lanzmann's film made so many years later, in the 1970 s.

We are dealing with two different kinds of musical representation. Quite apart from that, there is an interesting underlying question regarding the significance of the *theme, the subject matter* of this song: a little white house...

Might it be possible to conceive of this little musical dream-house as a musical image of *the* safe place remembered, as home to the child, the *Arbeitsjude*, as the lost paradise of his normal life ?

On the other hand we can see the musical image of that same house in the mind of this terribly traumatized man of forty-seven who returned to that place to sing for the film, for us all. What happened to that house?

Yes, music can offer a shelter, a safe house to live in, a home. Just as architectural forms surrounds us in space, the musical form can contain us, keep us close to ourselves.

The musical form can hold us like the spatial form of a house, a building, a cathedral. We can enter music as a place to hide and survive. Music is a cross of space and time.

In Lanzmann's film we see and hear Simon Srebnik, wonderfully transformed into Orpheus.

He represents the magnificent sublimity of western mythology. The peak of western culture, the moment of revelation. The sublime moment we can remember and re-create, as Lanzmann did, even after culture itself had been destroyed., by remembering this culture and reflecting on the terrible loss of it.

Simon Srebnik's little inner house may have been destroyed, but yes, he still can sing... and remind us of Orpheus.

There was music in the world of terror and pain, in the places of extermination. The all-time favourite, the composer most played, both in Theresienstadt and in Auschwitz, was Mozart. Michel Schneider writes about this striking paradox in his French essay "*musique au lieu de la mort*", speaking about *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* in the silent empire of *Nacht und Nebel*...

Terrible juxtaposition.

"Musique au lieu de la mort", in the opinion of this very sensitive author also must be understood as "music in place of death" in the very literal sense that music can be the other name, the other denomination of death. How is this possible?

Of all the arts, music is closest to death. Music like life itself is an analogue of time. Music is the eternal celebration of time.

Every piece of music, even a simple folk-song, is a rehearsal of how to begin, how to get through and most of all: of how to end. Every piece of music, by modelling time in its own way, anticipates the end of life: death, the end of time.

Of all the arts, music is also closest to the body.

The waves of sound, the waves of the voice, are physical, near to the human body, at any rate they are intimate and personal.

Of all the art forms, music is also the closest to our memories, the biological history of our bodies, the history of the mind.

Music is linked to personal recollections, music can preserve recollections on a subconscious level. Even when we have temporarily lost ourselves and our memories temporary through traumatizing circumstances, music can help to bring them back to mind as an intermediary force of reconciliation.

Of what kind of music are we speaking?

Can we use this word: *music* for what we normally play at home, what we go to hear in the concert-hall and what we, *they*, listened to in Theresienstadt, in Westerbork, in Auschwitz?

Music in the Nazi-camps had several functions, all of which were closely bound up with the camp's function itself. Of course there were big differences between the *Durchgangslager* Westerbork, Holland, and the *Vernichtungslager* Auschwitz-Birkenau, as to the possibility of living, so to speak, in the luxury of music.

In Theresienstadt, as we know, deported Jewish artists were allowed exceptional privileges. The music composed in Theresienstadt by Schoenberg's pupils Haas and Ullmann, nowadays sold in CD-shops as *forbidden, nor forgotten*, bore witness to the annihilation of men and minds of the highest level of musical creativity. Nonetheless, following imprisonment in Theresienstadt these musicians too came to their deaths in other camps.

I myself remember an old friend, a pianist, who told me about his stay in the Dutch camp Vught where he met a cellist in the Concertgebouw Orchestra, who had been allowed to bring his instrument. There was a piano in Vught, even a good one, and together they played Beethoven's Second Sonata for violoncello and piano, from memory. Yes, from memory, since they had no sheet music. But never in normal life would they have felt such pride and happiness at getting halfway into the second part as they felt then... * [Marius Flothuis and Hugo Nolthenius, Vught oct.1943]

It will be clear that, in spite of the agonizing situation in which the musicians found themselves, they also enjoyed some sort of privilege.

In his essay *musique au lieu de la mort*, Michel Schneider distinguishes between several kinds and functions of music in the Nazi-camps.

He mentions the music accompanying certain regular activities, like *zusammenmarchieren*, with march-tunes to regulate the *Kommando's* movement. This music was played on a small platform and was completely neutral and harmless, only serving to keep order, with no emotional connotation whatever.

There were, however, categories of music in the Nazi-camps which served as genuine entertainment. Chamber music, jazz, vaudeville, named and labelled as they would have been in normal life.

Camp Westerbork, in its specific function as a *Durchgangslager* had its weekly stage performances from *Bühne Lager Westerbork*, when all kinds of music were played by camp inmates who were quite often also professionals.

These shows, often including cabaret and singing, were given on Tuesday-nights. Tuesday was the day of train-departure, the day of deportation, of transport to Sobibor, Bergen Belsen, Birkenau.

These shows brought relief to those who, for at least another week, could be certain of their immediate future. It goes without saying that beautiful or sentimental music, the humour and wit of the cabaret were not acceptable to all of those who stayed behind in the *Durchgangslager*. They gave rise to intense moral problems, to feelings of guilt and outrage.

These evenings, organised and presented by the camp inmates, were attended by their fellow-prisoners as well as by the SS, who sat in the front row.

Far from there, in the other camps, where death and destruction had become a much more concrete threat to the prisoners, it was the SS authorities themselves who organized music performances. Just like on Sunday afternoons in public places, halls, gardens elsewhere in normal life- Germany, we might have listened to high quality music, *Erinnerungen an Schubert*, indeed, in Auschwitz.

These performances confirmed and stabilized the social rank and cultural standing of the SS. To this end Schubert, Haydn and Beethoven were used, we should say abused, in the concentration camps at the *soirées-musicales* in the SS-Stube. From a psychoanalytical point of view one might suggest that the nazis listened to the great music of their own past and wept to it, simply because for them it was impossible, unthinkable to allow themselves to be distressed by murder and massacre.

Of course, the emotional impact of music also affected the camp inmates.

Maybe this was a most important, indeed even a dangerous power. Music may bring to mind the past and even the future, any other time, by awakening associations and memories as only music can do.

Music also relates to another world, an outside world.

I read a text of a survivor, a woman musician, who described how she, when suffering from terrible starvation and disease, happened to hear, in a far-off SS-barracks, someone playing Bach on a guitar. She describes how her misery seemed to intensify the music's great beauty, how this confrontation with Bach's music for a little while seemed to bring back a normality of life.

Johann Sebastian Bach next to the gaschamber stands for life itself: the richness of a normal life in time and space. -On the other hand- as was mentioned by survivors any musical experience could intensify the awareness of suffering to an unbearable degree and even hasten death.

There was *one* danger, *one* big risk in great music: the risk that the experience might be *shared*, not only by the camp inmates as one separate category and the SS as another, but by *both*, together and simultaneously.

Recognition, communication, integration, a shared world of emotions, and above all: a common language, these might become undermining forces in this Babylon of death. We have known this for centuries, this secret of the Orphic myth: the supreme function of music is to abolish polarities. Even in the grimmest of circumstances.

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