

D. Were the Muses Really Silent Amongst the Bullets?

“There were often moments in the camp, when it seemed that Jewish life had completely come to a halt. The daily, tragic events caused a depressive mood among the prisoners. Despair, apathy, depression crept into people’s hearts without realising it. Some of the prisoners already lacked courage and patience for the Jewish tragedy that had been going on for so long. In this situation, people with supernatural power, appeared who had the courage and the strength to sing before their miserable brothers and sisters in order to add a little joy and comfort to them.”¹

With these words, Benjamin Orenstein begins his brief overview of the spiritual life in the Apparatobau camp.

In his book *Churban Czenstochow*, he does not provide many additional details either. As for the references that appear here and there in the testimonies, they do not expand the picture. Nevertheless, Orenstein writes:

“An entire array of inmates in the Czestochowa HASAG camps also wrote. Their poems reflect life in the ghetto and in the camps. Almost every occurrence was described.”

In light of the fact that a relatively large number of prisoners escaped from this camp, one can only ask, “What happened to these poems?”

From the fragments that survived, we can learn that the cultural activity in the camp was extensive and, as in all camps during the Nazi period, it is distinguished by two stages - first, protection of the existing, that is, the use of the cultural and literary heritage from home and school, which each prisoner brought with him to the camp and, in the second stage, an attempt to give expression to impressions of the new and hostile reality of the camp.

This activity was conducted simultaneously on two levels, in Yiddish and in Polish.² It appeared both spontaneously and in an organised manner and encompassed several areas - written literature, the organisation of literary evenings, performances by singers and public singing and even performances by a drama club.

In the field of original literature in both Yiddish and Polish, several types appear - songs of longing and sorrow, satirical hymns, songs of revenge and struggle, and more. The examples, which have been preserved, are scattered among the pages of this study, because they reflect various phenomena of camp life and the mindset of prisoners. Only with regard to a few works is it known for certain who the author is. Benjamin Orenstein included in his book *Churban Czenstochow*, several of his poems, plus other works, all in Yiddish.

¹ Testimony of Benjamin Orenstein, YVA, M-1/E/756.

² Felicia Karay, “The Social and Cultural Activity of the Jewish Labour Camp Prisoners In Skarzysko-Kamienna”, Gilad, A Compendium of the History of Polish Jews, Volume twelve, 1991.

Hadasa Karo-Wizenberg has preserved several fragments of artistic prose in Polish. In the Yad Vashem archives is a small notebook, without the author's name, which includes lyrics to songs and hits in Yiddish, Polish, Russian and English.³ The notebook also includes recitation songs and hymns from camp life. Among the songs appears the name of "Roma Hasagowa" and all indications are that the notebook belonged to Roma Nadelberg, the most popular singer in the camp. According to Gustawa Turowski, who knew her personally, Roma, a beautiful girl, had a wonderful voice, phenomenal hearing and sang in five languages.

Sara Ben-Tzvi says:

"In our barrack, after a hard day and after the lights were turned off, a young girl, Roma, who was the only one left from her entire family, would occasionally stand between the rows of bunks. I remember her black curls, her black, large, shining eyes.

"She would sing us songs of longing. Her voice was clear and warm and embraced those present. Here, the song *Mein Yiddische Mamme* did not sound like a gooey, tacky song. Here it rose to the top of a canon that touched every fibre of the soul of these women, whose world had been destroyed.

"These were also the only moments of grace I remember from that period."⁴

Among the popular singers in the camp was Karola Mordkowicz, known for her rich repertoire of Yiddish folksongs. Another singer, who entertained the evenings in the girls' barrack with Polish songs and hits, was Marysia Zborowska. Sara Edelist remembers Marysia Przyrowska, who also sang in German.⁵ In general, in the girls' barracks, there were always the brave ones, who would begin with a familiar melody, with the rest of the audience joining in enthusiastically with the spontaneous singing.

In the organised "musical life" of the camp, it was the men who stood out.

The idea of organising performances with an entrance fee arose simultaneously among the artists, who needed a living and among the "promoters", who knew that the audience was thirsting for entertainment. Because of the fear of interference from the *Werkschutz*, the concerts were held underground, in the "Cyrk" hall, in barracks seven and nine, and also in "Hofman's shop".

The most popular were the singers, among them Nechemje Trambkowski.

³ Yad Vashem Archive, 0.76/155.

⁴ Sara Ben Tzvi, YVA, 0-33/6912.

⁵ Weizenberg, YVA, 0-33/7147 - Edelist 0-33/6848.

His well-known and beloved, by the audience, songs were *Dude'le*, *Golus-Lied* [Yid., Exile Song], and he especially brought his listeners to tears of longing with his song *Matuszka Częstochowa*.

The audience's favourite was Szaja Bornsztajn, a pre-war film actor. He was known as the "Charlie Chaplin of Częstochowa", and the monologues of Sholem Aleichem or Mojsze Nadir in his performance evoked waves of laughter.

Classical music was represented by Leon Oberman, who possessed a heroic baritone and performed famous arias from the operas *Tosca*, *Judith* and others. Roma also sang in organised performances and among her favourite songs were *Eili, Eili, Lomo Azavtoni* [My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Psalm 22:1)] and the Polish song *Harmonia*.⁶

When there was a chance that Sunday afternoon would remain free (officially this was free time for prisoners), there were those who were willing to donate their time to the organisation of "spiritual life" - thus, in the men's *Rekalibrierung* barrack, two brave men, Vogel and Benek Bendet, organised two literary evenings. Among the listeners was also Szmul (Moniek) Dauman, who recalled:

"Benjamin Orenstein lived in our barrack. He wrote poems and stories and, at night, before we went to sleep, he used to read them to us."⁷

Orenstein's favourite motifs were nostalgia for the lost home and the urge for revenge:

*No! I shall no longer stay silent,
Or murmur wordlessly.
I shall not put my hands down,
But clench them into fists...*

*I shall carry the flag of battle courageously and high,
Fighting for freedom and human rights.
I shall proclaim my word bravely and proudly.
Enough! We shall be slaves no more!*⁸

(Excerpts – Translation from Yiddish (to Hebrew): Ruth Stern)

Aks, who carried boxes with casings in the *Rekalibrierung* department, was known as a satirical hymn writer. Unfortunately, his texts have not been found. It is known that he wrote hymns about the two German forewomen "Pietrucha" and "Marchewa".

⁶ Orenstein, YVA, likewise.

⁷ Testimony of Szmul Dauman, YVA 0-33/6858.

⁸ *Churban Czenstochow*, p. 211.

In general, he described almost every event in the life of the camp. When the clothes of the murdered Jews were brought to the camp again, Aks responded in verse:

*I want no vests from Director Lütt,
Nor do I wish to carry crates.*

Dr Bresler deserves special attention. He divided his time between working in a hospital and writing lyrical poems. His poem *Confession of a Newborn* was well known.⁹

In terms of the scope of activity and the nature of the audience, two phenomena stand out:

First, a complete separation between the “Yiddishists” and the “Poles”. The former were an adult audience, mostly men, who grew up surrounded by Yiddish culture in all its forms. The “Poles” were mostly girls, whose everyday language was Polish, even though most of them came from traditional homes.

Second, in the first period, until the spring of 1944, the scope of cultural activity was relatively limited. **The turning point was the arrival of the Jews from Łódź**, among whom were many artistic forces, and their activities will be discussed later.

It is assumed that the factory management was aware of the concerts and an official ban was not heard. It is possible that Director Lütt came to the conclusion that cultural activity, on reasonable scales, would not harm production. And how would every song, every recitation, every magic word affected the tortured Jews?

The answer is found in the following poem by Roma Nadelberg:¹⁰

⁹ There, p.219.

¹⁰ Yad Vashem, 0.76/155, p. 72.

Dziś pracujemy w fabryce broni
Jak maszyny o sercach z kamienia.
Każdy z nas się zmienił,
Każdy się zestarzał
I dziś żyje już tylko życiem cienia...
Zły los nie daje nam wytchnienia...

Dziwny jest ten żydowski lud,
Że wciąż nadziei iskierka w nim tkwi,
Może jednak stanie się cud,
Ważą się losy: "to be or not to be!"

(Roma Nadelberg)

*Today we work in the arms factory,
Like machines with hearts of stone.
Each one feels the burden of old age,
Each one of us has changed.
Today he'll live only a life of shadow
And his bitter fate will not let go of him...*

*But this Jewish people – How strange they are!
That the glimmer of hope – in their hearts still remains!
Maybe the miracle is still to come
And fate will be decided, "to be – or not to be!"*

(Translated from Polish to Hebrew – Felicia Karay)