

RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS: HONORING SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE IN A TIME OF PANDEMICS

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Abstract: Telling the stories of people who risked their lives to save victims of the Holocaust through music is the focus of a project called *The Garden of the Righteous*. This project was introduced in a recent article in the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, called “Righteous Among the Nations: Music Without Borders” (Eisner et al., 2019). This piece provides an update on the evolution of the project during a time of pandemics.

Key words: Spiritual Resistance; Holocaust; Warsaw Ghetto; Righteous Among the Nations; Garden of the Righteous; Yiddish Language; Yiddish Music; Klezmer; *Médecins Sans Frontières*; Doctors without Borders; Yad Vashem

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THE STORY-TELLING PROJECT

Telling the stories of people who risked their lives to save victims of the Holocaust is the focus of a project called *The Garden of the Righteous*, presented by *Naye Strunes*, a Minneapolis-based Yiddish music ensemble founded by violinist, teacher, and composer Gitl Eisner. A recent article in the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership*

Studies, Righteous among the Nations: Music Without Borders (Eisner et al., 2019), explores the foundations of this project:

- The Jewish tradition of the *tzadikim nistarim* (hidden righteous persons), whose role in life is to justify the purpose of humankind in the eyes of God, and who stand between us and the judgment we collectively deserve when we act on base motivations (Philologos, 2008).
- The more than 24,000 people who have been memorialized as Righteous among the Nations in the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem.
- The compelling stories of the actions of these people, from many places in the world, including Imre Báthory in Hungary; Eivind Berggrav in Norway; Lambertus and Greitje de Groot in the Netherlands; Feng Shan Ho, Chinese Consul-General in Vienna; Mustafa and Zayneba Hardaga in Yugoslavia; Žanis and Johanna Lipke in Latvia; Irena Sendler in Poland; Metropolitan Stefan of Bulgaria; Chiune Sugihara, Japanese diplomat in Lithuania; and Elisabeth Wust in Germany.
- The knowledge gained by studying these righteous people and their cultures, and what drew them to act when others stood by or acquiesced in evil. Sources include *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (Oliner & Oliner, 1988), and Riane Eisler's writings on Partnership and Domination Systems (Eisler, 2018a, 2018b).
- The surviving remnant, and now the contemporary revival, of Yiddish culture in many places, a worldwide *Yiddishland*.
- The role of klezmer music in Yiddish history and culture: a spiritual practice in precarious times.
- *Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)*, or Doctors without Borders, whom the members of *Naye Strunes* regard as modern-day Righteous among the Nations.

A TIME OF PANDEMIC: CREATING VIRTUAL LEARNING

Members of *Naye Strunes* have shared stories of the Righteous, accompanied by klezmer interludes and followed by discussions, more than 50 times, in churches, libraries, and community centers in Minnesota. In early 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic made group gatherings impossible at the same time that the need to address racial injustice became more evident than ever, the group began work to adapt to a virtual format.

The first stage was the creation of an hour-long documentary video, *The Garden of the Righteous*. The video recounts the heroism of Imre Báthory, who sheltered Jews on his farm near Budapest, passing them off as his relatives; Frans and Mien Wijnakker, who hid many Jewish people in their farmhouse in the Netherlands, at one point faking a pregnancy so that a baby born in hiding could be passed off as theirs; Lilly Wust, who sheltered her lesbian partner, visited her in jail after she was arrested, and then hid three other Jewish women in her home even though she was under Gestapo surveillance; Irena Sendler, who smuggled 2,500 children out of the Warsaw Ghetto, even after being arrested and tortured, and recorded their birth names and new names on papers preserved in glass jars buried in her yard; and Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat in Lithuania who went against orders and handwrote more than 6,000 visas for refugees at the outbreak of World War II. These passages are combined with klezmer interludes and an explanation of the role of klezmer in Yiddish culture, the story of *Oyneyg Shabbos* in which documentation of life in the Warsaw Ghetto was preserved for posterity, and information about the work of *MSF*. The documentary video is at tinyurl.com/gotrvideo

Stu Janis, *tsimbalist* in *Naye Strunes*, who produced the video along with Gitl and Dugi Eisner, says,

When we presented *Garden of the Righteous* to live audiences, Gitl would tell most or all of the stories, and the other band members would listen. That changed in the video, where each story has a different narrator. My roles in the

video production included narrating one of the stories, scouring the web for images to accompany all the stories, and assembling the images and audio to create the video. Near the beginning of the program, Gitl asks viewers to consider the question, "Would I have the courage to help others in great danger, knowing that my involvement would jeopardize not only my life, but the lives of my family?" I know I would have a hard time answering that question in the affirmative, and the research I conducted while finding images for the video gave me an entirely new appreciation for the bravery of these righteous heroes, as well as for the risks and sacrifices involved in their acts of courage.

SCHOLARS DISCUSS THE DOCUMENTARY

The resulting documentary video was so compelling and raised so many questions about the Holocaust and its resonance with and implications for current events in the US and in many other countries, that *Naye Strunes* convened a panel of scholars to discuss these themes. The recorded panel discussion, produced by Stu Janis, is at <https://youtu.be/56l9nUS9Ufo/> and the extensive reference list generated by the scholars is at the end of this article.

The scholars are:

- Riane Eisler, BA in Sociology, JD, DHL(hon), author of *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future*; *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*; and *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future* (co-authored with Douglas Fry). She was a child Holocaust refugee with her parents, and her research into alternatives to systems of Domination was influenced by these early experiences.

- Kathryn Agnes Huether, MA in Musicology and in Religious Studies from the University of Colorado at Boulder, and Doctoral Fellow in Historical Musicology and Ethnomusicology at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. Her dissertation examines the myriad of Holocaust ‘voices’ specifically for sonic qualities and their resulting effects.
- Dennis Peters, BS in Trumpet Performance, MA in Religious Leadership with emphasis in Interfaith Chaplaincy. He is a member of the Unitarian Society of Menomonie, Wisconsin, participating in leadership roles including supporting members with illnesses, leading services, and conducting life celebrations.
- Hannah Wilson, MA in Holocaust Studies, Doctoral Fellow studying material memory at archaeological excavations at Sobibór and Treblinka camp sites in Poland.
- Marty Lewis-Hunstiger (moderator), BSN, RN, MA in Communications Studies.

The people who became the major target of the Holocaust - the Jewish people living in Europe - have as a group and as individuals been marginalized, endangered, and scapegoated for centuries. The panel discussion was organized around four topics relevant to the actions of the Righteous among the Nations:

- The political and social position of Jewish people in Europe, historically but with an emphasis on the 20th century.
- The nature of the Ashkenazic culture that was nearly eradicated, including the role of music and the ethos it represented in relation to persecution.
- The Domination sociocultural structure of Nazism, its perpetuation through the framing of narratives and through parenting practices, and the actions of the Righteous as countercultural.
- The concept of allyship, as exemplified by the Righteous toward the Jews during the Holocaust, and in actions by Righteous people that are needed today in aid of endangered and marginalized individuals and communities.

In reflecting on the panel discussion, participant Dennis Peters links the Anti-semitism incorporated into the New Testament gospels (Crossan, 1995) and the writings of Martin Luther (1543/2020) to the targeting of Jews through the centuries, from the Middle Ages through The Third Reich, and its resonances in the underground movements in many countries, the history of the State of Israel, the cultural influences of Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews, and the persistence of Nazism. He says:

I learned of the need for allies, not only for Jews, the Roma, those with disabilities - all sent to the gas chambers - but also for the modern-day persecuted: non-whites in our culture, the LGBTQ, practitioners of Islam, and many others. May we all have our eyes opened and look for ways to help!

SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE IN THE WARSAW GHETTO: MAINTAINING HUMANITY

Among the stories told in the documentary video, one of the most poignant is about the Ringelblum Archive, a collection of documents chronicling life in the Warsaw Ghetto, collected and preserved in buried milk cans by a group codenamed *Oyneg Shabbos* (Joy of the Sabbath), including historians, writers, rabbis, and social workers, and led by Jewish historian Emanuel Ringelblum. Yael Weinstock Mashbaum, in his article, *What We Value - Spiritual Resistance During the Holocaust* (n.d.), describes the different ways that individuals sought to maintain their humanity and core values in the face of Nazi dehumanization. Jewish people and other groups of non-Jews who were interned and exterminated during the years of the “Final Solution” faced systematic modes of degradation imposed by the Nazi regime that made basic survival a nearly insurmountable challenge. Mashbaum explains that religious observance, cultural programs, education, and art in the setting of poverty and starvation constituted acts of spiritual resistance, of a struggle not only against annihilation but for humanity, for normalcy, for life.

A portion of our documentary video describes the conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto, where nearly half a million people were interned in an area of 3.4 square kilometers. Overcrowding, starvation, cold weather, and lack of access to basic hygiene made this population especially susceptible to a deadly typhus epidemic that swept through the ghetto during 1941. A recent study by Stone et al. (2020), featured on the podcast *Science Friday* (Flatow, 2020), examines a mathematical model of epidemiological data from the Warsaw Ghetto during this period. The data show a sudden unexpected reduction in deaths from typhus in the winter of 1941, just when mortality would be most likely to increase sharply. The study links this sudden change to dramatic public health interventions initiated by residents of the ghetto beginning in the fall of 1941, and documented in the Ringelblum Archive, as well as through survivor testimony and in personal diaries from the ghetto. Stone describes an extensive public health education campaign conducted by professional doctors and scientists, as well as by social and medical organizations within the ghetto, under nearly impossible conditions. This campaign included hundreds of public lectures and seminars on epidemiology and sanitation, with a single lecture sometimes attended by more than 900 people. Despite extreme overcrowding and widespread starvation, thousands of people followed the rigorous health guidelines to the extent the environment allowed, and thus contributed to lowering transmissibility below a critical threshold, likely bringing the epidemic to an early sudden halt (Stone et al., 2020).

These individuals sought to preserve life and improve the health of interned people, in the midst of death and overwhelming hardship, knowing that long-term survival beyond the ghetto was unlikely. This act of spiritual resistance, carried out inside the walls of the ghetto, was the struggle for, and affirmation of, humanity from within, in direct opposition to the destruction of life that was the ghetto's purpose.

SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE AMONG VULNERABLE PEOPLE AND THEIR ALLIES

There are many examples of spiritual resistance by Jews and others during World War II. How does that differ from physical resistance? There were physical uprisings in the Warsaw Ghetto and many other places: actual fighting against the monstrous actions of the German captors and their collaborators. But without the spiritual resistance that allowed Jews to preserve their dignity and humanity, there could not have been armed resistance. Spiritual resistance took many forms. For instance, prisoners Rudolf Vrba and Alfréd Wetzler carefully documented the activities at Auschwitz-Birkenau; they escaped in April 1944 and their information led to the halting of deportation of Hungarian Jews and saved thousands of lives (Vrba & Bestic, 1964).

Resistance is not only the struggle ‘against.’ It is also the struggle ‘for.’ In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, a book reflecting on his imprisonment in Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, and Bergen-Belsen, physician and philosopher Victor Frankl concluded that in such a world, everything can be taken from a person but one thing: to choose one’s attitude in a given circumstance - to choose one’s own way. In ghettos and camps Jews struggled for humanity, for culture, for normalcy, and for life itself. They set up libraries, choirs, orchestras, and schools for children. The goal was maintaining humanity in very inhumane conditions. They strove to remain free in their souls, as most other freedoms were stolen from them.

In a compelling example of spiritual resistance that continues to the present day, doctors imprisoned in the Warsaw Ghetto studied and recorded the physiological effects of slow starvation on the human body. These studies were meticulously documented and are still in use by scientists today; their value is inestimable because they can never ethically be duplicated. Subjects and doctors, knowing they would never get out of the ghetto alive, chose to participate as a form of spiritual resistance. Their participation remains as their legacy to all humanity. Or, as one imprisoned doctor put it, “You [the

participants and doctors] shall not wholly die.” (Ochayon, 2020).

Gitl Eisner, founder of *Naye Strunes*, says:

During the past year of pandemic, it has been easy to lapse into thoughts of boredom, inconvenience, deprivation, restriction, and fear of illness. To counter such thoughts, I find it helpful to focus on health-care workers, organizations such as *MSF*, and those of the past who made conscious choices to act from deep moral conviction, rather than to capitulate to fear. Spiritual resistance during the Holocaust is evident in the bravery of Jews hidden for long and terrifying periods of time in tiny spaces - closets, caves, underground bunkers. The same spiritual resistance is apparent in non-Jews who knew their neighbors were hiding people, but chose, at great personal risk, not to be informants. Victims and rescuers alike were able to maintain courage and dignity under degrading and terrifying conditions. These examples of spiritual resistance, working in partnership, fostered attitudes of hope rather than despair.

Creating, building, fostering, advancing, and enhancing these partnerships of spiritual resistance, among vulnerable people and their allies, is the reason for this article - please share it as widely as you can.

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Gretta Hunstiger, BA, MN, grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota and received a Bachelor of Arts in Global Studies and a Masters of Nursing from the University of Minnesota. She has studied the violin since childhood and has played professionally with various groups. She holds a special reverence for the timeless melodies and expressive modes of Klezmer music, and loves learning and performing Klezmer tunes with Gitl. She is honored to be part of the effort to keep this beautiful musical tradition alive. In addition to performing with *Naye Strunes*, Gretta works as a registered nurse in Minneapolis.

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