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### **Music as a Means of Survival: The Women's Orchestra in Auschwitz**

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When I first started to seriously consider music as the topic of my dissertation, I was filled with idealistic views of music in general. My yearlong stint as a music therapist convinced me that while music possesses healing powers and additionally plays an important role in personal education and growth, it is in no way limited to these two aspects.

It was almost unimaginable to me that there was music at all in Auschwitz, the Nazi's largest concentration camp. Nevertheless, in many camp sections the prisoners' orchestra was forced to play for the SS. For some, namely the few who were admitted, this orchestra meant a greater chance of survival, as long as they could withstand the compulsory musical labor.<sup>1</sup> Music was used in part as an instrument of torture – for example, the SS ordered the prisoners to sing as others or even as they themselves were being lined up to be shot or beaten. The prisoners made music in secret; they sang songs to lift their spirits and rekindle their strength and will to live. A few even performed for their fellow prisoners who were of a higher social or economic standing within the concentration camp in exchange for bread.

I was especially interested in the obligatory music made in the prisoner's ensembles, and my research focused primarily on the women's orchestra of Birkenau.<sup>2</sup> Though I use the term "women's orchestra", this is not an attempt to sugarcoat the reality of the camps, nor the conditions these women were subjected to. "Music Command" is, in my opinion, a better term for this woman's orchestra, as it comes closer to describing the reality of the orchestra and imparts the idea that performing in the prisoner's ensembles was forced labor.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'compulsory musical labor' was one that I heard for the first time at an event organized by Henryk Broder of the Jewish Cultural Society in April 1992. Broder inspired me to think about music being used as a type of forced labor.

<sup>2</sup> The women's orchestra was brought to the attention of the public through the book *Das Maedchenorchester in Auschwitz* (published in English as *Playing for Time*) written by Fania Fenelon who worked as a singer and transcribed music in the orchestra from January until October of 1944. Until Fenelon's book appeared, there was no known work or memoir about the orchestra. In my dissertation, I have compared Fenelon's memories and work with what other women of the orchestra reported; in many cases they were extremely critical of Fenelon. Her memory – as it was with many concentration camp survivors – applied specific forms of self-censorship and selectivity; she was not able to remember everything that had happened to her. The singer's mental capacity underlies – again, as with many concentration camp survivors – specific forms of self-censorship and selective recall. Fenelon's co-author turned her memories into a semi-autobiographical novel. The other musicians believe that Fenelon's rendition of what happened in the women's orchestra, namely their daily struggle to stay alive, was, among other things, not authentically told.

The central questions of my research were: how did the women endure being forced to perform music in Auschwitz? And, what meaning did this music have in their lives after 1945? The following paragraphs focus, for the most part, on the first question.

I have attempted to reconstruct the history of the women's orchestra, and the extreme living and working conditions of the musicians. My original research focused primarily on the women who were witnesses of the time and the interviews I conducted with them, rather than on actual historical records. My own knowledge of the women's situation during the Second World War was somewhat limited, thus the conversations I had with the survivors were extremely important as they provided the basis for the reconstruction of the history of the women's orchestra. I spoke extensively with former musicians and other witnesses who knew something about the music performed in Birkenau or of the women's orchestra.

There is no accurate record of the exact number of women in the orchestra at any given time. Of approximately sixty former musicians, three died in Auschwitz, and three died in the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. Among those who survived are nineteen women whose fates after their camp experience remain mysteries. After 1945, sixteen more women died. Out of the original sixty, there remained twenty or so women whom I could conceivably interview. However, only eleven out of these sixty women were still alive, and many were very ill. Additionally, the few remaining concentration camp survivors had migrated to and throughout Europe, America, and Israel. I interviewed seven of the women still living in Europe.<sup>3</sup> Apart from one woman, none of the witnesses were readily prepared to speak about their experiences in Auschwitz or the orchestra with me and it was only through subtle persuasion over a period of weeks, that most of them finally agreed to an interview. These weeks of persuasion were necessary because, as William Niederland observed (1980), concentration camp survivors are still affected in a very negative way from the Nazi occupation, and most speak of their experiences with extreme anxiety. In Niederland's view, survivors are in fact scared to speak of the terror of their experience with the Nazis as they are anxious that bringing up such powerful and painful memories from the past will cause them to lose their composure and lead to a breakdown (*ibid.*, pp. 230). In other words, the "history of a personal injury" stood behind the women's refusal of my requests for interviews;

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<sup>3</sup> Finding the surviving musicians was not an easy task. When I began this process, I knew of and was acquainted with three of the survivors. One of these three women was ready to be interviewed while the other two did not answer my written inquiries. My search both through and of institutes, monuments dedicated to the concentration camps, and the archives was, with two exceptions, uneventful. In any case, I was able to uncover three more names and was even able to interview two of them. The third woman did not respond to my attempts to begin a correspondence, and it was only later that I discovered this last woman was terminally ill and therefore no longer capable of conversing with me. At the Jewish Cultural League's commemorative service for concentration camp survivors in Berlin I coincidentally made the acquaintance of a former musician of the Birkenau's men's orchestra who let me have another survivor's address. This woman agreed to an interview and even introduced me to her friend from the camp; from this point on my research began to snowball.

My investigation necessitated a combination of sociological and historical methods. During the course of the conversations I used the problem-centered method suggested by Witzel (1985). In accordance with her interpretation, I focused on Glaser and Strauss's suggested Grounded Theory (1984). Getting closer to the actual subject matter of the research was a gradual and explorative process; understanding the subjective meaning that a person would attach to a given event was more important than assigning it a representative quality (Lamnek 1988, 40).

something that posed a huge disruption to the survivors' own "healing process" (Niethammer 1985, p. 402).<sup>4</sup>

### *Historical Context*

Today, the name "Auschwitz" is synonymous with National-Socialist mass murder. We can only guess at the number of people who lost their lives in this genocide as the SS did not record the names or the number of people who were sent straight from the trains bringing them into Auschwitz to the gas chamber. The latest research leads us to believe that between the years of 1941 and 1944 in excess of 1.5 million people were murdered, over 90 percent of which were of Jewish heritage. Of the roughly 405,000 people – one third of which were women - who were registered as having been in Auschwitz, over 261,000 died because of the conditions in the camp (Sofsky 1993, p. 57).

The prisoners were forced to endure catastrophic living conditions. These conditions were arguably worse for the women than for the men as the women's sections remained constantly overcrowded with poor hygienic and sanitary conditions (Hoess 1992, p. 54). If the women did not die because of the conditions in the camp, they died because of the extreme forced labor they were subjected to. Only a few prisoners were able to work at the "lighter" or "better" jobs in the camp, such as work in the writing rooms of the SS, in the camp kitchens, the camp hospitals or the personal effects room where prisoners' were robbed of their possessions before being gassed or taken off to work. The prisoners who were able to work at these jobs were painted as privileged or prominent within the camp as their working and living conditions were better than average. The women's music command was considered one of the better work details in the camp. Lucie Adelsberger (1956), formerly a prisoner's doctor in Birkenau, described the music chapel as the "pet of the camp leaders".

Camp leaders Franz Hoessler and Maria Mandl founded the ensemble in April 1943. The men's camp already had an orchestra, and it appeared that the women's camp was soon to have one as well. Forty-year old Zofia Czajkowska, a prisoner and former music and singing teacher, was named conductor of the orchestra. In April 1943, the ensemble was formed with one Ukrainian and five Polish women who were not Jewish. With the admission of Jews into Auschwitz in May of that same year, the number of ensemble members rose sharply: At the beginning of August there were twelve Jewish and fifteen non-Jewish women musicians from Poland, Greece, Belgium, Germany, and the Ukraine.

At first, the women practiced German marches and Polish folk and soldier songs. As the SS began to pass music on to the orchestra their repertoire expanded to include waltzes, minuets, and other light works. The women's first performance took place at the camp entrance in June, 1943. They were ordered to play marches as the other prisoners were led to and from their compulsory labor. SS members counted the women, who were arranged into five rows, as they walked by in time to the music. Light background music

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout the course of my search I discovered that the former musicians had been traumatized in a very specific and unique way. It was my impression that the musical forced labor they endured while in the camp was one of the main reasons it was so difficult for them to speak of their experiences. In this article I discuss the possible reasons for this phenomenon.

was played in the prisoner's hospital, sometimes it was also played when transports arrived carrying more deportees to be led to the gas chambers.

In August 1943, the Austrian musician Alma Rose was coincidentally discovered at the experimental medical station. She was named as the new conductor, despite the fact that she was Jewish. The thirty-seven-year-old violin virtuoso was the daughter of Arnold Rose and the niece of Gustav Mahler. Rose's fellow prisoners described her as an extremely charismatic woman. The SS treated Rose with respect, often referring to her as Frau Alma (Mrs. Alma). From the beginning, Rose was the protégé of Hoessler and Mandl. They placed an entire barrack at the musicians' disposal for their personal and work use. Alma Rose was even allowed to exchange the old instruments for newer ones with better tone; she herself was given a particularly valuable instrument. Through diplomatic maneuvers, Rose was slowly able to obtain better living conditions for all members of the orchestra. Each woman had her own relatively clean cover, straw mattress, sheet, and slept on her own plank bed. The musicians were able to wash daily and use the provisional toilet. They received exactly as much food as the other prisoners, but due to their contact with the women who worked in the chamber of personal effects, they had the opportunity to procure additional food or personal items. After particularly moving concerts, the musicians occasionally received a so-called "allowance": more food.

The SS expected Alma Rose to not only form an orchestra from a group of amateur musicians, but, additionally, to prepare them to give concerts. Alma Rose built the orchestra up and around new musicians, increasing the group by forty-two in the month of October, 1943 alone. Over two thirds of the musicians were Jewish, coming from nations such as France, The Czech Republic, Russia, the Netherlands, and after 1944, from Hungary as well. The orchestra was composed of mandolins, guitars, violins, a double bass, a cello, six wind instruments, and two accordions. A professional jazz musician was at the drums, and a professional pianist from the Ukraine played the grand piano - while it was available. Opera and folk singers were also brought into the orchestra to copy the music. The orchestra's repertoire quickly expanded to over 200 pieces typical of the contemporary tastes of the time: marches by Franz Schubert, Johann Strauss, and Franz Liszt; operas by Puccini, Rossini, and Verdi; operetta melodies by Benatzky, Kalman, Lehar, and Franz von Suppe; classical works composed by Brahms, Mozart, Schumann; popular hits like *Nur nicht aus Liebe weinen* (Don't Cry Because of Love), or *Im Prater blüeh'n wieder die Bäume* (Prater is a famous Berlin street, the direct translation of this title is The Trees on Prater are Once Again in Bloom). The classical pieces were played on Sundays for the SS and a few women prisoners. Sometimes, these pieces were also performed during private concerts for a few of the SS who could choose which of their favorite music was to be played. The SS personnel came predominately at night, to relax and amuse themselves after a long day of 'selections'. The orchestra was also expected to perform at official functions, e.g. when high-ranking SS officers came to visit the camp.

On April 4, 1944, Alma Rose died suddenly and unexpectedly. A great deal of uncertainty and mystery surrounds Rose's death though witness' statements point to a possible brain inflammation in conjunction with poisoning by methyl alcohol. After Rose's death, the pianist Sonia Winogradowa was named as the third conductor of the orchestra. Winogradowa had hardly any experience as a conductor and was unable to

maintain the musical level of the orchestra; thus the repertoire was once again limited to marches and light background music. The SS began to show less interest in the orchestra and eventually adjusted the orchestra's practice schedule accordingly. Practice times for the orchestra were severely limited in the summer of 1944 and the women were forced to do temporary manual labor in addition to continuing to perform marches at the entrance to the camp, the prisoner's hospital, and give private concerts for the SS and occasional concerts for the prisoners themselves. They were also ordered to play at the ramp where those who had not passed the selection were being led into the gas chambers.

In the course of liquidating Auschwitz, the SS disbanded the women's orchestra at the end of October, 1944. The Jewish women from the orchestra were taken to the Belsen concentration camp while those women who were not Jewish were sent on the "Death March" on January 18, 1945 through the Ravensbrueck concentration camp to the camp Neustadt-Glewe near Schwerin. Despite the catastrophic conditions that the women had to endure in the last few months in the camps, most of the musicians lived to see the liberation of the camp.

### *Music as Compulsory Labor*

The hard musical labor of the women's orchestra command in Auschwitz can be separated into two parts; the orchestra's actual employment in the camp and their practice times at the music block when they were left mainly to their own devices. The women in the orchestra lived through extreme conditions that frequently went beyond their capacity to tolerate them, whether they were forced to perform at the camp entrance, at the ramp or in the prisoner's hospital. Some survivors reported that they had to expend an almost inhuman amount of strength just to force themselves to play, and they continue to wonder, even today, at their ability to perform or sing at all within the horror of the concentration camp conditions. While it was very difficult for the women to speak of their experiences in the camp, it was especially hard for them to speak of the musical work they were forced to do during their imprisonment. I believe that one of the main reasons for this is that the musicians were forced to accept both their own role in the SS's extermination apparatus and their simultaneous impotence to do anything about it.<sup>5</sup> The women had to perform because they were afraid that if they did not they too would be killed. In nearly all of the interviews, I noted the doubt and confusion that surrounded the women's feelings towards this hopeless situation. According to Hannah Arendt, it would seem that the musicians, even today, are plagued by self-reproach and the belief that they compromised their moral principles and became "bad people" in order to increase their chances at survival (1958).

The Auschwitz musicians found themselves in the unique situation where their compulsory labor consisted of practicing and performing musical works.<sup>6</sup> They practiced six days out of the week, no less than eight hours per day, more than double the time a

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<sup>5</sup> I cannot delve further into the commands of the orchestra and the musician's extreme burdens at this juncture. I mention them so that I do not present a one-sided picture in predominantly characterizing the aspects of the musical forced labor that could be helpful for survival.

<sup>6</sup> The male musicians were compelled to perform other labor and could only practice during their 'free' time. This certainly has to do with the fact that most of the men were professional musicians and therefore needed less practice than the women, who were predominately lay-musicians with limited orchestral experience.

professional orchestra would practice. An amateur orchestra normally practices once per week. Exposed to continuous stress and being forced to work hours that would have exhausted even the most professional of musicians was the typical way in which the SS ground down the women's vitality. This treatment was typical of the SS and their operation of the concentration camps (Sofsky 1993, 215). When asked what they thought about their work, however, nearly all the women believed that they had been given a lighter sentence than the arduous and intensive physical labor that those not in the orchestra were forced to perform. This belief points to the fact that hard labor formed the basis of the camp's system of values for the prisoners.

When questioned about their time in the Auschwitz orchestra, the women referred frequently to Alma Rose. She required the musicians to play well technically, and that they also do their utmost to do justice to their own artistic conceptions of 'good' music. Those women who had either played or studied music in their youth did not find the hours and hours of practice to be too demanding technically, while the amateurs of the orchestra (musicians who previously had only practiced their instrument as a hobby) found the schedule extremely taxing. Making music is in itself an arduous activity, being forced to make music frequently is extremely taxing, both physically and mentally. The success of an orchestra does not depend exclusively on practicing - the determination, concentration and willpower of the musicians, as well as their ideas and hopes of what a good orchestra should sound like and their inherent abilities are all equally important (Bastian 1989, p. 283). The women of the Auschwitz orchestra were expected to exhibit all of these characteristics while working under the extreme conditions of the concentration camp.

### *The Relationship between Conductor and Musicians*

The women of the orchestra reported that conductor Rose treated her musicians with discipline and severity. According to them, she operated by using reward and punishment: those who played well received praise, while those who played poorly were punished. If a woman played incorrectly, Alma Rose would react furiously and with sudden anger. She would insult the offender and occasionally throw her baton at the orchestra, or she would use it to strike the musician on her hands or slap her across the face. Frequently, Rose resorted to collective punishment in the form of additional evening rehearsals. Fundamentally, however, Rose was on the musician's side; her survival was just as dependent upon theirs as the orchestra's was on her own. "An orchestra without a conductor is not an orchestra, and a conductor without an orchestra is not a conductor" (Kulenkampff 1980, p. 22). Today, the musicians remember their conductor as an inexorable, but fair teacher. If Alma Rose was content with the orchestra's progress, she would reward them by playing for them on her own violin. Additionally, the women of the orchestra were aware that Rose was able, through diplomacy with the SS, to secure better living conditions for them. Most of the women today describe Rose as the orchestra's savior, a woman they respected as a person and admired for the violin virtuoso that she was. Before her arrest, Rose had led the *Wienerwalzer-Maedel*, a women's chorus, in Vienna. After her emigration to the Netherlands, she organized another women's orchestra (Licht 1993, 250). She was therefore one of the few women who had a chance to gain experience as a conductor.

Women who were musically skilled conductors were then, as they are today, a rarity due to the fact that the traditional role of is diametrically opposed to the idea of a woman in charge of any group of people, let alone a group of skilled musicians (Richter 1995, p. 13). In National Socialism, women in music were radically out of place. Public appearances by women's chamber groups were not in accordance with the Nazi's politics on women, as they presented "a danger that could divert from higher values" (Kaufmann 1986, p. 57). Perhaps it was a testimony to the professionalism of Alma Rose that she demanded so much from the musicians in her orchestra.<sup>7</sup> Witnesses and survivors of the orchestra believe strongly that Rose lived for her music and that she tried very hard to pass on both her seriousness and her enthusiasm to the orchestra by associating with the musicians.

Many musicians looked up to and identified with Alma Rose. She managed to simultaneously maintain both a distanced and close relationship with the musicians; she was a companion in the orchestra's collective suffering and a role model as a musician. The secret wish of nearly everyone in the orchestra was to be taken seriously by Rose as a person and a personality, as well as just a musician (Kulenkampf 1980, p. 24). Alma Rose furthered the interpersonal contact within the orchestra; she herself found certain people likeable while others she found difficult to tolerate; she regularly pointed out the good musicians. Rose knew not only the particular strengths and weaknesses of each woman in the orchestra as a musician, but also their personality traits and quirks. This can be attributed to the fact that Rose practiced continuously with the women for nearly eight months. Good conductors utilize psychologically informed communication skills and show sensibility, competence as a leader, and strength; Alma Rose not only possessed these qualities but was able to unite them and use them in her conducting style. Rose was of the opinion that the women must play their absolute best so that the SS would let stay alive. She did not communicate this to the musicians to instill in them a sense of fear, but rather to strengthen the idea that if they did play well they had a legitimate chance of surviving the concentration camp. Rose chose to believe that she was playing for *herself*, that she was performing music because it spoke to *her* soul, and not because she was being forced by the SS to conduct an orchestra for their benefit. She repeatedly stated that she would not let herself be disturbed by the SS, that she would continue with her work and her music in spite of and not because of them. Rose was able to lay out her views for the musicians so that the orchestra was able to, for the most part at least adopt them and distance themselves from the everyday life of the camp; a necessity for those who were to survive. Rose's re-interpretation of the facts of her situation, that she was merely tolerated by those in power who also misused her musical talents and capabilities, was a powerful coping strategy that played a key role for those who did manage to survive the orchestra and the camp.

Due to her power as a conductor and her absolute authority, Rose was able to bring the orchestra and herself to a higher musical and technical level of performance. She created a structure for the Auschwitz orchestra that was as similar as possible to the structure of other "normal" orchestras. This was most likely an important tool to enable

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<sup>7</sup> In hindsight it is obvious that Rose was under immense pressure from the SS who expected nothing less than perfection from her in building the orchestra. In spite of this, Rose's passion for music served to compliment the desires of the SS; to have a decent sounding orchestra. The SS realized Rose's ability to use her own musical capabilities and ambition towards the one goal that they both had in common.

the woman to achieve the highest level of musical performance that was possible in the atmosphere of the concentration camp. The women of the orchestra were proud of their achievements individually and as a group; many improved their own talent. The fact that the women were proud of their achievements can be explained by the fact that their achievements were their own, attained through their own work; something that they could be proud of to a certain degree. Much like Bruno Bettelheim (1965), the prisoners of the concentration camp fought against the inhuman, undignified world of the camp to preserve their self respect and feeling of self-worth. One musician testified that it was indeed vital to her self-respect, to have performed well while she was in Auschwitz.

### *The Orchestra's Work and its Effects*

In addition to forming a close relationship with only their conductor, the musicians also bonded amongst themselves, as orchestral work is group work. In order to produce good music, it is vital that the orchestra members work well with one another. "Musical success occurs most frequently if the musicians are able to focus on communication and cooperation, instead of merely technique and competition" (Lauper-Schewizer, after Spychiger 1993, p. 364). Naturally, conflicts arose between the women as they were quite different from one another and forced to live in such cramped quarters. The orchestra also helped with this dilemma as the women had to set aside their differences in order to sound as one melodious body. Thus, the group work that the women were forced to perform became the glue that held them together and helped them overcome their experience in the concentration camp. Additionally, the orchestra work was unique in that it was the embodiment of the contradiction; the SS ordered the orchestra to work against the principals of the SS – the musicians had to maintain some level of self-respect; otherwise the quality of their music would never have allowed the orchestra to exist for as long as it did. The SS gave the women a free hand to manage and improve themselves as an orchestra. Learning and practicing were not ridiculous meaningless work for the musicians as so much of the other work in the camp was: rehearsals were a chance to rediscover and remember one's own determination. Within the orchestra interpersonal behavior was improved and personal qualities were developed that strengthened the women's defenses against the world of Auschwitz: the musicians had to learn to organize themselves under Rose's authority, as well as exercise self-restraint and discipline, and attain a form of professionalism by acquiring strong nerves, a quality all orchestral musicians have to acquire. The women of the orchestra were able to maintain their individuality as musicians and people throughout their forced labor. Their status as musicians saved a few women's lives: the sole cellist developed typhoid fever and was sent from the music block to the prisoners' hospital. While she was there she was 'selected' for death in the gas chamber. Suddenly, she heard someone say "that's the cellist", and she was put back on her plank bed. This woman is convinced that she owes her survival to the fact that she had become more than a number in Auschwitz through her role in the orchestra; she was recognized as a musician and a cellist.

The musicians were able to transfer themselves to another world for those periods of time when they were rehearsing. Music gave them another kind of reality, an end in itself, an activity that was able to remove them from their present world and became a repeatable ritual (Oerter 1993, 263). Performing music was also occasionally fun, as a

few witnesses reported. The experience of learning an instrument was just as much a form of release as the rehearsals themselves - additionally, the women were able to own the music they produced. The idea that this sense of freedom was possible even in the absolutely regulated world of Auschwitz is remarkable. There was “breathing room” in the orchestra, in the truest sense of the word.

The orchestra work allowed the women to leave and forget the world of the camp for short periods of time because they were able to live in the reality they had created through the music. Orchestra members liked certain pieces immensely and it became a joy to just practice them. Through the music itself, the intensive work, and rehearsals, the women were able to shut themselves off, retreat into themselves, think about something else, in order to escape from the camp and live in another world. Music also had an escapist function in that it offered protection from conflicts and offered possibilities for emotional compensation. The orchestra’s cellist reported how she frequently escaped Auschwitz through her music; she would sit somewhere and think of the music pieces that she had played at home with her mother and sister. She would perform her favorite Dvorák cello concerto, a piece that she hoped one day to be able to play as a soloist. This was how she was able to escape the “dirty and disgusting” camp, a world she wanted to have nothing to do with. When she was encapsulated in her “inner world as a musician”, she was “far away”, it was “like a drug” for her. The cellist was not alone in her method of escape; most of the women that survived reported they also used music to remove themselves from Auschwitz, a place from which there was no real physical way of escape.

Another way of making their time more bearable at the camp was to make music in secret, after they had finished with what they were forced to do. Singing forbidden songs strengthened their identity and will to survive; secret concerts for fellow prisoners fostered intense common experiences in which the prisoners were able to forget for a few minutes at least, where they really were. The secret music, made at the women’s own free will enabled them to build stolen moments of increased self-determination and understanding, even freedom, in Auschwitz. This was particularly the case when the women studied music that they liked, music they had not been ordered to learn by the SS.

The musical forced labor the women endured assisted in their survival, although it must not be forgotten that the women were forced to make their music under extreme and difficult circumstances. Making music allowed the women to hold on to the remnants of independence and freedom that had been left to them. They were allowed to work within a medium where they found strategies for survival that are inherent in the creative process. The survivors rarely speak of the individual aspects of their orchestral work, possibly because they are overcome by feelings of shame and guilt. It seems as if the fact that there were moments of respite and even joyful experiences amongst the horrors has to be made taboo, in order to prevent a diminishing of the extent of the misery and horror which is, however, never called into question.

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