How do we receive personal musical memories emerging out of the Holocaust experience? My question is addressed to that moment of individual hearing: to the intimate point where we encounter experiences shared with us, where we are positioned as listener and witness. This article draws on a series of oral history interviews made in 2008 in Sydney with Jewish Holocaust survivors who participated in a project of documenting and preserving private musical experiences and memories during the Nazi era. In presenting these cases, I am arguing for two considerations. First, I wish to advocate a scholarly model of care, of attentive listening to a wide variety of archival material, including living musical testimony of survivors. It is fairly uncontroversial to acknowledge that sonic experiences remain in memory and travel with us throughout our lives, providing moments of nostalgia, evocations of past connections, ties to culture, friends and family, frames of reference. Is it confrontational to extend this ability of our sonorous bodies to imagine that musical memories of dark, distant and difficult times continue to be embodied within and around us? Second, and more specifically, I wish to draw attention to the diversity of experiences at the point of liberation. The resonance of a musical memory awakens the fragility of an aporetic moment between oppression and freedom, where the testifier may allow themselves the space for doubt, uncertainty, questioning and absurdity.

Holocaust testimony generally focusses on experiences of Jewish civilians entrapped in ghettos, labour and death camps. Musical activities (be they coerced, voluntary, or clandestine) had more chance of being recorded in testimony or documentation, and confirmed afterwards by a greater number of witnesses to such events. Songs performed at or immediately after liberation mark a
less certain point of transition; they appear as sonic border zones (Bohlman 135–6) that facilitate arrival and departure (both in the moment and in the memory), and are, in turn, powerful subjective aides-memoire for survivors.

Instances of songs being sung at the point of liberation have been materially captured, the two most famous being a recording of Bergen-Belsen survivors singing the Zionist hymn *Hatikvah* for the BBC after the liberation of the camp; the other being the account given by Fania Fenelon in her wartime account of liberation by British troops, also set in Bergen-Belsen:

“Sing, Fania, sing!” someone shrieked. The order galvanized me; I opened my mouth desperately. The soldier thought I was at my last gasp; he lifted me out of my filth, took me in his arms, showing no signs of disgust. How comfortable it was, how light I must feel (I weighed sixty-two pounds). Held firmly, head against the chest, drawing my strength from his, I started on the first verse of the *Marseillaise*. My voice had not died; I was alive. The fellow was staggered. Carrying me in his arms, he rushed outside towards an officer, shouting, “She’s singing, she’s singing.” (Fenelon, Routier and Landry 7)

Fenelon’s account goes on to mention that the BBC recorded her singing *God Save the King* and the *Internationale*. It is not untoward to assume that such instances of singing spontaneously occurred for those liberated from camps and ghettos, that is, those with enough strength to be able to sing. In my interviews with over 110 Holocaust survivors over a period of 15 years, three survivors specifically recalled moments of spontaneous musical performance at or just following liberation. Each retelling of the experience brings further complexity and ambiguity to such moments.

*Peter Rössler: Schöne Isabelle von Castilien*

Peter Rössler was born June 1930 into a wealthy secular Jewish family of spice merchants from Prague. Together with his older brother
Honza and parents, the family were in the second of five transports of one thousand Prague Jews deported directly to Łódź in October 1941, prior to the establishment of the Terezín Ghetto. Of these 5000 Czech Jews deported to Łódź, only 277 survived to liberation. Rössler came from a musical family; his mother Lilly was a pianist, and he studied violin in occupied Prague with a friend of his father’s, Mr Freund. Rössler’s first memory of music in the Łódź ghetto was sitting in a makeshift accommodation centre in Lagiewnicka Street, listening to Mr Freund practising violin (Dvořák’s *Humoresque*). In the same room he also remembered a fellow deportee performing Weill and Brecht’s “Mackie Messer” (“Mack the Knife”) from *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*). In March 1942 Rössler’s father Karel passed away; in September of that year, through the mercy of a nurse at the hospital, the brothers managed to save their mother Lilly from deportation during *Aktion Gehsperre*, a week-long rounding up of the elderly, the infirm and the children of the ghetto. Approximately 12,000 people were deported to Chelmno’s mobile gas units during this period of terror. Owing to lack of proper medical treatment, Lilly passed away soon after, at the age of 36, in the dilapidated wooden house occupied by the extended Rössler family. By late 1942 Rössler’s uncle and aunt had died, and their cousin Herbert had disappeared. Miraculously, both boys managed to survive on their own until June 1943, when a ghetto social worker discovered them, and took them to live in one of the last remaining ghetto orphanages in Gnieznienska Street. The orphanage was a place of relative normality, with proper beds and food regularly distributed. On the eve of the Sabbath the children sang traditional songs and recited poetry, and there was a library. One of these songs utilised the melody of Franz Lehár’s “Vilja Lied” from *Die Lustige Witwe*, with conractum Polish words “Wagony Wagony zielone, czerwone” (Freight wagons, green, red). Following the *Gehsperre*, all inmates of the ghetto were obliged to work, including the children who had managed to avoid the roundups. Rössler and his brother found jobs in the various small factories that produced goods for the Reich: first in the *Schneider Ressort* (tailoring division) producing army uniforms for the Reich; later on in the *Metall Ressort* processing metal.
parts, and finally in the Schuh Ressort, making clogs (canvas uppers nailed to wooden soles).

In August 1944, with the dissolution of the Łódź Ghetto, Rössler and his brother Honza were transported to Auschwitz where the 14-year-old Peter unwittingly ignored the direction of selection, and followed his 16-year-old brother to the right (thus saving his life). After time spent in the Zigeunerlager, Rössler and his brother fortunately found labour camp work and were transported in a cattle truck to Kaufering IV, near Landsberg in Bavaria, officially classed as a Krankenlager (camp for the sick) (Raim 17, 109). Because they did not wish to be separated, both brothers were sent there because Peter had sustained a severe leg injury from a brutal SS guard. On arrival the medical supervisor of the camp, a Czech doctor called Leon Halpern sent his friend Poldie to meet the transport, calling for Czech Jews to identify themselves. Through this intervention Peter’s life was saved, with Dr Halpern immediately seeing to the appropriate treatment of the leg. Once healed, Dr Halpern also obtained for Rössler an assignment as läufer (runner) for sentries, and for this work the young man received extra soup rations. By the end of April 1945, the American army was approaching, and Kaufering was liquidated. The residents were sent on a death march for fifty kilometres for three days and nights, whence they arrived at camp Allach, a satellite camp of Dachau on the outskirts of Munich.

Allach was a camp of horrific conditions with parts of unburied corpses littering the ground, and only skeletal survivors greeting the horrified marchers. Rössler was lucky in having to endure this for only a few days before the liberation by the US forces. When the US jeeps rolled in, a fellow German Jewish inmate began singing in praise of the arriving forces. After talking at length with Rössler, he could only remember the tune, and a fragment of three words from the song, Isabella von Kastilien; from this, I was able to surmise that the fragment was from the popular Schöne Isabella von Kastilien, originally performed by the most popular vocal ensemble of Weimar Germany, the Comedian Harmonists (Bootz and Karlick; IrRrIS113nt).
I played the original recording to Rössler, and he confirmed that this was the song sung by his fellow survivor. The absurd joyousness of the lyrics finessed the moment of liberation. Isabella could stand in for the US army troops, for an absent lover, or even for freedom itself. By sharing this musical moment, Rössler evokes the unthink-

Ref: Schöne Isabella von Castilien
pack deine ganzen Utensilien und komm zurück zu mir nach Spanien!

Du weißt doch:
Nur im schönem Lande der Toreros
wirst du dein Herzchen und noch mehr los.
Drum komm zurück zu mir nach Spanien!
Kommst du nicht bald, mein Schatz,
brauch ich Gewalt, mein Schatz,²
Ich mach erst halt, mein Schatz, wenn du mich küssst,
und du wieder bei mir bist!
Also bitte, bitte: (Ref)

Leise fleh’n zur Laute meine Lieder,
komm wieder, denn Du bist meines Herzens Ideal.
Keine passt zu mir so gut im ganzen, beim Tanzen bist Du grade zu phänomenal (chorus)

Chorus: Lovely Isabella of Castile, pack up your utensils And come back to me, to Spain!

You know, do you not that only in the fair land of the Toreadors Will you lose your heart, and even more.
So, come back with me to Spain!
If you don’t come soon, my darling, I will use force, my dear
I will only stop, my dear, when you kiss me
And you are again with me!
So please, please: (Chorus)

My songs beckon softly on the lute: Come back!
For you are my heart’s desire.
No-one suits me so totally, When dancing You’re a phenomenon!
(Chorus)
able, illogical moment of liberation, where the assumption of relief is destabilised by the realisation of a fundamental transition to a new, barely-hoped-for reality.

*John Engelman: Habeit Mishomayim Ur’eh*

John Engelman was born in on 5 February 1927 into a prosperous, religiously observant family in a small town called Dusina (now Dusyno, Ukraine). Dusina was in the region of Czechoslovakia known in Czech as Podkarpatská Rus (Carpathian Ruthenia, an ethnically diverse region that extended through eastern Czechoslovakia in the west, north-eastern Hungary in the south through to Ukraine in the east). The family spoke Yiddish at home, and also Rutenish (Ruthenian), and Engelman attended a Czech primary school and then a Ruthenian school from third grade. All Jewish members of the village were religious; the men attending Synagogue twice daily, with religious Jewish school (cheder) added to children’s secular schooling. Carpathian Ruthenia was ceded to Hungary in November 1938, and Jewish life became more restricted with Hungarian legislative discrimination already in place. However, the region was not subject to the deportation, ghettoisation and indiscriminate murder that had been happening in Poland because of the independent governance of the fascist Horthy regime. Engelman travelled to Budapest at the end of 1941 to learn cabinet making; by doing this, he eluded the first set of Jewish deportations from the Hungarian countryside (beginning March 1944). Engelman had a fine singing voice, and from an early age learned religious Jewish songs in both Hebrew and Yiddish. In Budapest, this repertoire was supplemented with secular Yiddish popular songs of the day. In May 1944 deportations began from Budapest to Auschwitz-Birkenau. In order to evade deportation, Engelman moved around the various so-called “yellow star houses” (designated Jewish dwellings in Budapest), but eventually the young man was taken in June 1944 to the Budakalász Ghetto, detained for a week and then transported to occupied Poland. In Auschwitz he had no memories of orchestras or bands playing, but recalled singing a song with fellow religious Jews,
Ani Ma’amín (Gilbert 48–9). After passing selection and residing a short time in the Zigeunerlager, Engelman was transported to a slave-labour camp at Mühldorf, working on the construction of an underground factory. In the last weeks of the war, the inhabitants of this camp were placed in cattle trains, bound for destruction by labour, possibly at Mauthausen. Constant strafing of the train tracks prevented them arriving at any destination, and after a while the cattle trucks were abandoned. Those still alive emerged from the trucks, and Engelman was at the end of his strength, lying on the grass and waiting to die:

\[\text{and then we stopped, and then they said “the guards are gone.” At this time, I was lying on the grass and waiting for the finish. They said, all of a sudden, “the Americans are coming: we can hear them, their cars.” And I lifted up my head and I’ve seen them coming, and that was the last I remembered till I was in a yard, sitting near a table with people giving us food. I had passed out, I don’t remember how I got to this place, or how long I was there. That night I went to the toilet, and people were sick from the food, they couldn’t take it.}\]

After this account, I raised the subject of inmates singing at liberation. I asked Engelman if he remembered any particular song at that point, which prompted him to go to his siddur (prayer book), look up a particular prayer, and sing a song related to this prayer. The first time Engelman learned the prayer component of the song was at the age of fourteen, taught by the cantor of the village, the father of his friend Zalman. Years after, liberated at the point of dying, lying on the grass with Zalman, he remembered singing this version together with his friend. The song has a structure of a Hebrew line followed by a Yiddish line (indicated by H: or Y: in the verses below). The Hebrew text is from the nefilat apayim (falling of the face) section of Tachanun (supplicatory prayers), recited in the morning and afternoon prayers on normal weekdays.
John Engelman maintained a consistency of belief and religiosity throughout his life. The Hebrew words of this song combine with secular Yiddish expression, to accentuate the needless suffering he and his fellows endured, and the faith that remains constant throughout. There is a tradition in Chassidic (ultra-orthodox) Judaism that allows an active interrogative stance against God when communal suffering is encountered through the actions of non-Jewish perpetrators. The most famous of these songs is the Kaddish of Rebbe Levi Yitskhok of Berditchev, an eighteenth-century mystic, also known as A din toyre mit Gott (A religious court-case with God). In the Kaddish, just as in Engelman’s song, faith is maintained in the face of suffering, even as the Rebbe interrogates God for allowing such events to happen.

Eliezer Berkovits, the first post-war Orthodox Rabbi to deal with theological questions after Auschwitz, strove to demonstrate continuity to Orthodox Jewish belief throughout the suffering of the Holocaust marked through this reading of the notion of emunah
Berkovits’s reading of emunah is the signified notion of trust, reliability and endurance; and that sometimes this covenant of faith required Jews to contend with God (exemplified by the sentiment expressed in the song above). According to Berkovits (Braiterman 8), Auschwitz was another extreme example of the problem of evil, rather than the rupture that other theologians assigned to it, and Engelman’s song reflected the tension of renewing emunah in the face of his recent experiences and losses.

Some years after my interview with Engelman I discovered a written variant of this song notated in an early Holocaust song book. Kaczerginski’s version repeats the middle section with slight changes in the melody. The 1948 publication mentions that Yoel Pontshek (who shared the song with Kaczerginski) heard the tune in Chełm, but speculated that it was created in the Lublin region. The author remarks in particular about “the text of poem, which is unique in subject matter for ghetto and camp songs” (Kaczerginski, Gelbart and Leivick 120–1, 393). Unfortunately, John Engelman’s health had deteriorated by the time of my discovery, and I was unable to share further information about the song.

Frank Buyers: Kaddisch

Frank Buyers’s experience of music at liberation falls inbetween Engelman’s performative gesture of faith and Rössler’s observance of the absurdity of a secular song. Coming from a small village called Buj north of Nyíregyháza in northeast Hungary, Buyers also grew up in a religious household, attending Synagogue daily as well as religious school. Like Engelman, his village was under the control of the Horthy regime; unlike Engelman, the thirty-six Jewish families of Buj were modern Orthodox—still observant, but more secular in outlook. Buyers was recruited (along with the majority of Jewish men) for work in the munkaszolgálat, forced labour battalions. A civilian force attached to the Hungarian Army, the munkaszolgálat was used by the Horthy regime to forcibly conscript able-bodied
Jewish men for extremely risky and undesirable jobs. With declaration of war against the USSR in 1941, the regime stepped up anti-Semitic rhetoric, combining it with anti-Communist sentiment, and more Jewish men were “recruited” to these units to be sent east to accompany the Hungarian Second Army, often times acting as little more than cannon fodder or mine clearers. It is estimated that approximately 42,000 died in this service.

Buyers’s recruitment into forced labour saved him from the rural deportations to Auschwitz. In mid-1944, he decided to return to Buj while on leave from the labour battalion. A month prior to this visit the Jewish population had been deported, including his entire family. On arrival that night, non-Jewish neighbours approached the young man and offered food and other items for him to take back to other young men who had been forcibly recruited from the town. Buyers transported the supplies back to his unit. The next morning Buyers was preparing to return to the labour battalion. The place he had slept in had a long backyard adjacent to the Synagogue, and he tried to get into the building. Buyers remembered when he was young, the custom of the *shammes* (the beadle—a man known to the village as *Liba bácsi*), was to knock on the door before entering so as “to let the angels finish their prayer, and not to disturb them.”

As he was remembering this, his host for the night told him how all the Jewish occupants (including his family) were taken away from just outside the Synagogue, in seventeen or so carts. At this point of the interview, Buyers was distressed, questioning why it was that if the angel was in the Synagogue, he didn’t intervene at that point. It seemed to mark a point in Buyers’s testimony when the literal faith of his childhood and teenage years was destroyed by the realisation of the tragedy.

Buyers didn’t speak in any detail about his wartime experiences in the interview after this, except to remark that he continued in the labour battalions until 20 January 1945 (the day that the Miklós provisional government signed an armistice in Moscow)—and for the last few months, his battalion was operating underground under the direction of Communist and Zionist youth organisations, both in armed resistance against the Fascists. After Hungary’s liberation by
the Soviet armies, Buyers travelled from Nyíregyháza twice a week by train to the central office of Jewish affairs in Budapest in an attempt to track down the whereabouts of members of his family who had survived. Such journeys could be delayed by ten hours because Soviet occupying forces would frequently requisition train engines for continued fighting against the remaining Hungarian First Army and units still loyal to the Fascist regime. Non-Jewish Hungarians were reluctant at this stage to travel by train, so most of the people who were travelling were Jewish, and the custom was for people to sit in one long carriage (rather than on the platform), to wait for the train to leave. One particular afternoon, Buyers was sitting at one end of the carriage in the late afternoon, approaching dusk. At the other end of the carriage were a group of girls wearing unusually different clothes, and Buyers thought that they were Jewish, but the shy 21-year-old didn’t approach them. The group started to sing a sad song that Buyers could only make out, but he grasped the title of the song: *Kaddisch*.

It took almost a year to track down the actual song for Buyers, and I sourced Yiddish and German versions. The earliest date of composition according to the German recording is 1911, performed by the Berlin cabaret artist Paul O’Montis, written by Kurt Robitschek (head of the Comedian’s Cabaret in Berlin) with music by Otto Stransky. With no evidence of date of the Yiddish song (performed by the Dutch-Yiddish singer Leo Fuld, post-war) the German version for the transcription and translation reads as follows:

1. Durch’s Dorf geht ein Schrei man fragt sich: Was ist geschehen?
Es heißt: Alle Männer müssen heut zu den Soldaten gehen!
Yankel der Schmied küßt sein Weib

1. Throughout the village a cry goes out
One wonders: what has happened?
It is declared that today, all men
must report to soldier duty!
Yankel the smith kisses his wife
und sagt: Wenn Gott will,
daß ich dort bleib,
dann weine nicht die Augen Dir
blind
und lerne des Abends unser
Kind.
Ref: Mein Kind muß beten
für seinen Vater
bei den Soldaten ist er dabei.
Knie mit mir nieder,
en Gott will, kommt er
wieder,
denn groß ist unser Adonai.7
2. Da ging eines Tages der Rabbi
zur Tür herein.
“Hör zu, Esther: Morgens
mußt du
da schon ersten Kaddish rein!”
“Kaddish! Für wen, großer
Gott?”
“Esther, sei stark: dein Mann ist
Tod.”
Sie weint nicht, so groß ist das
Schmerz,
sie drückt nur sein Kind an ihr
Herz.
Ref: Mein Kind muß beten
für seinen Vater
bei den Soldaten war er dabei,
knie mit mir nieder,
denn er kommt nimmer wieder,
doch groß ist unser Adonai.

and says: If God wills it
that I will stay there
Do not weep till your eyes are
blind
But teach our child in the
evening:
Chorus: My child must
pray for his father
for he is with the soldiers.
Kneel down with me,
God willing, he will
come back,
For great is our God.

2. Then one day the Rabbi
arrived at the door:
Listen to me, Esther: You must
come
early morning for first Kaddish!
Kaddish? For whom,
dear Lord?
“Esther, be strong: your husband
is dead.”
She does not cry, so great is the
suffering
She only presses his child to her
heart:
Chorus: My child must pray
for his father
He was with the soldiers
Kneel down with me,
Because he is never coming back
But great is our Adonai.
In Buyers’s testimony there is a significant juxtaposition between the story of visiting Buj, recollecting the custom of the *Shammes* and hearing the account of the roundup of Jewish families there, and the story of the girls in the train carriage. Because of the distance between himself and the girls, Buyers did not hear the lyrics clearly in the song, and thought that they were singing “*men nehmt deinen Vater bei der Soldaten, der Kind schon nicht wieder, und das heißt Adonoi*” (the soldiers take the father to be killed, the child is already gone, and God willed it). When talking about the song, Buyers remarks:

> I would really like to know while I’m still alive: what was that song? Those children, singing that one [stops for emotional break]—the children who come back from there [Auschwitz]—to refraining starting “they killed the father by the Germans so he won’t come back anymore” and “he is called God.” I don’t know where to put that one—not years after, but coming back one month, two months after liberation. How did they come together, I don’t know where they came from: all girls, all Jewish, between sixteen and twenty-one. Now I am sorry that I didn’t talk to them. This was 1945, May.⁸

Buyers’s story encapsulates a deep pathos, as he navigates a journey from tradition to the loss or questioning of faith in the face of profound tragedy. The memory of the song privately haunted him for years, so much so that he never shared these stories with his daughters or wife until six months before our interview (after he had heard me speak about my project at a Synagogue service). He was incredibly relieved to find out the actual meaning of the song, and even more so to find out that the song pre-dated the events of World War II.

**CONCLUSION**

It has been observed that testimony often embeds itself in “a conscious language that can be repeated in structured settings” (Gilmore 7) and that the inherent belatedness of traumatic events enfolds the testimonial encounter in a discourse of memory rather than recall.
(Caruth). It may even be that in the years following near-death traumas, survivors utilise a discourse of fearlessness to reconstruct their lives with great success (Argenti-Pillen), submerging the memory of traumatic times until a safer time in the distant future, when life is re-established and the threat becomes a distant memory. If that is the case, the implication is that an ethnographer encountering these memories is to act as a point of care, enabling an attentive space where such memories are allowed to resound. Encountering these three individual engagements with music at a point of liberation allows a perspective that brings to the forefront the fragmented, deterriorialised culture (Ruskin and Rice) of Holocaust musical memory. And although it is right to suspect memorialisation projects as having “a tendency to tidy up disorderly histories” (Halberstam 15), if we take the care to enable individual recollection of memory to resound, I believe it possible to subvert hegemonic narratives and avoid Foucauldian “rituals of power.” Remembering musical experience is intrinsically subjective. In my introduction, I postulated that sonorous bodies resonate with all variety of musical memories, including those from dark times. Such memories may be submerged for years, and a place of security (temporally and physically removed from the original context) may enable a return (Nancy), to resonate again in our lives and the lives of others. Memories of musical moments around liberation resound in the testimonies of Peter Rössler, John Engelman and Frank Buyers, eschewing “tidy” notions of similarity. They provoke conversation and interest, spark care and concern, and enrich our experiences as listeners and witnesses. They sing about the testifier as much as about the memory of that experience: and they do so in the present day, without privileging the past.

DEDICATION

This article is dedicated to the memories of John Engelman and Frank Buyers. I am particularly thankful to Yvonne Engelman and Judi Hall for granting permission for the testimony to be shared. I am also deeply grateful to Peter Rössler for his permission to share his testimony.
NOTES

Translation/Transliteration: In John Engelman’s song, the Yiddish text has been transliterated according to YIVO standard of spelling in Latin characters. The Hebrew text has been transliterated with Ashkenaz pronunciation, guided by the YIVO standard. All translations are by the author of this article.

1 The Zigeunerlager or Gypsy family camp (also known as Camp E) was a section of the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex where approximately 22,696 Roma (Gypsies) deported from Germany, Austria and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia were housed until mid-Summer 1944. In one night the entire remaining population was gassed; afterwards the camp retained its name, but became a holding place after first selection for those who had not yet obtained a work detail.

3 Edith Sheldon pointed out that “Kommst du nicht bald, brauch ich Gewalt” is a quote from Schubert’s Erälkönig. Edith Sheldon, email correspondence to author, 9 July 2010.

2 John Engelman, interview with author, Sydney, Australia, 18 June 2008.


5 Kaddisch: a prayer (written in Aramaic), recited by Jewish mourners after the burial of a deceased relative. Mourners are strictly classified in Jewish law—children, spouse or parents of the deceased. According to Ashkenaz Jewish custom, it is an obligation to recite this prayer three times a day during prayer services for a month’s duration, except for children of the deceased, who should recite it for a period of eleven months after the burial.

6 Extremely helpful emails were received via Mendele Yiddish list from Kevin Carnes, 15 July 2009 (kcarnes@ucla.edu), including links to the songs in the Jewish National & University Library.

7 Adonai: the sacred representational name of God in Hebrew, used to replace the unpronounceable tetragrammaton; literally, it means “Lord”. Religious Jews use Hashem because they believe that Adonai should only be used in sacred contexts. The recording by Paul O’Montis substitutes with Adomai; Leo Fuld uses Adoshem.

8 Frank Buyers, interview with author, Sydney, Australia, 9 July 2008.

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