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“Everything’s a Mess Except Music”: Leonard Bernstein, Holocaust Survivors, and Music Making in Postwar Germany

Abby Anderton, Baruch College, City University of New York

“Everything’s a mess except music,” Leonard Bernstein wrote in 1948 during a visit to the rubble of postwar Germany.¹ In a vivid series of letters home, the twenty-nine-year-old described his three concerts in Bavaria: one with the Munich Philharmonic and two with the Representative Orchestra, an ensemble composed of Eastern-European Holocaust survivors. As the only American musician invited to conduct a German orchestra and Jewish survivor musicians, Bernstein proved to be a rare link between these groups separated by the recent genocide. While the survivor orchestra was newly formed in May 1945 and performed mainly for other refugees, the Munich Philharmonic was founded in 1893 and catered to the city’s classical music elite. Although the ensembles had radically different memberships, repertoires, and histories, it was Bernstein’s visit which unexpectedly brought them together.

In May 1948, Munich was still largely destroyed and occupied by the American Military Government. In the words Virgil Thompson, then a correspondent for *The Herald Tribune*, the metropolis was “a complete wreck, like a construction in pink sugar that has been rained on.”² Yet music-making in the city had not ceased, even in the final days of the Third Reich. In the ruined German postwar landscape, music was one of the few things that could freely traverse borders, and with the country split into Allied zones and sectors, divided by present and former political affiliations, music, too, was not free from politics. The occupiers took control of all aspects of governance. Even cultural matters were subject to supervision by a military organization called the Information Control Division (ICD), which employed American cultural officers to assist German civilians in the reconstitution of ensembles. Each musical group was required to have a military-issued license to perform, and every musician needed to obtain a work permit by filling out a series of lengthy denazification questionnaires. Bernstein recalled one American officer musing that the denazification process was simply one of “re-nazification” as the occupiers’ harsh policies merely reinforced Nazi stereotypes of Americans as culture-lacking brutes.³

In contrast to the American denazification process, occupier-supported cultural efforts in Displaced Persons (DP) camps had a decidedly different objective. The Allies were initially baffled about how to handle the DP population they inherited from the ruins of the Third Reich. The exultation of liberation was replaced by the reality that most of Europe’s DPs did not have a home to which to return, and Germany was often the last place the survivors wanted to be. Yet across Germany, Austria, Italy, these centers soon became home to the most ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse populations anywhere in Europe. The American Zone was home to the largest population of Jewish refugees, numbering 140,000 by 1946, and the fifteen major camps were located in the barracks of repurposed German military sites or even former concentration camps.⁴

Bernstein’s Visit

It was only at the behest of Hungarian-born conductor Georg Solti that Bernstein came to Munich in the first place. The Americans appointed Solti musical director of the Munich Staatsoper in 1946, and from the Allies’ perspective, Solti was an incredible re-education success story. It had proven difficult for the Americans to locate a competent conductor for the ensemble who was not politically compromised. Solti

“Everything’s a Mess Except Music” (cont.)

was not only an outstanding musician, he was one of the few Jewish conductors willing to work in postwar Germany.⁵

In May 1948, Solti invited Bernstein to conduct the Munich Philharmonic for two concerts, and he readily agreed. He planned to stop in Germany while on his way to a series of appearances in Palestine, where he had recently been appointed Chief Conductor of the Palestine Symphony Orchestra. In addition to playing with the Munich Philharmonic, Bernstein also wanted to give a concert for Jewish DPs, writing his personal assistant, Helen Coates, “I may have to hire the orchestra myself, but it’s worth it.”⁶ Fortunately, the logistics of Bernstein’s visit, including ground transportation, accommodations, and scheduling were left to music officer Carlos Moseley, who Bernstein had already met in 1947 at Tanglewood. As a pianist and arts administrator, he was uniquely gifted to act as the liaison between the American military, German and Jewish musicians, and the visiting Bernstein. His first hurdle was to find accommodations for the conductor; not an easy task given the scale of the city’s destruction. Unable to find a suitable hotel, Moseley rented the home of an actor friend, whom he had to pay to leave for the week, in Geiseltasteig which Bernstein dubbed “the Bavarian Hollywood.”⁷

From the moment Bernstein arrived in Munich, however, things did not exactly go according to plan. After getting off his train “in that shell-shocked Bahnhof,” as he called the station, music officer Carlos Moseley greeted him with the news that the Philharmonic was on strike over their food rations.⁸ An oboist in the orchestra had fainted with hunger, and now the musicians were refusing to appear with Bernstein unless their demands were met, namely, to receive better rations. By paying the ensemble a bribe of 115 cigarettes, Moseley eventually got the orchestra to agree to one concert with Bernstein, though not two as originally scheduled.⁹

Then there were the difficulties of transportation in and around the ruined city. When Bernstein learned the musicians were having difficulty reaching the venue, he managed to convince his contacts at the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) to help. The JDC, a relief agency for Jewish survivors, sent their trucks to ferry German musicians to and from rehearsals, an almost unheard of cooperative effort.¹⁰ And beyond the issues of rations and transport, Bernstein was worried the orchestra would be reluctant to work with him. Although he expected “great hostility,” because he was a young, Jewish-American conductor, he soon won the Philharmonic over. After a brief series of rehearsals which he conducted in German, “They seem to love me, and play with great Lust,” he wrote excitedly to Koussevitzky.¹¹

German civilians, American soldiers, and Jewish refugees attended Bernstein’s concert the following day on May 9, 1948; the audience make-up was a testament to Bernstein’s diplomacy and his music-making. Painter Samuel Bak, then a teenaged survivor living in Landsberg DP camp, was thrilled to report, “Now the Germans are getting orders from a Jew! Isn’t it wonderful?” as he dubbed the concert, “a sort of victory.”¹² After the performance, the audience followed Bernstein outside the theater and down Prinzregentenstrasse still cheering. Well aware of what was at stake, Bernstein was elated, writing home that “I had three obstacles to overcome—youth, Americanism & Jewishness,” and that the performance “means so much . . . since music is the German’s last stand in their ‘master-race’ claim, and for the first time it’s been exploded in Munich.”¹³ To his sister, Shirley, he confided he was “Happy as hell...The concert Sunday in Munich was absolutely the End...Shrieking Germans – What a delight!,” concluding, “I really sold America to those Germans—and I’m a proud guy.”¹⁴ According to the *New York Times*, the Philharmonic was particularly pleased that Bernstein shared the applause with them in what amounted to a dozen curtain calls.¹⁵

Jewish Survivor Concerts

While the press was focused on his appearance with the Munich Philharmonic, Bernstein ultimately found his performances with Jewish survivors to be the pinnacle of his visit to Germany. When JDC Officer Lewis Gaber organized the trucks to transport the Munich Philharmonic musicians, he asked Bernstein

“Everything’s a Mess Except Music” (cont.)

if he would also consider appearing with a Jewish DP orchestra.¹⁶ The ensemble of Eastern-European Holocaust survivors called themselves the Representative Orchestra of the Surviving Remnant (*She'erit Hapletah*), a phrase from the book of Ezra which postwar survivor communities adopted to describe themselves.¹⁷ The ensemble formed in May 1945 as its members convalesced at St. Ottilien hospital, and began to tour the displaced persons camps in the Western zones of occupied Germany. The Representative Orchestra played for other survivors, often wearing recreations of their concentration camp uniform with their former prisoner numbers sewn on the front. While using set pieces like barbed-wire fences and oversized stars of David, the ensemble opened most of their concerts with Carl Maria von Weber’s Overture from *Der Freischütz*, and the programs consisted of Ghetto and Camp songs, and arrangements of Verdi and Puccini arias.

On May 10, Bernstein and the ensemble briefly rehearsed together before performing two concerts at Feldafing (1:00 p.m.) and Landsberg (8:00 p.m.) Displaced Persons Camps. The program opened with



Leonard Bernstein rehearsing with the Representative Orchestra, 10 May 1948

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the Overture from *Der Freischütz*. Bernstein accompanied violinist Chaim Arbeitman, a teenaged Polish survivor, who played a Tartini Sonata. Vocalist Henny Durmashkin sang “Jerusalem” and “Kalaniyot,” which Bernstein requested she sing in Hebrew instead of Yiddish.¹⁸ And Bernstein could not resist closing the concert with a solo piano version of Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. The audience consisted of Jewish refugees, Munich Philharmonic musicians, and American aid workers, a nearly unheard-of audience constellation. German civilian visitors were not typically welcome at DP cultural events given their scarce resources and understandable distrust of the German populace. Yet Bernstein believed the attendance of the German musicians “was a kind of expiation . . . like Yom Kippur.”¹⁹

After witnessing an incredible outpouring of emotions, one JDC relief worker recalled how the audiences ran up to Bernstein and kissed him, sobbed with him, and how the conductor stayed an extra hour talking to everyone in Yiddish.²⁰ Carlos Moseley, who was present at both Bernstein’s camp

“Everything’s a Mess Except Music” (cont.)

performances, recalled that it was “one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life. ...so moving and terrible in its tragedy that I had to hang on for dear life to keep from making an ass of myself.”²¹ Bernstein seemed to agree, writing his sister the following day, “What an experience! I really can’t go into it now, but it’s heartrending. Glory on glory was piled on me, and of course I played *Rhapsody in Blue*. It all helped the morale, but it doesn’t help them get out of those rotten camps to Palestine. It’s a mess. Everything’s a mess except music.”²²

After Bernstein’s visit, the Americans imported some of his own compositions and recordings for German musicians. In July 1948, a recording of his Sonata for Clarinet and Piano was featured in a lecture at the *Amerika Haus* in Nuremberg. The Military Government also purchased recordings of the “Jeremiah” Symphony, *Fancy Free Suite*, and three of his *Seven Anniversaries* (1943) for loan to civilians.²³ Officers at the JDC asked Bernstein if he might be able to help arrange for scholarships to be awarded to DPs who were exceptional musicians. He agreed, and arranged for violinist Chaim Arbeitman (he later changed his name to David Arben) to study at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. Arben would go on to become Associate Concert Master of the Philadelphia Orchestra.²⁴

In the end, Bernstein’s visit was remarkable more for what happened offstage than on, as his concerts were a rare space of interaction between survivors and civilians on DP camp grounds. At the close of the Feldafing concert, the JDC awarded Bernstein a Citation of Meritorious Service in thanks “for his contribution to the welfare of the Jewish displaced persons.”²⁵ As a final gesture of gratitude, the orchestra presented Bernstein with an authentic concentration camp uniform. Bernstein sent the uniform home by airmail, instructing Coates to watch out for “a package containing a real concentration camp costume they gave me. Be particularly careful of it—it’s a great possession.”²⁶ The orchestra had given Bernstein a piece of their historical experience, one which he would never forget.

Notes

1. Letter from Leonard Bernstein to Shirley Bernstein, 11 May 1948, *Performing Arts Encyclopedia: The Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/lbcorr.00311.0/?sp=1>, accessed 1 November 2018.
2. Virgil Thomson, “German Culture and Army Rule,” *Herald Tribune*, Paris Edition, 22 September 1946.
3. Letter from Bernstein to Shirley Bernstein, 5 May 1948, *Performing Arts Encyclopedia: The Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/item/musbernstein.100068016/>, accessed 10 November 2018. See also Barry Seldes, *Leonard Bernstein: The Political Life of an American Musician* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 46.
4. Angelika Königseder and Juliane Wetzel, *Waiting for Hope: Jewish Displaced Persons in Post-World War II Germany*, trans. John A. Broadwin (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 216–50. For more on conditions in DP camps in the American Zone, see Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 130–82.
5. David Monod, “Internationalism, Regionalism, and National Culture: Music Control in Bavaria, 1945–1948,” *Central European History* 33/3 (2000): 339–68.
6. Letter from Leonard Bernstein to Helen Coates, 5 May 1948, *Performing Arts Encyclopedia: The Library of Congress*, <http://www.loc.gov/item/lbcorr.00567>, accessed 16 October 2018. See also Bret Werb, “‘Vu ahin zol ikh geyn?’: Music Culture of Jewish Displaced Persons,” in *Dislocated Memories: Jews, Music, and Postwar German Culture*, ed. Tina Frühauf and Lily Hirsch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 88.

“Everything’s a Mess Except Music” (cont.)

7. Letter from Bernstein to Serge Koussevitsky, 11 May 1948, *Performing Arts Encyclopedia: The Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/lbcorr.01273.0/?sp=1>, accessed 16 October 2018. (The LOC catalogue incorrectly dates the letter to 8 March 1948, probably because Bernstein decided to write “Mai” instead of “May” in the letter’s heading.) Moseley would later serve as President and Chairman of the New York Philharmonic. “Carlos Moseley, Philharmonic Manager, Dies at 98,” *New York Times*, 1 October 2012.
8. Letter from Leonard Bernstein to Helen Coates, 5 May 1948, *Performing Arts Encyclopedia: The Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/lbcorr.00564.0/?sp=1>, accessed 10 December 2018.
9. David Monod, *Settling Scores: German Music, Denazification, and the Americans, 1945–1953* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 205. See also Carlos Moseley, “Monthly Summaries for Period from 1 April 1948 through 30 April 1948,” April 27, 1948, RG 260, Box 20, Records of the Office of Military Government, Bavaria: Records of the Education and Cultural Relations Division, National Archive and Records Administration, hereafter abbreviated NARA II; Letter from S. Lewis Gaber to M. Jacob Joslow, June 24, 1948, Leo Schwarz Papers, Roll 34, Slides 818–19, Leo Schwarz Papers, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.
10. Interview with Theodore Feder, RG 250, 2 June 1995, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archive.
11. Bernstein Letter to Serge Koussevitsky, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/lbcorr.01273.0/?sp=1>, Accessed 1 November 2018. See also Michael Bernstein, “Remembering Leonard Bernstein: Music and Reconciliation in 1948 and Today,” 25 May 2018, <https://bernstein.classical.org/features/music-in-munich-1948-and-2018/>, Accessed 3 November 2018.
12. *Creating Harmony: The Displaced Persons’ Orchestra at St. Ottilien* [2007], directed by John Michalczyk, DVD. Étoile Productions, USA, 2007.
13. Letter from Leonard Bernstein to Helen Coates, 11 May 1948, *Performing Arts Encyclopedia: The Library of Congress*, <http://www.loc.gov/item/lbcorr.00567>, accessed 3 November 2018.
14. Leonard Bernstein to Shirley Bernstein, 11 May 1948, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/lbcorr.00311.0/?sp=1>.
15. “Bernstein Scores in Munich Concert,” *New York Times*, 11 May 1948.
16. Charles Malamouth to M. Jacob Joslow, 3 June 1948, JDC Archives, www.jdcarchives.org, accessed 7 November 2018.
17. The ensemble was known by various names between 1945 and 1949, including the St. Ottilien Orchestra (the hospital and DP camp where they began performing in early May 1945), as well as the Ex-Concentration Camp Orchestra.
18. “Henny G. Holocaust Testimony,” interview by Toby Blum-Dobkin and Michael Alpert, 1 August 1990. A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, Museum of Jewish Heritage, New York, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University, HVT 1774, 34:00.
19. Joan Peyser, *Bernstein: A Biography* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1988), 400.
20. Interview with Theodore Feder, RG 250, 2 June 1995, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archive.

“Everything’s a Mess Except Music” (cont.)

21. Quoted in Monod, *Settling Scores*, 206.

22. Letter from Leonard Bernstein to Shirley Bernstein, 11 May 1948, *Performing Arts Encyclopedia: The Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/lbcorr.00311.0/?sp=1>, accessed 1 November 2018.

23. Records of the Education and Cultural Relations Division. Bavaria: The Music Section, 1945–49, RG 260, Box 19, NARA II.

24. Letter from Charles Malamouth to M. Jacob Joslow, 3 June 1948, JDC Archives, www.archives.jdc.org, accessed 9 November 2018. See also Olivia B. Waxman, “The Surprising Story Behind this Picture of Leonard Bernstein Conducting an Orchestra of Holocaust Survivors,” *Time*, 27 August 2018.

25. “Report of Activities,” S. Lewis Gaber to Samuel L. Haber, May 1948, MK 488.35, Folder 417, *Zentrum für Antisemitismusforschung*, Berlin.

26. Letter from Leonard Bernstein to Helen Coates, 11 May 1948, *Performing Arts Encyclopedia: The Library of Congress*, <http://www.loc.gov/item/lbcorr.00567>, accessed 3 December 2018.