

Fate and Identity. Polish-Jewish Composers in the Twentieth Century

Frank Harders

Introduction

In 1979, the Polish musicologist Władysław Malinowski published an article in the Polish Music Journal „Ruch Muzyczny” with the title: Eugeniusz Morawski – nieobecny (Eugeniusz Morawski – absent). Malinowski referred to the phenomenon that one of the most important Polish composers alongside Szymanowski of the generation born around 1880, had completely vanished from public attention in his native country. His works, the few that survived the systematic destruction of Warsaw by the Germans after the uprising in the summer of 1944, were not played. His name seemed to be rubbed out from the history of Polish music, although quite a few of his pupils became famous in the second half of the 20th century, amongst them Grażyna Bacewicz, Andrzej Panufnik and Witold Lutosławski.

Although the reasons for his disappearance are quite specific, his fate is nevertheless symptomatic for several generations of Polish composers, regardless of their descent. Being interested in Polish Music since 20 years now and having worked on several projects linked to Polish music quite intensively in the last 10 years, I am tempted to extend Malinowski’s laconic résumé to Polish Music in its entirety.

Let me recall the names of the most of Polish Jewish composers whose biographies were directly affected by the Second World War, the occupation of Poland and the Holocaust: Andrzej Czajkowski, Grzegorz and Jerzy Fitelberg, Alfred Gradstein, Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, Paweł Klecki, Józef Koffler, Szymon Laks, Czesław Marek, Joachim Mendelson, Marian Neuteich, Karol Rathaus, Ignacy Straszewski, Aleksander Tansman, Mieczysław Weinberg and Władysław Szpilman.

Only Tansman could maintain a certain prominence until today. Szpilman and Weinberg became only recently known to the Western World in the last years, the first because of the publication of his memoirs and their adaptation for the film by Roman Polański, the second because of the revival of his works, promoted intensively by his publisher Peer and crowned by the triumphant production of his Holocaust-Opera *The Passenger* in Bregenz last year.

First of all, one fact captures our attention. From the composers who survived the Holocaust, only three were living and working in Poland after the war, Szpilman, Gradstein and Grzegorz Fitelberg, the latter had already stopped composing before the war and served his country's musical culture mainly as an outstanding conductor and organizer. Czajkowski, who could escape from the Warsaw Getto and who survived the war as a little child in hiding, moved to Paris and later on to England; Laks, who had survived Auschwitz, returned to Paris after the liberation; Tansman escaped in the very last minute to the US in 1941 thanks to a petition signed by his prominent artist friends: Charlie Chaplin, Arturo Toscanini, Jascha Heifetz, Eugene Ormandy, Serge Koussevitzky; Jerzy Fitelberg, Rathaus, Strasfogel and Klecki settled in the US already during the nineteen thirties, Marek escaped to Switzerland, Weinberg to Russia, Haubenstock-Ramati to Palestine before finally becoming a key figure of the post-war Avant-garde, living and working in Austria. Joachim Mendelson, Marian Neuteich and Józef Koffler did not survive.

If we want to understand why – with the mentioned few exceptions – these composers are completely neglected by the musical world abroad as well as “at home”, the fact that they lived and worked the major part of their lives in exile gives one possible explanation. Karol Rathaus, for instance, whose case we will examine in more detail later on, considered himself a Polish composer, but was until very recently entirely ignored by the Polish audiences.

Exile, a characteristic of Jewish destiny, was not limited to Polish Jews. Since Poland disappeared from the political landscape after its final partition in 1792 – devoured by its neighbors Prussia, Austria and Russia – an endless stream of Polish intellectuals and artists took refuge abroad, not only out of protest or to escape persecution: Poland's cultural life had come to a standstill for decades and artistic freedom and development was just not possible any more at home. The Holocaust survivor and important Polish writer Tadeusz Nowakowski once commented, “In a country, whose national anthem, whose national epic, whose national drama has been written by people living abroad, the word ‘emigrant’ cannot sound pejorative“. In this sense, the Jewish and

the Polish fates very much resemble each other, over a long period of time, were linked to each other inseparably.

I would like to have a closer look at the biographies and works of some of the above mentioned composers in the light of the topics we are interested in: To what extent did they consider themselves Jewish composers, which folkloristic traditions play a role in their music (be they Jewish or Polish) and which influence the Shoah had on their identity and creativity.

Szymon Laks

Szymon Laks came from an assimilated Jewish family in Warsaw where he was born in 1901. He studied mathematics and music in Vilnius and Warsaw, moved to Vienna and eventually settled in Paris in the mid-twenties, as so many other young Polish composers of his generation did. He joined the “Association des Jeunes Musiciens Polonais” (SMMP), where he played a significant role in the artistic administration. The association, which worked under the patronage of eminent Polish musicians of the elder generation – like Szymanowski and Rubinstein– added an interesting color to the musical life of the French metropolis, organizing concerts and commissions, thus creating a network between composers, musicians and sponsors. It was in the framework of this organization that Laks started a very promising career, writing for such eminent musicians as Vlado Perlemuter, Maurice Maréchal, Philip Hecking and the legendary Polish Singer Tola Korian. With the occupation of France by the Germans and the installation of the Vichy regime all came to an end. On May 14, 1941 Laks was interned in a camp near Orleans and subsequently brought to Auschwitz-II Birkenau on the seventeenth of July 1942. By an endless number of miracles, Laks, ill already at his arrival, didn't go the gas chambers but become member and later on director of the men's orchestra, a “prominent” in the camps language, which increased the chance to survive by a hundred times. “My father”, says André Laks, the son of Szymon, in the foreword to his father's book *Music in Auschwitz*, “my father belonged clearly to those assimilated Jews which had broken with the religion and the traditions, just as his two preferred poets, his compatriots Julian Tuwim and Antoni Słonimski.” Indeed, as we can see from Szymon Laks' compositions from before the war, there is strictly no reference to a Jewish, but there are some very clear statements regarding his Polish identity. A number of his songs based on poems by famous Polish poets were published by the established music publisher Lemoine, significantly in bilingual editions, with singing

translations in French, which underlined the Polish-French symbiosis represented by this generation of “Jeunes Musiciens Polonais”. And then there is Laks’ “Suite polonaise” for violin and piano, a typical example for the neo-folkloristic element, which is, as we know, a significant feature of the neo-classical movement of that period. Let’s have a closer look at the second movement.

12

II.

Andantino (♩ = 84)

pp

p espress e poco dolente

Tempo

rit.

p

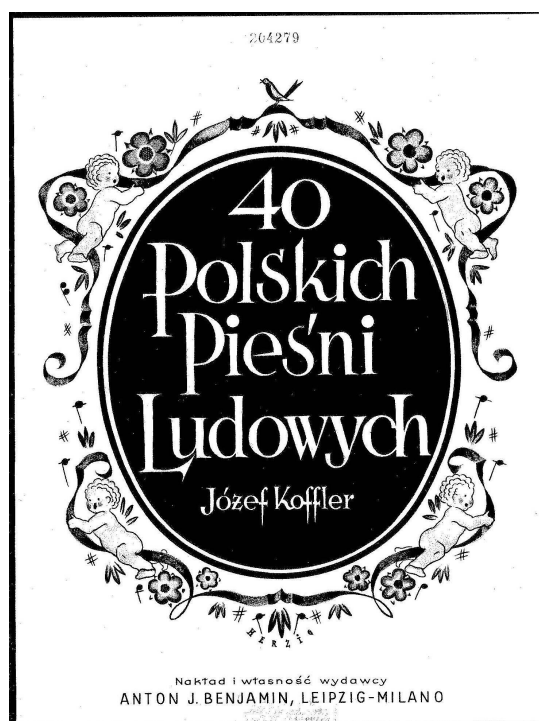
(11)

mf

pp

rit.

The unisono piano line seems to function as an introduction to the theme of the violin, but we can also interpret the violin-line as a variation of or response to the piano introduction, as we will later see. The initial phrase is quite astonishing because of its individual and unconventional shape. An opening gesture – a minor triad ending in the major seventh – transports an enormous expressivity. It is hard to believe that this melody is not “second hand” folklore but in fact corresponds with an authentic folk tune, which Laks found in a collection of *40 Polish Folksongs*, arranged by the Polish-Jewish composer Józef Koffler and published, who would guess, by the famous German music publisher Simrock in Berlin in 1926.



Simrock later on became part of the publishing house Benjamin, whose owners were Jewish. The Nazis aryanized Benjamin and the catalogues were taken over by Sikorski. After the war, the rights were handed back to the owners, than based in London, who sold Benjamin to Boosey & Hawkes in 2002. It is pure coincidence that Laks' *Suite polonaise* was published anew by Boosey & Hawkes in the same year, after having been inaccessible for decades. Not only these coincidences are quite amazing, but also the choice of just this melody by Laks for his composition. Let's have a look at it.

8.

Andantino sostenuto. Oj, kołysze się kołysz.

dolcissimo 1. Oj, ko - łysz - że się ko - łysz da ko - li - becz-ko li -
pp una corda legatissimo

po - wa, Niech cię mój Sta - sień - ku niech cię Pan Je-zus za - cho - wa, niech
pp

cię mój Sta - sień - ku niech cię Pan Je-zus za - cho - wa.
calando *ppp*

2. O Pan Jezus uchowa
 A Duch święty cię unosi,
 !: Najświętsza Panienska
 O niech za nami uprosi. !:

3. O Najświętsza Panienko
 Ta ratujże ty nas ratuj
 !: A nie daj nam ginąć
 Da ginąć marnie ze świata. !:

A. J. B. 8390

The text to the song is a prayer to Jesus and to the Virgin Maria, asking them to protect a beloved person, certainly a child, generalizing the demand for protection in the third verse. It is not very likely that a faithful Jewish composer would have used a catholic song in one of his compositions. And it is interesting to see that Laks was very much attached to the piece also after the war, when he orchestrated it, without a performance in view¹.

If we can say that Laks was only loosely rooted in the Polish musical culture before the war, besides his great affection to Szymanowski, to whom he dedicated the *Suite Polonaise*, there is striking evidence that both Polish as well as Polish-Jewish traditions began to play a decisive role in his work after the war. The first composition he finished after the liberation in 1945 was his *3rd String Quartet* which is entirely based “on Polish themes”, as the subtitle of the piece indicates, themes which stemmed from all parts of Poland. Laks, who had seen and who was forced to take part in the perversion of music as an “instrument” of the Nazi death machinery, was reluctant

¹ In fact, this symphonic version was world premiered only on 7 December 2008 by the National Polish Radio Symphony Orchestra (NOSPR) under Guillaume Tornaire.

to charge notes with the unbelievable horror he went through, which explains the absence of any kind of “memorial music” in his oeuvre, except for two songs he wrote many years after the war. He didn’t want to let the Nazis into his music again, not even through the back door, at least as long as the memory was fresh and the physical and psychological sufferings went on. This explains the absolute pureness of the music of this string quartet, where the author steps into the background to serve as a preserver and bearer of the indestructible relicts of a destroyed culture.

In the way the 3rd *String Quartet* can be called an homage to the popular music tradition of Poland, the cycle of *Eight Jewish Folk Songs (Huit chants populaires juifs)*, composed in 1947 at the same time he wrote his book about Auschwitz, is an homage to the annihilated Jewish culture in Middle and Eastern Europe. Most of the tunes are well known and it is interesting to compare Laks’ settings with parallel arrangements by Ravel, Ullmann, Weisgall and others.

Laks later on composed two songs which reflect the Shoah, *Pogrzeb/Funérailles* on words by Mieczysław Jastrun, which directly refer to the gas-chambers, and the *Elegy on the Jewish Villages* on an extraordinary poem by Antoni Słonimski, one of Laks’ last compositions, a kind of intimate requiem for the sunken world of the Shtetl, a world which remains only as memories in the minds of those who survived.

Laks did not become a religious person after the war, but the experience of Auschwitz made him sensitive for the Jewish fate and the Jewish case. He was a polemic and controversial character who wrote a considerable amount of books collecting his reflections about cultural and political issues. The books were published in London from the money he received from the German government as reparations for Auschwitz, much to the frustration of the family, who would have preferred him to spend the money on a larger and more comfortable apartment in Paris. Laks’ Jewishness was clearly of political and to a certain extent of cultural, but not of religious character. And it was strong enough to let him definitely stop composing with the outbreak of the Six-Day War in 1967, in which the aggression against the Jewish people had reached for him an unbearable level again.

Karol Rathaus

An “American composer of Polish origin” say both Riemann’s *Musiklexikon* and *The New Grove*, an “Austro-Polish composer” says Wikipedia. Tarnopol, where Rathaus was born in 1895, was then part of Galicia and under the control of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Annexed by Soviet-Russia in 1939, it was occupied by Nazi Germany in 1941 and fell back to Russia after the war. Since 1991 Tarnopol, now Ternopil, is part of the Ukraine. When Tarnopol was Polish, Rathaus didn’t live there. Rathaus studied music and law in Vienna, followed his composition teacher Franz Schreker to Berlin in 1920, immigrated in January 1933 to Paris, from there to London and finally to Hollywood and New York. Should Poland consider him a Polish composer?

During the war, Karol Rathaus intensively corresponded about the Polish and Jewish issues with the writer Soma Morgenstern, a close friend since school-times in Tarnopol, whom you might now also as one of Alban Berg’s best friends. Rathaus was very skeptical about the Jewish fate and didn’t believe in an amelioration of the situation of the Jews in the world after the end of the war. Morgenstern on the other hand blamed his friend for his sentimental attitude towards his Polish origins, and the lack of engagement and alertness in view of the crimes committed against the Jews in Europe, which became more and more obvious. Rathaus, who had successfully worked for the Jewish Habimah-Theatre in Berlin at the beginning of the 30s and collaborated at film projects for the Jewish Workers Union Histadrut, had been elected honorary vice president by the Jewish Music World Centre for his achievements for music in Israel. But it is obvious that with his heart he was fighting rather for the Polish rather than for the Jewish cause. “In regards to Rathaus’ preoccupation with Poland”, writes his biographer Martin Schüssler, “his interest went further than the discussion of political questions: he read patriotic Polish literature, participated at events organized by Polish societies and was member of the Music Committee of the Polish Cultural Institute, together with Jerzy Fitelberg and Bronisław Huberman.” After his immigration to the US, Rathaus composed a considerable amount of music inspired by Polish musical traditions, sometimes with an outspoken patriotic impetus: a *Mazurka* in 1941, *Three Polish Dances* in 1942, of which the second is dedicated to Paderewski, and in 1943 a *Polonaise symphonique* for orchestra as well as a Cantata *Gaude Mater Polonia* for mixed choir and piano.

Andrzej Czajkowski

Born as Robert Andrzej Krauthammer in 1935 in Warsaw, where his mother returned from Paris to give birth to her son after separating from her husband, Andrzej was 4 years old when the Germans occupied Poland. Andrzej, who was brought to the Warsaw Ghetto with his mother and his stepfather, survived thanks to the unbelievable courageousness of his grand-mother Celina. She bought papers for him and his mother, which allowed them to leave the Ghetto, but his mother chose to stay with her second husband, a decision which cost her life. Both were murdered in Treblinka. Andrzej lived with a Catholic family, got his hair dyed blond and took on the name of Czajkowski, which his grandmother had chosen, first because it was non-Jewish and second because she wanted her grandchild to become a musician. Most of the time Andrzej was hidden in a cupboard where he suffered horribly. After the war he became a child prodigy. At 9 he went to study piano with Emma Altberg in Lodz, herself a student of Wanda Landowska. Three years later, at the age of 12, he was admitted to the Paris Conservatory where he graduated with gold medals in performance and sight-reading at the age of 14. He continued his studies first in Sopot and from 1951 on at the State Music Academy in Warsaw, where he was Stanisław Szpinalski's piano- and Kazimierz Sikorski's composition student. The same year he became the youngest member of the Stowarzyszenie Kompozytorów Polskich (Polish Composers Association) after submitting a *Suite for piano* to the Jury. With an 8th prize at the International Chopin Competition in Warsaw, 1955, and a 3rd prize at the Queen Elizabeth of Belgium Competition in 1956 Andrzej started an international career as a concert pianist, strongly endorsed by Artur Schnabel, who blackmailed one of the leading impresarios Sol Hurok with the condition that Hurok would only be entitled, to organize a concert tour for Schnabel in the US if he did the same for Czajkowski. Andrzej toured the USA but subsequently continued his studies with Stefan Askenase in Brussels and with Nadia Boulanger at the American Conservatory in Fontainebleau. In 1960 he moved to London, where he lived until his premature death from cancer at the age of 46 in 1982. Although being a sought after pianist, who played with the major orchestras and under the greatest conductors of the world doing outstanding recordings for RCA and Columbia, Andrzej's interest shifted constantly from performing to composing, which he considered his real vocation.

From a first glance at Andrzej Czajkowski's compositional output one would not necessarily guess that he was a composer of Polish roots. One quickly senses the influence of the second Viennese school, notably of Alban Berg, but we can also observe influences of Szymanowski and

a manifest straight-forwardness and rhythmical verve typical for many Polish composers of his generation. Here is an excerpt from a BBC radio portrait by David Owen Norris, broadcast in 1992 on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Czajkowski's death, where Radu Lupu is interviewed on Czajkowski's Piano concerto²:

The pianist Radu Lupu became another friend and champion. He bumped into André [Andrzej] one day in 1970 and wondered what the big parcel was under his arm. 'He had a very thick pack under his arm and I asked him, what are you carrying here, and he said, well this is the manuscript of a piano concerto. I immediately jumped at it and I said, I will play it. Now... it seems to me that at the time, Terry was telling me all these fascinating stories about this character André Tschaikowsky. So that I considered that such an interesting and fascinating character couldn't possibly be writing bad music'. André was thrilled. To Halinka we wrote that 'Radu was quite simply the world's greatest pianist, and that's the very least one can say about him'. But it took five years to find a suitable date. Finally the RPO programmed it, with Uri Segal conducting at the Royal Festival Hall. It took Radu six months to learn the immensely complex piece with André accompanying on a second piano. André was worried about the orchestra learning it in the brief rehearsal time. 'How much of what I have written is unplayable', he asks in his diary, but he comforted himself with the note, 'Radu plays it like a fiery Angel'. 'Well this is in three movements, it starts with a slow introduction, after which the piano comes in and starts a lovely Passacaglia, a very lyrical Passacaglia which bears out very much the style of André's playing, very free, reminiscent in the sense of Chopin, in the sense of Szymanowski. It develops into a great dramatic moment out of which an Allegro springs. It lies pretty well, but there are a couple of passages that, you know, simply had to be written as they are because of compositional reasons and not because of pianistic reasons. Of course I tried to skip away with his agreement a few notes, which I did subsequently, but, yes, it's a very, very difficult piece, it's not an easy piece to play'. The audience itself was star-studded, it was full of pianists, and in fact if a bomb had dropped on the Festival Hall, a whole generation would have been wiped out at a stroke.

As a performer and outstanding advocate for the music of Chopin and Szymanowski, Andrzej Czajkowski didn't express his Polishness as a classical music composer in such an ostensible way as Aleksander Tansman for instance. There is only one piece in his catalogue which is directly Poland-related, a Mazurka for piano. And, what is even more interesting, the Jewish issue seemed irrelevant until, in 1968, Czajkowski came across Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*. Here is another quote from David Owen Norris' feature, this time including an excerpt from an interview with Hungarian pianist Peter Frankl:

André was first attracted by the famous poetry *How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank*, but soon decided to make an opera from the whole play. It seems significant that the central figure, Shylock, is a Jew. Perhaps André was trying to come to terms with his past and his heritage. He went to see his long estranged father in Paris and he visited Israel, where he began to feel at home. 'He was denying the existence of his father, for instance. But he was always blaming his father about the loss of his mother. It must have been a terrible time, but it happened to quite a few of us. I was in Hungary at that time, and I lost my father also through the Nazis. But he believed that only happened to him. Only later in life, after his second visit to Israel, he learned many things, and he experienced many things, what started to change his outlook about his past. I think therefore he became more of a settled human being.

Czajkowski, who suffered from a painful trauma and who needed to drug himself with a handful of sleeping pills every night to be able to sleep, could not get over the loss of his mother

² The complete feature is available on the composer's website <http://andretchaikowsky.com/>.

and the horror he had lived in hiding and concealing his true identity over years. He is described by his close friends and colleagues who knew him well as a wayward, uprooted and restless character, who had great difficult “settling down”, in the very sense of the word. Actively dealing with his Jewish heritage both in art and in life, and seeing the possibility that being a Jew could be considered a normal thing and not a stigma, might have appeased the inner demons to a certain degree. But these are only conjectures. And many questions arise: why out of all possible subjects for an opera did he choose Shakespeares’ *Merchant of Venice*, a piece that needs very strong advocates to invalidate the suspicion of anti-Semitism. Before we get to know the piece, it will be very difficult to come to any conclusions. The opera, which Czajkowski was finishing in hospital a couple of days before he died, remains unpremiered until today³. Only the epilogue was given a performance with piano after his death.

Résumé

Laks, Rathaus and Czajkowski represent the fate of the Polish Jewish composers in the 20th century in a prototypical way. Their profile show some common features:

First of all a complex identity which is build up from very different cultural influences, which can negatively be expressed as uprootedness and positively as cosmopolitanism⁴.

With very few exceptions, all the composers I mentioned have been banned from or never admitted to the Canon of classical music repertoire. The average notions of a European history of music, the rules that govern the “music market” are still dominated by nationalistic stereotypes. A different way of understanding the Western History of Classical Music, which takes into consideration the many obvious and the many subjacent cultural transfers and mutual influences between the different musical cultures at any times is yet to come.

³ [The opera will be staged during Bregenzer Festspiele 2013 – a note by editor].

⁴ The notion of one’s “self” is not necessarily identical with the image the others have of you, the more when you live in Exile. In her article “Separation and Belonging: Polish Jews, Jewish Poles and Their Music” in the Polish Music Journal (Vol. 6, No. 1, Summer 2003) Maja Trochimczyk quoted the Polish-Jewish journalist Rafael F. Scharf, who emigrated to England in 1938, with a telling statement: “The personal pronoun is the most suspect part of speech. How we relate to the ‘I’ defines our personality.(...) Poles have always taken me for a Jew, Jews for an Englishman, the English for a Pole. I myself could say that I look upon England as a wife, Israel as a lover, on Poland as a step-mother.”

If it is evident that the legacy of the Jewish Polish Composers of the 20th century is rejected both from the cultural heritage of the land of their origins as well as of the land of their exile. But if we see the other side of the medal, it becomes obvious, that their contribution to the history of music is part of something more important, which is the World Cultural Heritage. And may be as such we have to protect and take care of it.

Which brings me to the two positive terms of this conference panel's theme: *Rediscovery and Perspectives for the 21st century*. We cannot "repare" the fates of those artists who were victims of the civilizational crash caused by Hitler's Germany. But we can preserve their legacy and help to unleash the spiritual and emotional energies that rest sealed in their scores. As it was and is the case, to a certain extent, with the so called "Terezín composers" (Victor Ullmann, Pavel Haas, Hans Krása and Gideon Klein).

It is a shame for the musical world, that we can buy the 500th recording of a piano concerto by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, whereas not a single work by Andrzej Czajkowski has ever been released on a commercial CD. It is a shame, that Szymon Laks' book about Auschwitz is available in excellent editions in French, English and Spanish. It is a shame that nobody in Germany knows about Roman Padlewski, one of the most outstanding Polish talents of his generation – to also mention one of the non- Jewish victims of the German fury which devastated Warsaw in 1944.

Much of basic work has to be done to bring back or introduce the treasures of Polish music to public attention. Great efforts still have to be done. I am happy and grateful that I can actively participate in this task in so many different ways. It has made me a rich man over the last years by finding wonderful friends and in getting to know some of the most beautiful music ever composed.

The text was previously presented at the Conference Jewish Music in Eastern and Central Europe as unifying cultural factor, Görlitz-Zgorzelec, 20-22nd Oct 2011. Published by the permission of the Author.