

"Tsen Brider": A Jewish Requiem

Joshua R. Jacobson

Introduction by Leon Botstein

As time passes we face a paradoxical circumstance with respect to our historical understanding of the Holocaust. On the one hand, the number of survivors who were adults in 1939 continues to dwindle. The bearing of direct witness is not only harder to come by, but even survivors willing to speak openly are elderly and recollection is often mediated by a long history of either silence or retelling.

On the other hand, however, there is an outpouring of new information and research, of things long forgotten or not well known. Historians now have the privilege of turning their attention away from the overwhelming and defining aspects of the Holocaust, the camps, the slaughter and degradation, to secondary phenomena. Among those is the poignant effort among concentration camp victims, individuals trapped in hiding, and those rounded up in the organized ghettos of Eastern Europe to sustain some dimensions of meaning, hope, and even normalcy. The extraordinary story of Alma Rosé has just been retold in *Alma Rosé: Vienna to Auschwitz* by Richard Newman with Karen Kirtley (Portland: Amadeus Press, 2000). Alma Rosé was the daughter of the great concertmaster, quartet leader, and teacher in Vienna, Arnold Rosé, the husband of Mahler's sister. Alma was married to one of the great violin virtuosos of the twentieth century, Váša Příhoda. One can hear her playing on a recording of the Bach "Double Concerto" with her father.

Alma Rosé's most memorable experience as a musician was as the leader of a women's waltz orchestra. But what makes Alma Rosé's story so powerful is the fact that she was the conductor of the women's orchestra at Auschwitz. Alma did not survive the camps even though dozens of her musicians did, and this was to no small measure because of the success of the orchestra.

The editors of MQ are pleased to contribute to the expanding historical record of the daily lives and work of victims who were musicians during the Holocaust. Joshua Jacobson has brought back from near oblivion a powerful fragment of the past that constitutes a contribution to the history of music and musicians, Yiddish culture and history, and our understanding of life in the concentration camps.

—Leon Botstein

In 1939 a Jewish choral conductor imprisoned in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp organized a clandestine choir. The choir and its conductor managed to rehearse and perform secretly for three years. Sensing that the end was near, in 1942 the ensemble was rehearsing its own "Jewish Requiem" when the deportation order arrived. Neither the conductor nor any of his singers survived, but the requiem did. This article chronicles the origins and fate of this unique composition.

Martin Rosenberg

Martin Rosenberg was born on 24 December 1890 in Russian-occupied Poland.¹ A child prodigy in both music and political activism, Rosenberg was caught up in the revolutionary fervor of the times. At the age of fourteen he was arrested by the czarist police for distributing revolutionary fliers and was detained in prison for thirteen weeks. Soon after that incident he left Poland to study conducting and composition in Vienna and later in Italy, eventually earning the title of professor of music and taking the stage name "Rosebery d'Arguto." In 1912 he arrived in Germany, and five years later he took over the conductorship of the Schubert-Kinderchor, a ninety-member children's choir in Berlin. In 1922 he received an appointment as conductor of a well-established working-class choir in Neuköln, a suburb of Berlin. He renamed the group "Gesangsgemeinschaft Rosebery d'Arguto" (Rosebery d'Arguto Singing Society), and under his inspiring leadership the ensemble's membership quickly grew to 270 singers.

As a composer, Rosenberg strove to combine the socialist and humanistic with the aesthetic functions of music. He experimented with quarter tones and the instrumental use of voices, often abandoning lyrics in favor of vowel colors only. But he never forsook the concept that music must serve the common welfare of the people.²

After 1933, when Hitler's party gained power, Rosenberg, a Jew and a socialist, was forced to resign his conducting positions, and he soon returned to his native Poland. In 1939, a few months before the outbreak of war, he made a brief business trip to Berlin and was arrested by the Gestapo. On 13 September he was sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp with a transport of approximately 900 Jews. All of his effects, documents, scores, and choral pedagogy manuscripts were destroyed. The building in which Rosenberg lived and where he had left his belongings was burned to the ground.

In Sachsenhausen, Rosenberg formed a secret four-part choir comprised of twenty-five or thirty Jewish male inmates. Rehearsals took



Figure 1. Martin Rosenberg

place in Block 39 because its overseer was sympathetic enough to look the other way. Over 300 people attended the first performance in the sleeping quarters of Block 39. According to an eyewitness who survived, the concert was magnificent, deeply moving and very risky.³

In September 1942 Hitler ordered that all Jews in concentration camps in Germany be moved to Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland. On the evening of 21 October 1942, an announcement came that the following day Jews would not be sent to work. Block overseers and supervisors from the Jewish Blocks 37, 38, and 39 were thrown into the bunker.⁴ Expecting imminent death, Rosenberg was inspired to compose a choral work, which he called “Jüdischer Todessang” [Jewish Death Song].

“Tsen Brider”

Rosenberg’s choral work was based on a ubiquitous Jewish folk song called “Tsen Brider” [Ten Brothers].⁵ A transcription of this song by the ethnologists Saul Ginsburg and Pesach Marek was published in Russia in 1901;⁶ it is the earliest version that I have been able to locate.⁷

“Tsen Brider” [Ten Brothers]
anonymous Russian Jewish folksong (1901)

Tsen brider zaynen mir gevezn,
Hobn mir gehandelt mit layn.
Eyner iz geshtorbn,
iz geblibn nayn.

Oy Shmerl mit dem fidl,
Tevye mitn bas,
Shpilt zhe mir a lidl
Oyfn mitn gas.
Oy, yoy, yoy, oy, yoy, yoy
Shpilt zhe mir a lidl
Oyfn mitn gas.

Nayn brider zaynen mir gevezn,
Hobn mir gehandelt mit frakht.
Eyner iz geshtorbn,
iz geblibn akht.

Oy Shmerl mit dem fidl . . .
Akht brider zaynen mir gevezn,
Hobn mir gehandelt mit ribn.
Eyner iz geshtorbn,
iz geblibn zibn.

Oy Shmerl mit dem fidl . . .
Zibn brider zaynen mir gevezn,
Hobn mir gehandelt mit gebeks.
Eyner iz geshtorbn,
iz geblibn zeks.

Oy Shmerl mit dem fidl . . .
Zeks brider zaynen mir gevezn,
Hobn mir gehandelt mit shtrimp.
Eyner iz geshtorbn,
iz geblibn finf.

Oy Shmerl mit dem fidl . . .
Finf brider zaynen mir gevezn,
Hobn mir gehandelt mit bir.
Eyner iz geshtorbn,
iz geblibn fir.

Oy Shmerl mit dem fidl . . .
Fir brider zaynen mir gevezn,
Hobn mir gehandelt mit blay.
Eyner iz geshtorbn,
iz geblibn dray.

Oy Shmerl mit dem fidl . . .
Dray brider zaynen mir gevezn,
Hobn mir gehandelt mit hey.

We were ten brothers
And we traded in flax.
One of us died,
And nine were left.

Oy, Shmerl with your fiddle,
Tevye with your bass,
Play a little song for me
In the middle of the street.
Oy, yoy, yoy, oy, yoy, yoy
Play a little song for me
In the middle of the street.

We were nine brothers
And we traded in cargo.
One of us died,
And eight were left.

Oy, Shmerl with your fiddle . . .
We were eight brothers
And we traded in vegetables.
One of us died,
And seven were left.

Oy, Shmerl with your fiddle . . .
We were seven brothers
And we traded in baked goods.
One of us died,
And six were left.

Oy, Shmerl with your fiddle . . .
We were six brothers
And we traded in stockings.
One of us died,
And five were left.

Oy, Shmerl with your fiddle . . .
We were five brothers
And we traded in beer.
One of us died,
And four were left.

Oy, Shmerl with your fiddle . . .
We were four brothers
And we traded in lead.
One of us died,
And three were left.

Oy, Shmerl with your fiddle . . .
We were three brothers
And we traded in hay.

Eyner iz geshtorbn,
iz geblibn tsvey.

Oy Shmerl mit dem fidl . . .
Tsvey brider zaynen mir gevezn,
Hobn mir gehandlt mit beyner.
Eyner iz geshtorbn,
iz geblibn eyner.

Oy Shmerl mit dem fidl . . .
Eyn bruder bin ikh gevezn,
Hob ikh gehandlt mit likht.
Shtarbn tu ikh yedn tog,
Vayl esn hob ikh nisht.

Oy Shmerl mit dem fidl . . .

One of us died,
And two were left.

Oy, Shmerl with your fiddle . . .
We were two brothers
And we traded in bones.
One of us died,
And one was left.

Oy, Shmerl with your fiddle . . .
I have become one brother,
And I trade in candles.
I die every day
Because I have nothing to eat.

Oy, Shmerl with your fiddle . . .

The song's structure is regressive, much like "Ten Little Indians" or "One Hundred Bottles of Beer on the Wall": the constituency of each verse is reduced by a factor of one unit from that of the previous verse. In the first verse the full component of ten brothers is introduced, and in each of the succeeding verses one of the brothers dies, until, in the last verse, only one is left. This theme of the vanishing Jew is not uncommon in Yiddish folklore.⁸ A hundred years ago Jewish men were being murdered in pogroms, being drafted for twenty-five-year stints into the czar's army, and escaping Russia through emigration.

The choice of profession in each verse is constrained by the rhyme scheme. In the first verse the object of commerce is *layn* (flax), in order to rhyme with *nayn* (nine); in the second verse the item is *frakht* (freight or cargo), to rhyme with *akht* (eight); and so on. There are, of course, other considerations. First, the professions listed are only those in which Jews were allowed. There are no policemen or politicians in the list. Secondly, the professions at the very end of the song assume a macabre twist: in the next to last verse the two brothers sell bones, and in the final verse the one remaining brother sells candles, an allusion to the Jewish practice of lighting a candle as a memorial for the dead.

In the refrain the narrator addresses a klezmer duo, a small ensemble of itinerant musicians the likes of which could be seen in any small town on the Western fringe of the Russian empire in which Jews were permitted to live. When not employed at a wedding, these musicians would play on street corners for whatever coins might be tossed their way. There seems to be no significance to the names "Shmerl" and "Tevye," other than that they were common among Eastern European Jewry. The violin and bass would be considered the minimum composition for a klezmer ensemble. This request for the musicians to play establishes a tone of irony, for the ensemble, which normally performs on joyous occasions, is called upon to entertain for the funeral of each of the brothers.⁹

I have collected, so far, ten variants of the "Tsen Brider" folksong, and most are remarkably similar to the version we have just examined. The names are sometimes changed; instead of Shmerl and Tevye I have found Yosl and Tevye, Shmerl and Yekl, Shmerl and Cheikl, and the euphonious Shmerl and Berl. In one version, published in New York in 1924,¹⁰ none of the brothers dies; rather, most of them succumb to occupational hazards. For example, the wine merchant gets drunk, the baker gets singed, and the hosiery dealer gets tangled in his thread. In the final verse, the narrator of the song explains his own fate in words that reveal yet another dimension of the disappearing Jew: he leaves the community by marrying outside of the faith.

Eyn bruder bin ikh mir,	I am one brother,
Hob ikh mikh ferlibt in a meydel,	I fell in love with a beautiful girl,
a sheyner,	
Hob ikh mir a shikse genumen,	I married a non-Jew,
Ikh gebliben keyner.	Now I'm no one.

The earliest transcription of the music seems to have been published in *Ost und West* (Berlin, vol. 7, June 1907) in 1907 as a variant called "Oi! Jossel mit dem Fiedel" (see Ex. 1).

A. Zhitomersky's arrangement, published ten years later (Ex. 2), is a more perfect fit for the 1901 lyrics.¹¹

"Ten Brothers"

An English version of "Tsen Brider" edited for children appears in a collection by Harry Coopersmith (1902-75), *The New Jewish Song Book*.¹² In a footnote, the editor suggested, "This song lends itself to imaginative dramatization. Have ten children act out the brothers' parts. The contents of each stanza will suggest the intended action."¹³ Coopersmith also offered some sociological and psychological insights: "The Jews in Europe were denied permission to practice professions, enter into business or cultivate the land, hence they had to earn a living in areas which others disdained. Their burden was lightened by the humor they possessed."¹⁴

"Ten Brothers"

English version by Harry Coopersmith

Ten brothers, quite a family,	Diddle daddle dee,
And we were selling twine.	Fiddle faddle fee.
One of us up and died,	Let joy abound and song resound;
And there were only nine.	Be merry as can be!
"Oh, Mindl, take your fiddle;	Nine brothers there remained thereafter,
And Fredl, your bassoon.	Who were selling slate.
Won't you lift our sagging spirits,	One of us up and died,
Play a little tune."	And there were only eight.

OI! JOSSEL MIT DEM FIEDEL.

(Nach einer jüdischen Volksmelodie.)

Nachdruck verboten!

Aus der Sammlung: LEO WINZ.

Begleitung von JACOB BEYMEL.

Lebhaft.

Zehn Brü-der sei-nen

6
mir ge-we-sen ho-ben mir ge-han-delt mit Lein is ei-ner ge-stor-ben

11
ist ge-blie-ben nein. Oii _____ Jo-ssel mit dem Fie-del

Example 1. "Yosl mit dem fidl" (Ost und West, 1907).

17

Tew - jeh mit dem Bass spielt sche mir a Lie - del chotsch auf dem Mit - ten

22

Gass.

Example 1. continued

Tseyn bri - der zay - nen mir ge - ve - zn, ho - bn mir ge - han - dlt mit
 layn. Ey - ner iz ge - shtor - bn, lz ge - bli - bn nayn. Oy
 Shme - rl mit dem fi - dl, Tev - ye mi - tn bas, Shpilt zhe mir a
 li - dl oy - fn mi - tn gas. Oy — oy — oy! Oy — oy —
 oy! Shpilt zhe mir a li - dl oy - fn mi - tn gas.

Example 2. "Tsen Brider," based on Ginsburg and Marek (1901) and Kisselgof (1911).



Ten Brothers

Eng. verse: H.C.

Folk song
Tsen Brider

Moderately

SOLO: Dmi. D⁷ Gmi.

1. Ten broth-ers, quite a fam-i-ly, And we were sell-ing twine.
2. Nine broth-ers then re-mained there-aft-er, who were sell-ing slate.

C⁷ F

One of us — up and died, And there were on-ly nine. "Oh,
One of us — up and died, And there were on-ly eight. "Oh,

Dmi. Gmi. Dmi.

Min-dl, take your fid-dle; And Frä-dl, your bas-soon.
Peni-na, play the pia-no; And De-na, bang the gong.

A Dmi.

Won't you lift our sag-ging spir-its, Play a lit-tle tune."
Keep us from des-pair and sor-row, Play a live-ly song."

CHORUS:

A Dmi.

Did-dle dad-dle dee, Fid-dle fad-dle fee. Let
joy a-bound and song re-sound; Be mer-ry as can be!

Figure 2. Facsimile of "Ten Brothers" (*The New Jewish Song Book*, 1965)

"Oh, Penina, play the piano;
And Dena, bang the gong.
Keep us from despair and sorrow,
Play a lively song."
Diddle daddle dee, . . .
Eight brothers were left over, who were
Peddling wood and sticks.
Two of us up and died,
And there were only six.
"Oh, Yitshak, pound the drum;

And Tamar, the trumpet sound.
Help us bear up, help us, do!
Oh, help to bring us 'round."
Diddle daddle dee, . . .
Six brothers—what misfortune, oh,
Were selling fish alive.
One of us up and died,
And there were only five.
"Now, Moishe blow the saxophone [sic];
And Yoshe, toot the fife.

Allay our fear; come cheer us up;
 Oh, play some jolly jive."
 Diddle daddle dee, . . .
 Five brothers left, who stuck together,
 Trying to sell glue.
 Three of us up and died,
 And there were only two.
 "Oh, Hayim, pipe the bugle;
 Efrayim—the celeste.
 Give thanks to our Almighty God
 That two survived the rest."
 Diddle daddle dee, . . .
 Of brothers—ten—but two remained,
 The rest to heaven gone.
 One of us up and died,

And there was only one.
 "Oh, Soshe, bang the cymbal;
 And D'voshe, blow the horn.
 Won't you cheer me—try somehow
 Of ten, I'm all alone."
 Diddle daddle dee, . . .
 Alas, now I alone am left;
 And feeling none too spry.
 Who will bid the band to play
 When I am doomed to die?
 "Now gather all around me;
 And give me your farewell.
 For writing such a poem
 I'll surely go to . . . !"
 Diddle daddle dee, . . .

Coopersmith has retained the basic form and rhyme scheme (ABCB) of the original but changed the names and instruments in each refrain, allowing the children greater opportunity for dramatization. The song is shortened by having two brothers die at once between brothers eight and six, and three at once between brothers five and two. Despite his own reference to the "disdained professions" in which the Jews were forced to work and the recurrence of death in each refrain, Coopersmith has created a cheerful song. The "oy, yoy, yoy" chorus has been transformed to "Diddle daddle dee, Fiddle faddle fee," expanding on the *yidl-fidl* rhyme of the original. "Play me a little song in the middle of the street" has been altered to the more upbeat, "Let joy abound and song resound; / Be merry as can be!" Coopersmith even indulges in some American slang in the fourth refrain—"Oh, play some jolly jive"—and implied profanity in the final refrain: "Now gather all around me; / And give me your farewell. / For writing such a poem / I'll surely go to . . . !"

Yidl Mitn Fidl

In the 1930s the American entrepreneur Joseph Green produced a Yiddish musical comedy film called *Yidl mitn fidl* [Yidl with His Fiddle]. The movie was shot in Poland in 1936, even as the Nazi menace threatened from the west. The title of the show is taken from the refrain of our old folksong. In fact, the plot revolves around the adventures of the two itinerant musicians, Aryeh the bass player and his daughter, a violinist, played by the popular actress Molly Picon. The latter dresses as a young man, since it was too dangerous for an attractive single woman to be on the road.

Yidl Mitn Fidl [Yidl with His Fiddle]
music by Abe Ellstein, lyrics by Itzik Manger (1936)

Over fields and roads,
On a hay-wagon,
Through sun and wind and rain
Two musicians are travelling.
What a new thing this is!
You know who they are?

Iber felder, vegn,
oyf a vogn hey.
Mit zun un vint un regn,
forn klezmer tsvey.
A khidish, oy, a khidish,
Zog, ver zeynen zey?

*Yidl with his fiddle, Aryeh with his bass,
Life is but a song,
So why be angry? Hey!
Yidl, fiddle, schmiddle, hey!
Life is so much fun!*

*Yidl mitn fidl, Aryeh mitn bas,
Dos lebn iz a lidl,
To vozhe zayn in kas, hey!
Yidl, fidl, schmidl, hey!
Dus lebn iz a shpas!*

A goat stands in the meadow
And sadly bleats: meh!
Hey, you foolish goat,
It's stupid to be sad!
He shakes his beard and says:
Truly, truly stupid!

A tsig shtey oyf der lonke
un meket troyrik: me!
Hey, du tsig, du shoyte,
troyrik zayn iz fe!
Shoklt er dos berdl:
Take, take fe!

Yidl with his fiddle . . .

Yidl mitn fidl . . .

A birdie chirps: good morning,
Good morning and happy new year!
Sorrow and cares—
to hell with them!
We laugh in the wind's face,
And onward, Yidl, onward!

A foygl flit: gut morgn,
Gut morgn, a gut yor!
Di troyer un di zorgn
tsu alde shvartse yor!
Dem vint a lakh in ponem
Un Yidl, Yidl, for!

Yidl with his fiddle . . .

Yidl mitn fidl . . .

The title song is an astonishingly lighthearted parody of the somber Russian folksong. The verses are completely new. The focus is on the joys of being a carefree traveling musician, and there is no reference whatsoever to the dying brothers.¹⁵ The only factor that ties the two songs together is the refrain. The fiddler and bassist are there, but with new names. The name *Yidl* was chosen not only for its ability to rhyme with *fidl*; in Yiddish, *Yidl* means "little Jew" and, as such, represents an Everyman figure. "Shpil zhe mir a lidl" (play me a little song) has been changed to the lighthearted metaphor "dos lebn iz a lidl" (life is but a little song). To *Yidl* and *fidl* is then added the nonsense word *shmidl*, replacing the somber vocables from the folksong (*oy, yoy, yoy*), and cementing the frivolous tone. Rhyming with *bas* are now *kas* ([why be] angry) and *shpas* (fun).

The music is by Abe Ellstein (1907–63), a popular and prolific composer of music for both the Yiddish stage and the synagogue. His setting matches the upbeat sentiment of the lyrics. The melodic line of the refrain follows the contour of the refrain in the folksong but travels in lanes that are far richer in both melody and (implied) harmony.

“Jüdischer Todessang”

As for Rosenberg’s “Jewish Requiem,” unfortunately, no score has survived. We know about the piece only because of the efforts of Aleksander Kulisiewicz, a non-Jewish political prisoner who witnessed the rehearsals of the prisoners’ choir. Rosenberg asked Kulisiewicz to promise that, if he survived, he would keep this song alive and tell the world of the Nazi crimes.¹⁶

Kulisiewicz fulfilled his promise, and from a hospital bed after the war, he dictated 716 pages of poems and songs that he had heard and memorized in Sachsenhausen.¹⁷ Until his death in 1982 he traveled the world performing “Tsen Brider” and other songs that bore witness to the horrors of the Holocaust.¹⁸ He recorded eight albums in Europe and America, including the classic Folkways recording *Songs from the Depths of Hell* (Folkways 37700, 1979). A copy of his unpublished memoir, “Polskie Piesni Obozowe, 1939–1945,” has been preserved in the archives of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. To my knowledge, this is the first time this work has appeared in English.

Here is the story of “Jüdischer Todessang” in Kulisiewicz’s own words:

This is what the first, and as it turned out the last, rehearsal looked like. . . . Rosenberg,¹⁹ without further ado, gathered the choir and started a secret rehearsal. On this rainy October evening when heaven seemed to be more gray and merciless than usual—people, shivering from cold, in heavy wooden clogs, looked upon their conductor with limitless trust, like children in a kindergarten visited by a long awaited Santa Claus. Suddenly, the conductor interrupted. Before the eyes of the whole choir he took my hand in his and said: “Alex, remember. You are not a Jew, but you must sing my song all over the world until you die—otherwise you won’t die in peace.” . . . Several drunken SS men burst into Block 39, screaming shrilly: “Alles raus!” (“everyone out!”). Still singing, Jews were kicked, beaten up. Never again did I see the composer of “Jüdischer Todessang.” In the last moment I managed to jump out through a window. As I ran away, shouting reached me from the Jewish barrack. I spent that night precisely memorizing every tone and every word of the unfinished song. Several hours later a transport of 454 Jews left for Auschwitz. Among them was Rosenberg. He perished in 1943.²⁰

The image shows a musical score for two songs, 'Tsen Brider' (1) and 'Yidl Mitn Fidl' (2). The score is written for two voices (1 and 2) and piano accompaniment. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are in Yiddish. The score is divided into four systems, each starting with a measure number (1, 5, 9, 13). The lyrics for each system are as follows:

System 1 (Measures 1-4):
 1 Shme - ri mit dem fi - dl, Tev - ye mi - tn bas,
 2 Yi - dl mi - tn fi - dl. Ar - yeh mi - tn bass, Dus

System 2 (Measures 5-8):
 1 Shpilt zhe mir a li - dl oy - fn mi - tn gas.
 2 le - bn iz a li - dl, — To vo - zhe zayn in kas, hey!

System 3 (Measures 9-12):
 1 Oy, — yoy, — yoy! Oy, — yoy, — yoy!
 2 Yi - dl, fi - dl, shmi - dl, hey! Dus le - bn iz a shpas!

System 4 (Measures 13-16):
 1 Shpilt zhe mir a li - dl oy - fn mi - tn gas.
 2 (The piano accompaniment continues with a simple harmonic line.)

Example 3. Comparison of the refrains of "Tsen Brider" (1) and "Yidl Mitn Fidl" (2)

Kulisiewicz claims that he was a witness to the compositional process from the beginning. Presumably that would be the end of October 1942.

Rosenberg showed me day by day the consecutive composition phases of "Jüdischer Todessang." We were united by a desperate love of music and songs, trust in their immortal power—united by the hatred of fascism which desecrated music for the first time in history. We saw the SS victims murdered to the sound of fox-trots and marches, played *vivace*.²¹

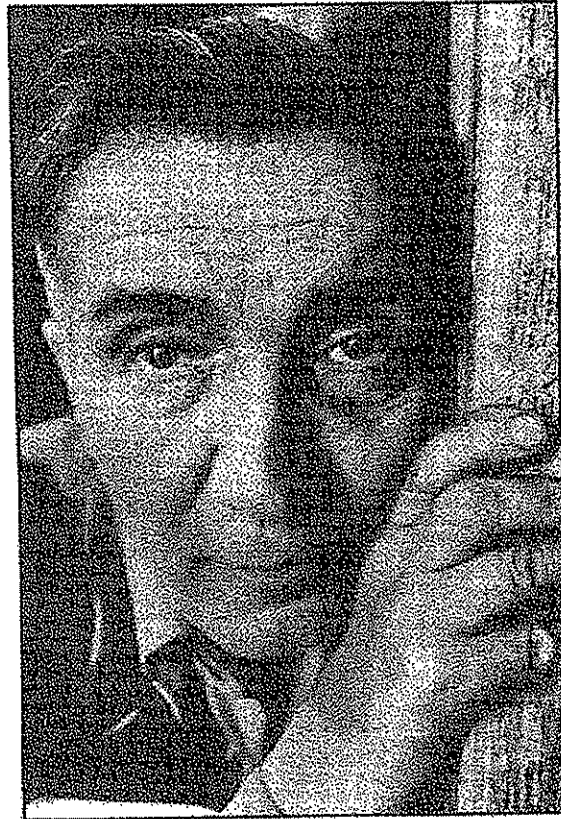


Figure 3. Aleksander Kulisiewicz

By the time we both realized that within the next few days all Jews would be transported to Birkenau, our friendship was cemented by a strong feeling of commitment. Rosenberg was finishing his "Jüdischer Todessang" and I was memorizing bar after bar, every ornamentation and every novelty of this difficult interpretation.²²

What was Rosenberg like? Kulisiewicz remembered, "Rosenberg was the first Jewish composer that I met. He impressed me with his musical knowledge and his consequent labor to reach his goal, even in the face of death. He was my senior by twenty-eight years and more experienced, but never did he make me feel it. I remember, in the last days, he spoke a lot about his homeland of Mława."²³ Another inmate at Sachsenhausen, Edward Janiuk, recalled, "I met this composer while carrying bricks. He was slim, with an ascetic and always concentrated face and restless hands. I often imagined they were playing something. His hands were long, so were the fingers. The eyes were expressive, very dark, almost black. He spoke calmly, with a melodic voice."²⁴

“Jüdischer Todessang”
music and lyrics by Martin Rosenberg
(Sachsenhausen concentration camp, 1942)

German version	Yiddish version	English translation
<i>ba ba ba ba . . .</i>	<i>bom bom bom bom . . .</i>	<i>bom bom bom bom</i>
<i>li laj li laj li . . .</i>	<i>li lay li lay li lay . . .</i>	<i>li lai li lai li lai</i>
Zehn Brüder waren mir gewesen, haben wir gehandelt mit Wein.	Tsen brider zenen mir geven, Hobn mir gehandelt mit vayn.	We were ten brothers, Our business was the wine trade.
Einer ist gestorben, Sind wir geblieben neun.	Eyner iz geshtorbn, Zenen mir geblibn nayn.	One brother died, So we remained nine.
Yidl mit dem Fiedel, Mojschje mit dem Bass, singt mir mal ein Liedel— müssen wir ins Ga-a-a-as!	Yidl mitn fidl, Moyshe mitn bas, Shpiltzhe mir a lidl, Men firt undz in dem gas.	Yidl, with your fiddle, Moyshe, with your bass, Play me a little song; They're taking us to the gas.
<i>ba ba ba ba . . .</i>	<i>bom bom bom bom . . .</i>	<i>bom bom bom bom</i>
Ein Bruder bin ich nur geblieben; mit wem soll ich nun weinen?	Eyn bruder nor bin ikh geblibn, Mit vemn zol ikh weynen?	Now I am the only brother left. With whom can I share my tears?
Die and'ren sind ermordet!	Di andere hot men derharget.	The others have all been murdered!
Denkt ihr an alle neun?	Tsi gedenkt ir zeyer neymen.	Do you remember their names?
Yidl mit dem Fiedel, Mojschje mit dem Bass, hört mein letztes Liedel, ich muss auch ins Ga-a-a-as!	Yidl mitn fidl, Moyshe mitn bas, Hart mayn letst lidl, Men firt milkh oykh tsum gas.	Yidl, with your fiddle, Moyshe, with your bass, Hear my last little song. They're taking me, too, to the gas.
Zehn Brüder waren mir gewesen, wir haben keinem weh getan.	Tsen brider zenen mir geven, Mir hobn keynem mit vey geton.	We were ten brothers. We never hurt anyone!
<i>li laj li laj li . . .</i>	<i>li lay li lay li lay . . .</i>	<i>li lai li lai li lai</i>

Let us examine “Jüdischer Todessang” phrase by phrase (see Ex. 4) and hear, through Kulisiewicz’s testimony, Rosenberg’s description of the music and its choreography, a description that he requested be published someday:

The composer described the introduction sung by the basses as “Todeswarnung”—a warning of death. Each phrase with the vocal

Jüdischer Todessang

(Zehn Brüder)

trad./Martin Rosenberg

Martin Rosenberg
as sung by Aleksander Kulisiewicz

bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom

6

bom bom bom bom bom li lai li lai li lai

13

la la la la la la li li lai li lai li lai bom bom

19

bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom

25

Zehn Brü - der wa - ren mir ge - we - sen, ha - ben wir ge -

30

han - delt mit Wein Ei - ner ist ge - stor - ben. Sind wir ge -

35

blie - ben neun. oy yoy oy yoy

43

Ji - dl mit dem Fie - del, Moj - schje mit dem Bass, — sing mir mal ein

48

Lie - del müs - sen wir ins Gas! — Ji - dl mit dem Fie - del,

53

Moj - schje mit dem Bass, — singt mir mal ein Lie - del Lie - del

58

müs-sen wir ins Gas! ins Gas! ins Gas! _____

65

bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom

70

bom bom bom bom Ein Bru-der bin ich nur _____ ge-

75

blic-ben; mit wem soll ich nun wei-nen? Die an-de-ren sind er-mor-det!

80

Denkt ihr an al-le neun? oy yoy oy _____ yoy _____

89

Ji-dt mit dem Fie-del, Moj-schje mit dem Bass, _____ hört mein letz-tes

94

Lie-del, ich muss auch ins Gas! _____ Ji-dt mit dem

98

Fie-del, Moj-schje mit dem Bass, _____ hört mein letz-tes Lie-del, _____

103

Zehn Brü-der wa-ren mir _____ ge-we-sen, wir ha-ben

107

kei-nem weh ge-tan, weh ge-tan. li lai li lai

112

li lai li lai li lai li lai

ending “bom-bom” expressed a different feeling: extreme anger, resignation, will to survive—without the need to use words. Rosenberg wished to demonstrate here the achievements of his pioneering choral method. It aimed in some scores to replace text, the traditional element of a song, with descriptive vocalization.²⁵

Rosenberg advocated the use of vocables, syllables that bear no discursive meaning. He once wrote, “[S]inging without text brings forward with particular strength the unspoiled, elementary components of feelings. . . . The strongest of feelings are deprived of words, they find their own way through shouting, for example, and from their very genesis rest at the root of the human soul.”²⁷ Rosenberg’s composition *Absolute symphonische Gesänge* [Abstract Symphonic Songs] is an example of his most subjective use of vocalization in singing. It was first performed during a concert in the Berlin Philharmonic on 21 May 1924.²⁸

Kulisiewicz’s transmission of Rosenberg’s program notes continues:

The initial vocables of falsettos [li-lai] is like a lullaby for the hundreds of thousands of murdered Jewish children. Rosenberg never spoke about his family or relatives. The only person he recalled with tears was a little girl called Reginka. This two-year-old child was stampeded to death in mud by the Germans during the annihilation of a Jewish township in the Bialystok area. Rosenberg met and liked Reginka during a visit to his homeland in 1939. In Sachsenhausen, he was told that in the last moment the girl ran up to her father, hugged his knees desperately crying and begging him not to leave. She was killed at this point. So, the concept of *voci degli bambini* [the voices of children] in “Jüdischer Todessang” was born out of bitterness and desperation.

The baritone soloist was a young, tall, perhaps twenty-year-old Jew. He must have been in the camp not longer than several weeks. With a muscular chest and a handsome manly neck, the man’s lust for life was clear. He did not want to die.

The soloist’s first words suddenly stop, signifying a broken thread of life. The choir commences after a short break, “oy oy oy, yoy! . . .” in a long held-back diminuendo. The soloist’s face, up to now expressing the enormity of pain, suddenly changes. The vision of the Jewish yard orchestras²⁹ appears, interrupted by a kind of dissonance “müssen wir ins Gas” [“we are being taken to the gas chambers”].

The soloist seems to have recovered from the macabre surrounding. He attempts to dance, but a glance behind [to the choir] shows the striped camp uniforms.

His exhaustion gives way to tragic resignation and ends with paroxysms of pain and desperation. The singer’s eyes are wide open with horror; his stiff fingers push away the vision of gas chambers. The last syllable “gas!! . . .” lasts awkwardly long. Sorrow, sobbing delicately vanishing into pianissimo. A longer pause.

During the basses' vocables [bom bom], the soloist makes a few, heavy, slow paces, as if following his own funeral. The choir turns silently [away from the soloist] to face the wall. According to the composer's explanation it symbolizes Jerusalem's Wailing Wall, [as well as] insignificance and death. The soloist is on his own. His hands hang down beside his body.

[The next lines are sung] *quasi recitativo*, with meticulous German articulation. While singing "Denkt ihr an alle neun?" the soloist points his stretched finger at the prisoners gathered in the sleeping quarter. It is not aimed at the Jewish "audience" from Block 39—it's only a rehearsal—but at the comrades from other nationalities, for whose ears "Jüdischer Todessang" was mainly destined.

The next part [from "Jidl mit . . ."], as opposed to the first verse, is sung with a growing emotion. The soloist improvises a crazy dance, mimicking playing some string instrument. Repeating "Jidl mit . . ." the singer claps his hands, attempting to draw into the dance the choir members, who are [still] standing with their backs towards him. The choir remains motionless. The young Jew stoops forward, his hands hanging down. The palms dangle lifelessly, as if they belonged to a body carried on someone's back. Then, like an echo, the first motif returns: "Zehn Brüder waren wir gewesen. . . ." Facing the wall all this time, the choir does not respond anymore "haben wir gehandelt mit Wein" ["we traded with wine"], but accuses: "wir haben keinem weh getan" ["we haven't harmed anybody"].

The final vocables of the falsettos [li-lai] are the carefree voices of children playing, perhaps skipping rope. The choir, hitherto still, begins increasingly lively dance movements.³⁰

Rosenberg's lyrics are very similar to those of the folksong, but the differences are telling and, in some cases, chilling. In the refrain, the names are now Yidl and Moyshe. The word that rhymes with *bas* is again *Gas*, but this time not *Gas*, a street, but *Gas*, the gas chamber. While the effect of the word is startling to anyone who hears it, how much more meaningful must it have been for those who knew the original folksong and understood the transformation of *Gas* from "street" to "gas chamber." In the concluding refrain, the phrases "last little song" and "they're taking me, too, to the gas" are Rosenberg's personalization of the text to his own situation.

Rosenberg shortened the song from ten to two verses. Perhaps the prisoners knew that their time was limited. The most striking change in the verses can be seen at the end of the second and final verse. The brothers have not simply "died," as they did in the folksong, they have been murdered, and we are enjoined to remember them. Could Rosenberg have been either consciously or unconsciously recalling the words of the biblical injunction to remember the evil deeds of the Amalekites?

Was this socialist composer aware that historically the Jewish people have identified their worst enemies, from Haman to Hitler, with Amalek?

Remember what Amalek did to you on the road, when you were leaving Egypt; how, undeterred by fear of God, they surprised you on your march, when you were famished and weary, and they cut down all the stragglers at your rear. Therefore, when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies that surround you, in the land which the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the very memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget! (Deut. 25:17–19)

Rosenberg has also added several new elements that are not to be found in any previous versions of the folksong. At the end there is a brief coda, a tearful couplet that serves as a final appeal on the basis of their obvious innocence: “We were ten brothers. / We never hurt anyone!” Also evident in this song is Rosenberg’s modernist penchant for the use of non-discursive phonemes, onomatopoeic words created by the composer—thus the vocables *bom-bom* and *li-lai*, analyzed in detail above.

In his musical setting of the text, Rosenberg made extensive use of the melody of the folksong. We can find the closest correspondence between these two pieces in their refrains. The first four bars are identical. Measures 5–8, while not an exact match, are quite similar. Then, at m. 9, where the folksong moves into the “oy, yoy, yoy” section, Rosenberg instead repeats the first four measures, sequenced up a third. At the end, instead of cadencing back on the tonic, he avoids resolution by rising again to the dominant. The last word, *Gas* (gas), is eerily elongated, eventually rising and falling a tritone (A–E♭–A), an interval associated for centuries in the minds of Europeans with death and hell.

Kulisiewicz’s recordings of “Jüdischer Todessang” are quite striking. He accompanies himself on the guitar, and his rendition is personal and emotional in the extreme. At the end of the song, to evoke the horrible scene of the SS guards breaking up Rosenberg’s rehearsal and beating the prisoners, Kulisiewicz shouts, “Alles raus!”³¹

In 1994 I wrote an arrangement of “Jüdischer Todessang” for chorus.³² At that time I had not heard Kulisiewicz’s recording, nor had I seen his annotations on the original performance. I based my version on a transcription that appeared in Shoshana Kalisch’s collection of Holocaust songs, titled *Yes, We Sang!*³³ Her version of the text is in Yiddish, like the folksong, rather than Kulisiewicz’s German. In some areas my reconstruction turns out to be quite different from Rosenberg’s choral version. Most obviously, Rosenberg’s chorus was an all-male ensemble, while my arrangement is, for practical rather than historical reasons,

1
 1 Shme - ri mit dem fi - dl, Tev - ye mi - tn bas,
 2 Ji dl mit dem Fie - dl, Moj - schje mit dem Bass,

5
 1 Shpilt zhe mir a li - dl oy - fn mi - tn gas.
 2 singt mir mal ein Lie - del mü - ssen wir ins Gas!

9
 1 Oy, — yoy, — oy! Oy, — yoy, — yoy!
 2 Ji dl mit dem Fie - dl, Moj - schje mit dem Bass,

13
 1 Shpilt zhe mir a li - dl oy - fn mi - tn gas.
 2 singt mir mal ein Lie - del mü - ssen wir ins Gas! ins

17
 1
 2 Gas! ins Gas!

Example 5. Comparison of the refrains of "Tsen Brider" (1) and "Jüdischer Todessang" (2)

scored for mixed voices. Yet, Rosenberg did have the men sing falsetto in the “li-lai-li-lai” refrain, a section that I had assigned to the women’s voices.

Conclusion

It is a privilege for me to have had a part in the reconstruction of “Jüdischer Todessang.” By doing so, I have felt myself to be an emissary of Rosenberg and Kulisiewicz, helping to ensure that the “Sachsenhausen Requiem” continues to be heard into the twenty-first century, helping to carry on its message, its *Todeswarnung*, the warning that bigotry, cruelty, greed, and xenophobia can cause humans to forget their humanity.

Notes

1. The biographical information on Rosenberg was taken from Aleksander Kulisiewicz’s unpublished typescript, “Polskie Piesni Obozowe, 1939–1945,” pp. 1830–31. Portions of Kulisiewicz’s memoir are currently being prepared for publication in Germany. I am grateful to Bret Werb, the musicologist at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, for his assistance in my research. Peter Gorny was most generous in providing me a carefully edited translation of the relevant portions of Kulisiewicz’s manuscript.
2. “Arbeitshefte: Sektion Music: Forum Musik in der DDR: Arbeiterklasse und Musik: Theoretische Positionen in der deutschen Arbeiterklasse zur Musikkultur vor 1945,” 74. This article from an East German academic series was provided to me by Bret Werb from the archives of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and translated by Ross Hall of Northeastern University.
3. Kulisiewicz, “Polskie Piesni Obozowe,” 1833.
4. Kulisiewicz, “Polskie Piesni Obozowe,” 1834.
5. There is a huge repertoire of music composed as a response to the Holocaust, including many works contrafacted from well-known folk and popular songs. See Gila Flam, *Singing for Survival: Songs of the Lodz Ghetto, 1940–1945* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Joshua Jacobson, “Music in the Holocaust,” *Choral Journal* 36, no. 5 (Dec. 1995): 9–21; Shoshana Kalisch, *Yes, We Sang! Songs of the Ghettos and Concentration Camps* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985); Eleanor G. Mlotek, *We Are Here: Songs of the Holocaust* (New York: Workman’s Circle, 1983); and Shmerke Kaczerginsky, *Songs of the Ghettos and Concentration Camps* (New York: CYCO-Bicher Farlag, 1948).
6. Saul Ginsburg and Pesach Marek, eds., *Yevreiskaya Narodnyya Pijesni v Rusii* [Jewish Folksongs in Russia] (St. Petersburg: Voskhod, 1901).
7. I am grateful to Eleanor Mlotek, the music archivist at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, for her assistance in locating the early sources.
8. Philip Bohlman, “Musical Life in the Central European Village,” in *Modern Jews and Their Musical Agendas*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 30.
9. There is a funeral dirge tradition in the klezmer repertory, but it is minimal.

10. *Jewish National and Zion Songs (K'vutsat Shirim)* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1924), 255–57.
11. Z. Kisselgof, ed., *Lider-Zamelbuch* (Berlin: Juwal, 1917), 30–31.
12. Harry Coopersmith, *The New Jewish Song Book* (New York: Behrman House, 1965), 118–19.
13. Coopersmith, *The New Jewish Song Book*, 118.
14. Coopersmith, *The New Jewish Song Book*, 118.
15. By the end of the movie, all the klezmorim have, one by one, abandoned the tradition. The movie might well be construed as a metaphorical ode to the death of klezmer.
16. Kalisch, *Yes, We Sang*, 50.
17. Folkways, 2.
18. Kalisch, *Yes, We Sang*, 50.
19. Throughout his typescript, Kulisiewicz refers to Rosenberg as “Rosebery D’Arguto.” In this translation I have substituted the conductor’s given name.
20. Kulisiewicz, “Polskie Piesni Obozowe,” 1837.
21. Kulisiewicz, “Polskie Piesni Obozowe,” 1834.
22. Kulisiewicz, “Polskie Piesni Obozowe,” 1837.
23. Kulisiewicz, “Polskie Piesni Obozowe,” 1835.
24. Kulisiewicz, “Polskie Piesni Obozowe,” 1835.
25. Kulisiewicz, “Polskie Piesni Obozowe,” 1839.
26. This transcription is based on the three recordings made by Kulisiewicz: *Songs from the Depths of Hell* (New York: Folkways 37700, 1979), *Chants de la Deportation* (Paris: Le Chant du Monde LDZ74552, 1975), and *Lieder aus der Hölle* (Heidelberg: Da Camera SM95011, 1968). There are some differences in the three interpretations. My spelling of the vocables is slightly different from that of Kulisiewicz.
27. Kulisiewicz, “Polskie Piesni Obozowe,” 1839.
28. Kulisiewicz, “Polskie Piesni Obozowe,” 1839.
29. The reference is to the orchestras of inmates who were forced to play at the entrance of the concentration camps. Their music might be soothing, to allay the fears of the new arrivals, or rousing, to inspire the slave laborers as they went off to work each morning. See Szyman Laks, *Music of Another World*, trans. Chester Kiesel (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1989; originally published as *Musiques d’un autre monde* [Paris: Mercure de France, 1948]), and Fania Fenelon, *The Musicians of Auschwitz*, trans. Judith Landry (London: Michael Joseph, 1977).
30. Kulisiewicz, “Polskie Piesni Obozowe,” 1840–42.
31. On the Folkways recording, Kulisiewicz sings without accompaniment and omits the final shout.
32. The sheet music is published under the title “Tsen Brider” by Transcontinental Music Publications (New York). A compact disc recording is available under the HaZamir label (www.zamir.org).
33. Kalisch, *Yes, We Sang*, 48–57.