Biddle I, Muller B. (2014) 'and all of a sudden, in the middle of it, they began singing...': Languages and Commemoration in Arnold Schoenberg's Cantata A Survivor from Warsaw (Op. 46).


Copyright:

© 2014 by The Editors and Contributors.

The definitive version of this chapter, published by Camden House, 2014, is available from:

http://www.camden-house.com/store/viewItem.asp?idProduct=14689

Always use the definitive version when citing.

Date deposited: 12th December 2014
Edinburgh German Yearbook

General Editor: Peter Davies

Vol. 1: Cultural Exchange in German Literature
Edited by Eleoma Joshua and Robert Vilain

Vol. 2: Masculinities in German Culture
Edited by Sarah Colvin and Peter Davies

Vol. 3: Contested Legacies: Constructions of Cultural Heritage in the GDR
Edited by Matthew Philpotts and Sabine Rolle

Vol. 4: Disability in German Literature, Film, and Theatre
Edited by Eleoma Joshua and Michael Schillmeier

Vol. 5: Brecht and the GDR: Politics, Culture, Posterity
Edited by Laura Bradley and Karen Leeder

Vol. 6: Sadness and Melancholy in German Literature and Culture
Edited by Mary Cosgrove and Anna Richards

Vol. 7: Ethical Approaches in Contemporary German-Language Literature and Culture
Edited by Emily Jeremiah and Frauke Matthes

Vol. 8: New Literary and Linguistic Perspectives on the German Language, National Socialism, and the Shoah
Edited by Peter Davies and Andrea Hammel

Vol. 9: Archive and Memory in German-Language Literature and Culture (Forthcoming 2015)
Edited by Dora Osborne

Edinburgh German Yearbook

Volume 8

New Literary and Linguistic Perspectives on the German Language, National Socialism, and the Shoah

Edited by
Peter Davies
and
Andrea Hammel

CAMDEN HOUSE
Rochester, New York
Contents

Introduction: The German Language, National Socialism, and the Shoah  
Peter Davies and Andrea Hammel 1

German Language and National Socialism Today:
Still a German “Sonderweg”?  
Marko Pajević 7

Clear Wording or “Historical” Euphemisms? Conceptual Controversies Surrounding the Naming of National Socialist Memorial Sites in Germany  
Sylvia Degen 25

The Language of the Perpetrators

“Lieber, guter Onkel Hitler”: A Linguistic Analysis of the Letter as a National Socialist Text-Type and a Re-evaluation of the “Sprache im/des Nationalsozialismus” Debate  
Geraldine Horan 45

“German was heard so often in our Dutch home”: German Nazi Refugees in the Netherlands and Their Ambivalent Relationship with Their Mother Tongue  
Simone Schloth 59

“Whose text is it anyway?” Influences on a Refugee Memoir  
Andrea Hammel 73

Stigma and Performance: Victor Klemperer’s Language—Critical Reflections on Anti-Semitic Hate Speech  
Arvi Sepp 89

Literary Language

Reinventing Invented Tradition: Vergangenheitsbewältigung and the Literature of Melancholy  
Mary Cogrove 107
“Even the word ‘und’ has to be re-invented somehow”: Quoting the Language of the Perpetrators in Texts by Anne Duden

Teresa Ludden

“Reden ist Silber, Schweigen ist Gold”: German as a Site of Fascist Nostalgia and Romanian as the Language of Dictatorship in the Work of Herta Müller

Jenny Watson

The Power of Language and Silence: Reinhard Jirgl’s Die Stille

Dora Osborne

Words and Music

“Disrupted Language, Disrupted Culture”: Hanns Eisler’s Hollywooder Liederbuch (1942-43)

James Parsons

“and all of a sudden, in the middle of it, they began singing . . .”: Languages and Commemoration in Arnold Schoenberg’s Cantata A Survivor from Warsaw (Op. 46)

Ian Riddle and Beate Müller

Translation

Understanding a Perpetrator in Translation: Presenting Rudolf Höß, Commandant of Auschwitz, to Readers of English

Peter Davies

Translating Testimony: Jakob Littner’s Typescript and the Versions of Wolfgang Koeppen and Kurt Nathan Grüber

Simon Ward

Introduction: The German Language, National Socialism, and the Shoah

Peter Davies, University of Edinburgh
Andrea Hammel, Aberystwyth University

There is seemingly no escaping the association of the language of Goethe with the language of Hitler. Whatever one may feel about the rather leaden cliché that juxtaposes Buchenwald and Weimar, the disciplines of cultural history, literary criticism, discourse analysis, “Sprachkritik,” and memory studies have all, in their various ways, contributed to a rich field of concepts (“Tätersprache,” “Sprache des Nationalsozialismus” vs. “Sprache im Nationalsozialismus,”1 “unheimliche Heimat,”2 and many others) that both describe and embody the ambivalent, uneasy status of the German language and its traditions after the Shoah.

“Sprachkritiker” such as Victor Klemperer suggested that the Lingua Tertii Imperii was a perversion of German that needed to be purged from the language in order to restore its healthy traditions. However, does the notion of “Nazi language” as an identifiably separate entity really hold water, or is it simply a form of linguistic purism analogous to the desire to construct a clear demarcation line between “Germans” and “Nazis”? Is the German language really so fraught with history and violence that constant vigilance and self-reflexivity are necessary, or is neutral or even innocent speech in German still possible in the post-Holocaust world? And do the descendants of victims and of perpetrators have comparable attitudes and responsibilities regarding language, or radically different ones?

The poet Gershon Ben-David, who had survived the Holocaust as a child with non-Jewish foster parents, and continued to write in German in Israel after his emigration in 1947, wrote strikingly in the 1960s about a longing for authentic communication with non-Jewish Germans and a fear that this communication can only take place in a social context in which language is characterized by cliché and the legacy of the Nazi assault on truth. How possible is it to break old habits and start anew?
“and all of a sudden, in the middle of it, they began singing . . .”: Languages and Commemoration in Arnold Schoenberg’s Cantata *A Survivor from Warsaw* (Op. 46)

*Ian Biddle and Beate Müller, Newcastle University*

Arnold Schoenberg’s *A Survivor from Warsaw*, Op. 46, is a twelve-tone cantata for male narrator, male chorus, and orchestra, written in August 1947. The narrator recounts, in *Sprechgesang*, how, one day during an early morning reveille in an unnamed camp, the Nazi guards started viciously beating the Jews, killing many of them. Those surviving are ordered to repeat the roll call, and suddenly start singing the Jewish prayer *Shema Yisroel*. One of the most striking elements of the cantata is the fact that its libretto uses three languages: English, German, and Hebrew. The narrator tells his tale in English, citing Nazi commands in German, and the prayer is sung in Hebrew by the chorus; this tripartite linguistic organization is mirrored by the music, which is characterized by tripartite parallelisms.¹ The push and shove between English and German in the narrative section of the cantata and the use of Hebrew in the *Shema* raise questions about the relationship between languages: how is German (the language of the composer, an émigré German-speaking Jew living in Los Angeles) positioned as the perpetrator language in the figure of the Feldwebel? How is English (the then-emerging language of Holocaust memorialization, the dominant language of prosecution during the Nuremberg Trials, and subsequently the leading language of Holocaust Studies as a discipline) framed as the language of witnessing in the cantata? And finally, how is Hebrew (the language of liturgy, but also the language of political Zionism) enacted here and to what effect?

These three languages, we will suggest, stage a range of subject positions and, in particular, invite the audience to make specific ideological and ethical (or unethical) associations with the communities represented by the three languages.

The libretto of *Survivor*, as an early example of Holocaust themed art music, encourages reflection on memory, the representation of trauma, and the role of languages in that work of memory. The three languages
used, whilst each serving different functions when taken on their own, also form a network in which each language unfolds its meaning in relation to the other two. Their main significance lies in the destructions and constructions of community. As well as positing (and simultaneously questioning) the play of communities, Schoenberg’s cantata also deals with the emergence and integration of the individual into those changing communities: here the individual is the witness and the victim, that exemplary protagonist of Holocaust narratives, who is afforded the authority and burden of bearing (and communicating) memory.

Musical Contexts

Schoenberg’s combination of the Shema Yisrael with his own avowedly secular text maps on to long-established expectations of the cantata genre, especially in the German-speaking world. Indeed, the German baroque cantata tradition drew on religious or secular texts, or combined them. Schoenberg’s piece compresses but preserves the hybrid textual nature of most German Lutheran cantatas, especially the so-called Spruchdankantate, a hybrid of the Odenkantate (based around a religious song text in strophic form) and the so-called Konzertmotette (by the late seventeenth century a rarer form, drawing on older sacred traditions, and permissive in its use of instrumental and vocal resources). This hybrid form consisted of several stop-start sections, usually including at least two arias, a recitative, and at least one chorus. The textual and musical form of Survivor draws on Bach’s Kantaten as a model, whilst also “through-composing” the contrasting sections into a continuous (but compacted) musical work.

Schoenberg’s designation of Survivor as a cantata, although included neither in the first published score of 1949 nor in the later 1979 revised score, seems apt. Yet that designation also raises complex questions about Schoenberg’s own relationship with both Judaism and German culture. Indeed, in 1933, as is well attested in the literature, Schoenberg re-entered the Jewish faith, and whilst the relation between this rediscovery of Judaism and his creative output can be demonstrated, the Christian musical traditions of Vienna persist in much of his oeuvre. Although his unfinished oratorio Die Jakobsleiter (1917–22) could be said to address Judaism, it is probably better understood as belonging to a tradition of biblically-themed oratorios from the Christian tradition. In 1926, Schoenberg wrote his first consciously Jewish work, the play Der biblische Weg. The play is avowedly Zionist in its conception, and deals with the choice of the protagonists Asseino and Aruns between the way of Moses (the rule-giver) and the way of Aaron (the radical, the modern). The connection with his opera Moses und Aron (1927–32) is clear, although the latter drops the explicit political tone of the former. Nonetheless, after the notorious Mattsee incident in 1921, when Schoenberg and his family were asked to leave the holiday resort because they were Jewish, Schoenberg’s political reawakening as a Jew seemed unstoppable. That both Der biblische Weg and Moses und Aron were written before his formal conversion to Judaism in Paris in 1933 is testament to the fact that Schoenberg’s Jewish awakening occurred before he marked his formal return to the faith of his childhood. Schoenberg was demonstrably aware of the political dimensions of his Jewish identity, as evidenced for instance in his famous letter to Kandinsky in 1924 where he wrote that he had been forced to learn that “ich nämlich kein Deutscher, kein Europäer, ja vielleicht kaum ein Mensch bin . . . sondern, dass ich Jude bin” (I am not a German, not a European, maybe not even a human, . . . but that I am a Jew).

His next major explicitly Jewish-themed work was the Kol Nidre for speaker, mixed chorus, and orchestra (Op. 39, 1939), commissioned by Rabbi Jakob Sonderling, who later provided Schoenberg with the phonetic transcription of the Shema Yisrael for Survivor. The use of a speaking narrator here also clearly anticipates that used in Survivor. In several ways, the Kol Nidre works as a kind of early study for Survivor. The Kol Nidre’s conception is intimately connected to the plight of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, and the piece deals with the interrelationship of three languages: English, German (the original language of Schoenberg’s first draft of the Kol Nidre libretto), and (missing, implied) Aramaic. The Kol Nidre was originally conceived, like Survivor, as a cantata, and, of course, it deals structurally, in a manner not unlike that of Survivor, with the juxtaposition of speech and song. However, the piece differs significantly in several important ways: it is largely tonal, whereas the cantata is written using curtained hexachordal/serial procedures; Kol Nidre does not stage any action or melodrama but is purely liturgical in conception; it attempts to set an existing nigan or melody (albeit extremely freely), whilst Survivor abandons liturgical musical traditions for the setting of the Shema Yisrael.

From Partisan Song to Cantata

The idea to compose a piece on the Holocaust originated in correspondence between Schoenberg and Corinne Chochem, a dancer from Russia who had by that time emigrated to New York. Chochem sent Schoenberg the English lyrics of a Partisan song from the Vilna ghetto, wanting to commission a composition of six to nine minutes’ length on a story heard by Chochem of Jews in the Warsaw ghetto who had started singing shortly before being killed. Schoenberg was willing to undertake the work, but the envisaged collaboration fell through because the composer’s demand for a thousand dollars was too much for Chochem to pay. Schoenberg eventually wrote the piece for the Koussevitzky Music Fund.
of the film is set in a theater in postwar Łódź. Unlike Undzere Kinder, which represents the Holocaust only in flashbacks, the narrative in Alfréd Radok’s Daleká cesta is set during the Holocaust. This film is a melodrama that deals both with the buildup to deportations from Prague, the “ghetto without walls,” and the lives of the inmates at the transit camp Terezin (Theresienstadt). Jifi Sternwald’s complex musical score for the film resonates with other European modernist musics from the time, not least Schoenberg’s own (Sternwald was apparently an avid follower of Schoenberg’s career). Perhaps most notable in the film is the strange expressionistic representation of the transit camp as a chaotic railway station, and the inmates’ blocks as railway carriages.

The topsy-turvy confusion of places in the cantata (the sewers of Warsaw, concentration camps, gas chambers) shares with many early representations of the Holocaust a tendency to conflate various key sites of the atrocities. Avrom Sutzkever’s Yiddish-language epic poem Gheymshot (Secret City, 1945–47), for example, centers on the sewers of Vilnius, where the protagonists subsist in the damp and the dark: “These pipes, sewers, they are something quite different, / Like circuitous roads, dirt paths, trails... The city has sunk. The world has been turned on its head.” Similarly, Chaim Grade’s 1945 poetry collections Pylestim (Refugees) and Dayres (Generations), and his 1947 Farrvokscne vogn (Overgrown Paths) also deal with themes similar to those used by Schoenberg in the cantata: hiding underground, endless role calls, disturbed sleep, hunger, the frailty of the old, fractured communities, and so on.

**Staging Trauma**

The title A Survivor from Warsaw is both apt and misleading: on the one hand, the narrator shares a traumatic memory that involves him being beaten savagely, narrowly escaping death, and hearing his fellow-sufferers erupt into song; on the other hand, this memory is not a historiographically reliable survivor testimony, because its location and timeframe are unclear. The initially specified Warsaw is revealed as a symbolic rather than a geographical space by the sergeant’s reference to a gas chamber, which did not exist in Warsaw or the Warsaw ghetto; nor were there daily roll calls, as described in the libretto. With its move beyond historically and locationally specific representation, the text encourages a more general and symbolic engagement with the legacies of the Holocaust, an engagement that, in turn, is informed by modernist cultural traditions.

The figure of the libretto’s narrator emerges as a modern creature: aware of his own limitations but trying to overcome them through expression; juxtaposing different perspectives, locations, and time frames, thus testifying to the existential disorientation of the modern
subject; desiring—but failing—to achieve clarity through rationality, while grappling instead with his unconscious; oscillating between foregrounding his subjectivity and seeking communion in a group. Right from the beginning, the narrator’s unreliability is signposted: “I cannot remember everything. I must have been unconscious most of the time.”21 The only memory he seems to have retained is that of the recitation of the Shema Yisroel: “the grandiose moment when they all started to sing... the old prayer.” In these opening sentences, the libretto narrows down the scope of the narrator’s recollection until it is delimited to the crucial moment of the sung prayer. And yet, the narrator protests too much: once he starts to unfold the events that led to the incantation, we are faced with a linear, chronological story, albeit one that provides a framework for exploring complexities surrounding traumatic memory, individuality, and community.

The narrator describes the day as starting like any other: “Reveille when it still was dark. Get out! Whether you slept or whether worries kept you awake the whole night.” The introduction of sleep and its disturbance subtly connects with the opening lines, in that sleep, like unconsciousness, brings with it loss of control, helplessness, forgetting, and separation from others.22 The positive functions of sleep—providing necessary rest for body and soul—are relativized by the more sinister associations pertaining to unconsciousness. Both the narrator’s unconsciousness and the enforced pre-dawn reveille of the exhausted fit into this paradigm of the unnatural nature of the narrated concentrationary world. The perspective shifts from general reflections (daily routine, sleep or lack of it) and constant anxieties (the fate of absent loved ones) to more pressing worries brought about by the present situation of the roll call, conducted by a feared sergeant. The endeavors of the terrified to comply are futile, as barked orders and threats of violence turn into a vicious attack.

In the libretto, group identities are created, starting with a community built on worries and physical suffering, ending with them emerging in a twofold community of the dead on the one hand, and of surviving believers on the other. Before the abuse commences, the Jews are united in their fear; their responses to the Nazi threat atomize them into separate groups, which, however, are then indiscriminately subject to violence when the Nazis strike “everybody: young or old, quiet or nervous, guilty or innocent.” The Jews are now united in their pain, voiced non-verbally: “it was painful to hear them groaning and moaning.” This phrase shifts the sensation of pain from its source (the bodies of the sufferers) to auditory perception. The impersonal construction used here provides a transition to the narrator’s first-person voice, which emerges for the first time in the actual story: “I heard it though I had been hit very hard.” It is therefore at the moment of great pain that the suffering subject emerges linguistically, only to integrate himself expressly into the group of those felled by the Nazis’ clubs. The narrator undergoes a near-death experience before regaining consciousness: “I lay aside—half-conscious. It had become very still—fear and pain.” The sensations of fear and pain here echo the emotions experienced during the previous scene. As a survivor among the dead, the narrator is again isolated from the other Jews, and it is this isolation that turns him into a witness of the next events. This act of witnessing is once more channeled through the auditory: “Then I heard the sergeant shouting: ‘Abzählen!’” (Count off!).

The roll call commences again, interrupted by the sergeant demanding a faster pace. Consequently, the speed picks up, becomes frenzied, and the counting-off turns into song: “They began again; first slowly: one, two, three, four, became faster and faster, so fast that it finally sounded like a stampede of wild horses, and all of a sudden, in the middle of it, they began singing the Shema Yisroel.” What started as a monotone, bureaucratic exercise, endowing the individual victim with a specific (albeit merely numerical) identity of his own for the last time before annihilation, then, seems to get out of hand by virtue of the Jews’ ever-faster counting-off. The metaphor of the “stampede of wild horses” suggests powerful, free, fast movement, but driven by panic and without orientation: neither controlled nor in control. What provides poise and dignity to the victims, as well as a sense of community, is their act of singing, giving them agency and voice.

Only the core section of the Shema Yisroel (Deuteronomy 6:4–7) has been included in the cantata (two other passages, Deuteronomy 11:13–21 and Numbers 15:37–41, are also often included as part of the Shema). As the declaration of Jewish faith, the Shema represents one of the most important prayers in the Jewish religion, recited twice daily by observant Jews. The words are sung in Hebrew. Ironically, as Barbara Barry has observed, the “rediscovery of identity is a doomed vision because it takes place only moments before they (the singers) are annihilated in the gas chambers, so the affirmation of identity is also, tragically, a lamentation of loss.”23 The choice of the Shema Yisroel befits this ambiguity, as it is the prayer Jews pray when they are about to die. In the scholarship, this final scene of the cantata has been interpreted as an instance of Jewish resistance to Nazi oppression (Argentino, for example, speaks of bravery, martyrdom, and heroism24): the singing Jews defy Nazi orders while at the same time demonstrating unity in faith, focusing on the Lord as their master, not the Nazis.

Language and Community

In Schoenberg’s cantata, the two adversary groups (Nazis and Jews) are not only established through the plot’s historical resonances (perpetrators and victims) but also through linguistic means. The most obvious of these is the use of different languages and their allocation to different speech
types; the narrator tells the story in English (recitative), the narrated figure of the Feldwebel is quoted in German (direct speech), the Hebrew prayer is the chorus's part (song). It would be easy to say that German is used here as the perpetrator language, but this description, while obviously correct, does not go far enough. The point is that the meaning of German is generated in its relation to the other languages of the piece, which form a network of languages.

This is remarkable, since Schoenberg lived in the United States when he wrote the cantata, and, whilst he may not have had an exclusively American, largely monolingual audience in mind, the effect of linguistic non-comprehension deserves consideration. As an émigré who had to leave a German-speaking environment when he was already well advanced in years, Schoenberg would not have been oblivious to language barriers. Therefore, these barriers need to be regarded as intentional: not erected in order to primarily confuse the audience but to evoke the Nazi camps' multilingualism, which constituted a source of danger. Primo Levi pointed out how vital a basic command of German was for prisoners: "knowing or not knowing German was a watershed," he wrote, because a command of German provided its speaker with a chance of being seen and communicated to as a human being, at least to some extent, linguistically. By contrast, the ignorant, in the eyes of the Nazis, ceased to be human, and "as with cows and mules, there was no substantial difference between a scream and a punch," as the "beast" would not have understood speech anyway; apparently, in Mauthausen, the truncheon was referred to as the "Dolmetscher" (translator, interpreter). This mindset obviously also characterizes the Feldwebel and his brutes, who beat the Jews with their rifle butts when their commands are not immediately met. Since the Feldwebel's orders are made in German, a connection is made between the German language and violence, conjuring words and actions. It is worth noting here that German makes up less than ten percent of the libretto text. And yet, German is key to the narrated incident, because it is the German commands that bring about the violence and hence structure the episode. Therefore, German is constituted as doubled, both as a marginalized language (submerged in the flow of English) and as the central language of instigation (initiating violence through barked commands).

The sergeant's German sentences consist, to a large extent, of oneword injunctions: we hear his "Achtung! Stillgestanden!" at the beginning of the drill, hear him shouting "Abzählen!" after the attack, leading to a repeated "Achtung!" followed by a staccato string of "Rascher! Nochmal von vorn anfangen! In einer Minute will ich wissen wieviele ich zur Gaskammer abliefern! Abzählen!" (Quicker! Start again from the front! In a minute I want to know how many I'm sending to the gas chamber. Count off!) This concentration of commands obviously illustrates the Feldwebel's authority over the Jews and the other soldiers; Föllmi goes so far as to say that the very fact that the Feldwebel is quoted verbatim in German, whilst the soldier's words "They are all dead" are rendered in English, marks the latter figure out as a subordinate. But the main point here is that the soldier's English words summarize a key point of the narrator's memory for the audience. English as the language of narration, which serves as the language in which Jewish suffering and commemoration are depicted, is eminently suitable for voicing information about the deaths inflicted.

What is also important about the use of German is that Schoenberg used a mix of Hochdeutsch and vernacular forms that invoke a Prussian dialect. In the autograph fair copy of the score of 1947, we read "stillgesttan" and "jutt"; the typed text of the libretto that precedes this version of the score emphasizes the vernacular elements even more, as the Feldwebel here shouts "Stilljesstann" and threatens to use his "Yewer-Kolben." For the 1949 published score, these vernacular forms were taken out and replaced with standard German, whereas the 1979 score re-introduces the vernacular letters J and Y throughout. Whilst vernacular forms in general tend to localize the speaker and can suggest Gemütlichkeit, homelessness, or an informal communication context, evoking Prussia linguistically in a military setting conjures up authoritarianism, unquestioning obedience, nationalism, and imperialist politics. Schoenberg was certainly aware of this fact, as his handwritten note in the 1947 score shows, where—underneath the words "Achtung! Stillgestan!"—he stipulates that the voice should be "imitating the manner of speaking and the shrill, breaking voice of the Feldwebel sergeant," thus linking the Prussian vernacular with aggressive, military authoritarianism. For Levi, key Nazi practices were built on Prussian legacies insofar as the cruelty of the roll call, that "very emblem of the Lager," "fits into the system, the tradition of the drill . . ., the ferocious military practice which was a Prussian inheritance." The Prussian dialect therefore potentially suggests a historical dimension to Nazi Germany: a continuity of evil.

The aggressive Feldwebelton (military—or literally sergeant's—tone) has yet another function, which unfolds only in relation to the English narrative. As English is the main language, German stands out as alien, especially since it is not translated. All of the German lines are rendered in direct speech, and the only one speaking German is the sergeant. This marks him out as the central Other. The direct speech here functions as a distancing device for the narrator, who is relieved of the necessity to mediate the officer's commands using his own words, which would—linguistically speaking—have implied an appropriation on the narrator's part of the perpetrator's vantage point. The only other individual who speaks directly (apart from the narrator, of course) is the soldier who pronounces all the Jews dead—again, distance is signaled. However, the direct speech at the same time dramatizes words and scenes: the soldier's proclamation
marks a climax that leads to the surviving Jews singing the *Shema Tisroel*, the sergeant’s words underline the fact that he was present to the actions of the narrative, whereas the narrator looks back in time.

At first sight, English seems to be reserved for the narrator’s story and reflections, marking English out as the language of the victims here. However, a closer look reveals echoes of the German in the English, for example when the words “Get out!” are used by the narrator not once but twice, or when he declares: “In vain! Much too much noise, much too much commotion! And not fast enough!” This negative verdict on the Jews’ efforts foreshadows the Nazis’ judgment, feared and expected. The short, abrupt sentences and exclamation marks in this section signal the narrator’s anxiety, as does the sudden shift into the present tense, which, Camille Crittenden claims, is used “for the sense of immediate action.”31 However, the present tense is soon abandoned after the description of the commotion preceding the attack, despite the fact that much more “immediate action” follows. What the present tense therefore rather constitutes is a passage written in interior monologue, which draws the audience into the thoughts of the narrator, encouraging identification.

The libretto blends several different temporal layers;32 this is partly reflected in the tenses chosen. The remembered scene, from daybreak to the prayer, is represented in the past tense, the tense conventionally employed in English for depicting events from the past. The narrated scene gains its sense of immediacy from the Nazi soldiers’ direct speech, which is rendered in the present so that the text seems to shift from present to past tense. However, all direct speech is embedded in the narrative’s preterit frame. By contrast, the opening lines, whilst not exclusively written in the present tense, are nevertheless anchored in the present of remembering, which is accentuated by the repetition of the verb “remember,” and the noun “recollection.” The difference between these two English words is important, as a memory can come unbidden and may not necessarily be shared, whereas a recollection usually implies a more active searching of the past for a process or event that is then communicated. In the libretto, the narrator’s statement that he had “no recollection” of his time in the Warsaw underground implicitly contrasts with the dominant memory of the narrated atrocity in the camp: the traumatic memory of savagery overshadows, even obliterates, the narrator’s more quotidian memories, even if those memories are of prolonged periods spent avoiding and resisting persecution.

Why mention a period of time that has been forgotten and forms no part of the narrated story to unfold? The answer to this question lies in the image used: the “sewers” of Warsaw.33 Whilst the sewage system was certainly used by the Warsaw resistance, the term also conjures up associations with filth, waste, stench, in short: a nasty flipside of modern urban civilization not intended for, even hostile to, human habitation. And of course sewers are underground, their location resonating with the need of the resistance to hide. The only other image of the libretto is that of the “stampede” of wild horses, which contrasts sharply with that of the sewers. And yet, both expressions—“sewers” and “stampede”—serve to describe the Jews’ collective acts of resistance, first when in hiding, then when captured and doomed; the alliteration emphasizes the connection between these two images. That this otherwise rather sober text, in which scarcely an adjective is used, should reserve these two powerful images for acts of the persecuted Jewish community underlines the importance attributed to these acts while at the same time betraying the narrator’s strong emotional involvement in them.

The fact that the Jews, through the act of singing the *Shema Tisroel*, remember their “long forgotten creed” and emerge as a powerful group as a result, implicitly points to the power of remembrance, which can give agency and collective identity to the remembrance subjects. Perhaps it could be argued that the time in the underground, the details of which remain, for the time being, forgotten and thus excluded in this narrative, might one day emerge, when somebody else does remember and share, like the narrator in the libretto: remembering and commemorating atrocity, whilst requiring an individual’s voice, is grounded in community, which in turn is strengthened by its individuals.

That the act of remembering and communicating is undertaken in English has a resonance beyond the late 1940s when Schoenberg’s cantata was conceived. It points to English as the language that was to gain in significance after the end of the war, especially for engagements with the Holocaust. Alan Rosen has pointed to the marginal role occupied by English in relation to the Holocaust at the time of its occurrence, which did not happen in English-speaking countries, nor was the language important for central and Eastern Europe at the time.34 Yet English, albeit rare among primary sources, “did early on play a significant role in secondary ones,” especially in early comprehensive histories of the Holocaust.35 Schoenberg’s libretto can therefore be seen to belong to a group of artistic responses to the Holocaust that form what has since become an extensive Anglophone tradition of writing about the Holocaust. Today, the English language assumes center-stage position when it comes to engagement with the Holocaust, primarily at the expense of Eastern European languages (most notably Polish and Yiddish), but also in comparison to Hebrew as a minority language.

The inclusion of the Hebrew prayer *Shema Tisroel* at the end of the cantata raises interesting questions not just about the relationship between languages in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, but also about contested versions of Judaism, and differing group affiliations. Modern (“standard”) Hebrew, that version of the language developed by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda in the late nineteenth century, is based largely on so-called
Sephardic Hebrew pronunciation, whereas the majority of European Jews would have used so-called Ashkenazi pronunciation in their liturgy. It is worth noting, then, that there is a strong trace of Ashkenazi cultural practices in the use of that group’s distinct pronunciation of Hebrew for liturgical purposes, for instance in the Shema Tisroel. One of the key markers of Ashkenazi pronunciation is a distinct predilection for the so-called darker vowels (u) and (oy) instead of Israeli Hebrew (o) and (ay): hence Shema Tisroel as opposed to modern Hebrew Sh’ma Yisra’el (the absence of the glottal stop—marked with an apostrophe—is also a key feature of this liturgical dialect).66 That Schoenberg and Rabbi Sonderling should have chosen this liturgical dialect is understandable: the greater part of the Jewish community in Los Angeles was Ashkenazi in origin, and the Ashkenazi Jews carried the overwhelming burden of the Holocaust. Hence, this pronunciation tradition would have been profoundly resonant with the Los Angeles audience; it would also have been familiar to Schoenberg from his childhood. Indeed, in the context of Schoenberg and Sonderling’s attempts to elicit sympathy and financial support for the plight of European Jewry in the 1938 setting of the Kol Nidre, the Ashkenazi articulation of the Hebrew prayer in Survivor is clearly more than a coincidence.

One language conspicuously absent in the cantata is that key language of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, and a significant language of the camp and ghetto systems, Yiddish.67 It would most likely also have been the language of the narrator, as a Jew incarcerated in the (admittedly fictitious) Warsaw concentration camp.68 In the early phase of the cantata’s gestation, Chochem seems to have tacitly suggested that Schoenberg might set Hirsh Glik’s (originally Yiddish-language) Partisan song “Zog nit keyn mol.”69 It is unclear from her letter to the composer dated April 2, 1947 whether she expected Schoenberg to set the original Yiddish or the English translation provided by Aaron Kramer.70 Yiddish, already sidelined here, functioning as a silenced subaltern, is marked from the outset by a specific and consistent marginalization (even though the song in question was actually sung in Yiddish, not in Hebrew as Chochem seems to suggest). Indeed, German attitudes towards Yiddish, especially among the educated elite, and among the German-speaking Jewish elite to which Schoenberg undoubtedly belonged, were quite negative, and the language was routinely dismissed variously as a kind of broken German, a Jargon, or as a rootless Mauscheln (Yiddish babbling).71 Schoenberg likely shared the dismissive attitude to Yiddish, common among assimilated German-speaking Vestejen (Western Jews) of Central Europe.

Conclusion

Using three languages in a piece little longer than six minutes might well seem, at first sight, somewhat extravagant. However, the juxtaposition of the three languages speaks to a need, not uncommon in early responses to the Holocaust, to restage the dramatic linguistic hybridity of the concentrationary universe and to mark the changes in the linguistic map of the post-Holocaust world. This urge to restage that world and its aftermath is particularly evident in Schoenberg’s use of German: the German-speaking composer limits his German to the mimicry of Nazi commands, harsh words that stand out all the more sharply for having been embedded in an English narrative unfolded by a survivor of unknown national background. His choice of English points, perhaps, to the impossibility of speaking about the Holocaust in whatever his native tongue might have been: Polish, perhaps, as the reference to the Warsaw sewers suggests; Yiddish, as the lingua franca of vast swathes of East European Jews prior to their speakers’ extinction; German, even, the language once thought to have been that of the “Dichter und Denker,” now discredited as that of the “Richter und Henker,” as Karl Kraus famously put it.72

Whilst Hebrew is confirmed as the language of Jewish religious ritual, English emerges here as the medium of remembrance and commemoration, but would also have been perceived, by Jews and non-Jews alike, as the new lingua franca of retribution and formal justice: the so-called “Subsequent” Nuremberg Trials had been in session since December 9, 1946 and, indeed, while Schoenberg was writing Survivor, the highly publicized “Judges’ Trial” had been underway for some five months.73 As the language of the US military authorities, then, especially during the second set of Nuremberg Trials, English was the language of the victors and the language of some notion (however compromised) of legal redress.74

That the narrator is the only primary witness, turning the audience into secondary witnesses, in a language not his own, poignantly illustrates the silent absence of those Jewish victims who did not survive (marked here, of course, by the absence, also, of Yiddish in the language matrix of the cantata). This further accentuates the loneliness of the narrator, whose former communities have vanished, and whose future affiliations are as of yet unclear. In traumatized communities after the Holocaust such as his, re-attachments to the old, pre-traumatic collective are blocked by trauma, thereby shaping the affective responses to the post-traumatic community. These blocked attachments re-emerge only as disassociated fragments and remnants of the community (like fetishized photographs, letters, diaries, half-remembered snatches of dialogue, and so on), promising, but always failing, to deliver a return to the plenitude of the originary collective. The fact that the narrator’s subject position, like that of the composer’s, is translated, underlines all the more his fragile, attenuated line to the community of the Shema.

The lines of the Hebrew prayer sung by the chorus at the end of the cantata serve both as a promise of attachment to the Law of the one true God and also as a traumatic eruption of the lost community into
the narrator’s consciousness, like a haunting. This doubled quality of the
archaic materials of the Shema stages the structural incommensurability
of thinking individual and collective together. The narrator in Survivor
is looking for a modality of productive cultural work, which is invariably
archaic: communities cohere around materials that have long since
exhausted their logic, but which nonetheless remain as a kernel that per-
sists, forming community’s ground, its internal Other. The “forgotten
creed,” then, is just such an Other, erupting onto the scene like a terrible
revelation: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, The Lord is One.” But it
is an archaic core that no longer grounds a community, and that can only
haunt the narrator as unattainable.

Notes

1 See Joe R. Argentino, “Tripartite Structures in Schoenberg’s A Survivor from
2 See Schoenberg’s letter to Donald Gray, February 7, 1948, held at the Arnold
Schoenberg Center, Satellite Collection, L10, r.27, fr.261, 263.
Press, 1990), 25; David Schiller, Bloch, Schoenberg and Bernstein: Antimilitarizing
Jewish Music (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003); Klara Moritz, Jewish Identities:
Nationalism, Racism, and Utopianism in Twentieth-Century Music (Berkeley and
5 Moshe Lazar, “Arnold Schoenberg, and His Doubles, A Psychodramatic Jour-
ney to His Roots,” Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute 17, nos. 1–2 (1994):
8–150; Herbert Lindenberger, “Arnold Schoenberg’s ‘Der Biblische Weg’ and
‘Moses und Aron’: On the Transactions of Aesthetics and Politics,” Modern Judi-
6 Lazar, “Arnold Schoenberg and His Doubles,” 143.
7 See Naomi André, “Returning to a Homeland: Religion and Political Context
in Schoenberg’s Dreimal Tausend Jahre,” in Political and Religious Ideas in the
Works of Arnold Schoenberg, ed. Russell Berman and Charlotte Cross (New York:
8 Letter dated April 19, 1924, quoted in Nuria Schoenberg-Nono, Arnold Schön-
berg, 1874–1951: Leben, Gedichte, in Begegnungen (Klagenfurt: Ritter Klagenfurt,
1992), 204.
9 See in particular Argentino, “Tripartite Structures,” par 1.
10 The song is Hirsh Glik’s famous “Zog nit keynol az du gest demlet veneg”
(Never say you are on the final path). See Chochem’s letter to Schoenberg, dated
April 2, 1947, in which she enclosed a translation by Aaron Kramer of Glik’s
song: Arnold Schoenberg Center, Satellite Collection, L10, r.24, fr.440–41. For
the Yiddish original, see Shmerke Kaczerginski, Dos gezang fun vilner geto

11 For further details, see Michael Strasser, “A Survivor from Warsaw as Personal
Barry, “Chronicles and Witnesses: A Survivor from Warsaw through Adorno’s
Broken Mirror,” International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music 41,
12 See Joy H. Calico, “Schoenberg’s Symbolic Remigration: A Survivor from
17–43, here 22.
13 See Strasser, “A Survivor from Warsaw,” 56, and Calico, “Schoenberg’s Sym-

dolic Remigration,” 25, note 17.
15 For a useful overview, and a comprehensive catalogue of Holocaust-themed
compositions, see Ben Arnold, “Art Music and the Holocaust,” Holocaust and
16 Ira Konigsberg, “Our Children and the Limits of Cinema: Early Jewish
Responses to the Holocaust,” Film Quarterly 52, no. 1 (Autumn 1998): 7–19,
here 14.
17 For more on this film as a key statement in the emergence of an early Holo-
cast aesthetic, see Jiří Cieslar, “Daleká cesta (Distant Journey),” in The Cinema
18 “Di reyn, kanan, zey zehn farshdyen / Geglkhn tsu umveg, shliakhn un
shreglekhe . . . / Di shnot iz farzunik. Di vetl—farkapoyet,” Avrom Sutzkever,
Gheylunot (Mexico City: Yidishe shul in Mekisk, 1952), 13 and 18. Translation by
Ian Biddle.
19 Chaim Grade, Pletzlim (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun poishes yidn
in Argentine, 1947); Dayres (New York: Izkuf farlag, 1945); Farvoksene vogn (Paris:
Yidisher folks-farband in Frankraykh, 1947). For example, in Emanuel Ringel-
blum’s Warsaw ghetto archive, known as Oyneg Shabes, for example, similar
references abound in numerous poems, short stories, and diaries. See Petetz
Opachinski’s “Herbstiger Ownt” (Autumn Evening) and Khaim Semiatrski’s
“Varsho” (Warsaw); both unpublished, available at Poetry in Hell, accessed Sep-
20 Föllmi speaks of a “Vernebelung” (obfuscation) with regard to both time and
location of the action. Beat A. Föllmi, “‘I Cannot Remember Ev’rything.’ Eine
narratologische Analyse von Arnold Schönbergs Kantate ‘A Survivor from War-
21 Unless otherwise stated, quotations from the libretto follow the autograph
fair copy, which is available electronically from the Arnold Schoenberg Center
at http://www.schoenberg.at/compositions/allewerke.php (accessed September 9,
2014).
22 There is a long tradition in art of exploring the link between death and sleep.
Greek mythology sees sleep (Hypnos) as a brother of death (Thanatos). See
Christiane Sourvinou Inwood, “Reading” Greek Death: To the End of the Classical

In his correspondence, Schoenberg repeatedly refers to the limitations of his command of English and to issues to do with translation. See, for example, letters held by the Arnold Schoenberg Center to: Mr. Herbert Askwith, November 28, 1933, Satellite Collection, L10, r.1, fr.62; Mr. Willis Wagner, October 14, 1942, Satellite Collection, L10, r.17, fr.893; Miss Dika Newlin, January 25, 1949, Satellite Collection, L10, r.2, fr.164.


Föllmi, “‘I Cannot Remember Ev’rything,’” 25.

«Rifle butt.” For a facsimile of this score, see http://www.schoenberg.at/ (accessed September 12, 2013).

Strikethrough in the original.


Föllmi, “‘I Cannot Remember Ev’rything,’” 33.

Barbara Barry claims that the “action is initially located in the sewers of Warsaw” (253), but this is not the case: the narrator simply mentions his time in Warsaw. It is also worth noting that Warsaw had, even in Schoenberg’s days, already acquired the status of a symbol of Jewish resistance. Sven-Erik Rose refers to the Warsaw ghetto as a lieu de mémoire: “the memory of the Warsaw Ghetto as a universal symbol tends to unify and consolidate a wide spectrum of the Jewish community.”


Rosen, Sounds of Defiance, 10.


Yiddish was certainly the majority language of Ringelblum’s Oyneg Shabes archive.

See Chochem’s letter to Schoenberg, dated April 2, 1947 (see note 10). In the same letter, Chochem mentions the song “I believe the Messiah will come” (“ani ma’amín”), which might have been the kernel of the idea for Schoenberg’s setting the Shema Tsroel.

Ibid., recto.

Ibid., recto.