Lydie Fialová: To Forget and to Remember. The Music of Gideon Klein in the Context of his Life in Terezín
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To Forget and to Remember

Music of Gideon Klein in the Context of his Life at Terezín

The work of composers in Terezín is often represented as the spiritual resistance to the violence of Nazi regime. Especially since the 1990', this topic has attracted growing attention from historians and musicologists, who aim to contribute to the earlier thematizations in the memoirs and reports of direct participants and scholarly analysis of available documents. After a period of interest brought about by the indisputable symbolic power of the topic (titles of respective works are often metaphors – *Musik an der Grenze des Lebens, The Undying Flame, Music in the Inferno, Hear our Voice* etc.), the focus has recently been shifted to the biographies of single artists and detailed analysis of their works, which finally allows to assign them the position in music history that they rightly deserve, independently on the actual context in which their work has been created. Apart from the contribution to music history, this issue is of general importance as it provides unique insight to the universals of humanity in its most extreme variations.

We shall examine the forms of this resistance in the context of life and work of one of the artists, Gideon Klein (6.12.1919 Přerov – 21.1.1945 Fürstengrube), who belonged to the youngest generation of musicians in Terezín. We shall focus on three interrelated domains of his activities that inherently reflect his personality and character: organization of cultural life, education and upbringing of children and finally, composition. Based upon analysis of his texts and music we shall witness the creative power of imagination and memory that constitute an alternative world that resists and actually infirms the rules of ideology and regime he was forced to live in (especially in the concentration camp), by establishing a space where the differences of social, political, religious and national identities and orientations cease to exert its power, space that can be entered independently of

the physical constrains. The sole existence of this alternative world is then the source of hope that renders transcendence to human life.

Pre-war life of Gideon Klein

The legacy of Gideon Klein, despite his young age (he was interned shortly before his 22nd and died shortly after his 25th birthday), belongs to one of the treasures of European music in 20th century and has only recently began to be rediscovered. Born into Moravian Jewish family, in the age of 11 he moved to Prague to pursue his piano studies and have soon immersed into the rich cultural life where tradition faded into avantgarde movement. He was in close contact with the world of literature and especially poetry (Jiří Orten, Erik Saudek, Rilke, Halas, Baudelaire, Březina, Goethe, Hölderlin), philosophy (Kirkegaard), theatre, and of course music (concerts of Honegger, Hindemith, Milhaud, Novák, Prokofjew, Rachmaninow and Strawinsky). This proved as solid fundament and source of inspiration of his later work.

His promising prelude as distinguished pianist (prof. Vilém Kurz) and musicologist (prof. Alois Hába, prof. Josef Hutter) has been disturbed by the outburst of war, which had not left anything from the homely world intact. In November 1939 the universities were closed, and few month after that on the basis of race law he was forbidden to perform in public as well as to accept the scholarship offer at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. Nevertheless, he continued to secretly organize concerts at home that give evidence his passion and mastery of classical repertoire of piano and chamber music, and from this period also stem his first compositions for piano, string quartet and various combination of instruments and voices, which especially by the choice of poetry for which he wrote music indicate his awareness of the darkening situation (Friedrich Hölderlin: *Hälfte des Lebens*, Johann Wolfgang Goethe: *Dämmerung senkte sich von oben*). Symbolically, most of his pieces remained unfinished and until 1990‘, unknown. In December 1941 he was commanded to join the Aufbaukommando II. to Terezín.

Terezín – Music

As one of the first inhabitants of Terezín, young men who came with Aufbaukommando were demanded of the tough physical work of building facilities for town that had to count more than 30.000 inhabitants, which exceeded the former capacity manifolds. We probably can not imagine the physical and mental state that the constant exhaustion, hunger, lack of sleep, crowded conditions with no privacy, dismal and insecurity brought forward. As new transports kept arriving, with women, elderly and children, the primary illusion of the temporary character of their condition melted away. These were the circumstances in which Gideon Klein and others were organizing evenings of poetry and music, first illegally, later tolerated and ultimately in the summer of 1942 formally established as Freizeitgestaltung (separate sections for theatre, music, lectures, library and sport) that finally was misused by the Nazis for purposes of propaganda (performance of children´s opera *Brunidbár* for the inspectors of Red Cross, performance of *Verdi´s Requiem* on the occasion of Eichman´s visit to Terezín in September 1944, as well as the film *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* in the same year).

First few months, no books, papers or scores were available and the only resources the protagonists of these events had were their memory. The stories, poems, melodies that arise in very different context were given new voice here, and these were also the occasions for which the present poets and composers wrote their works. Gideon Klein, with his phenomenal memory, shared with others his knowledge of poetry, literature and music. With later transports, they somehow managed to bring there piano in pieces (which Gideon Klein made into one piece, as we know from the story told by Karel Ančerl, his friend who survived the war and became one of the finest conductors in the post-war ČSSR), and also music instruments as well as a limited number of music scores were brought here by the new inhabitants, and the artistic activities flourished with new opportunities. In the report by Gideon Klein to the local magazin (*Einige Bemerkungen zur Musikkultur in Theresienstadt, Das Heft* – Sešit – in Slavický 1995) from August 1944, we might read:

> Bei der Betrachtung des wöchentlichen Musikprogramms, das von der ›Freizeitgestaltung‹ veröffentlicht wird, werden diejenigen Besucher, die Theresienstadt nicht ken-

> nen, über die Vielfalt der hier reproduzierten Musik verwundert, ja sogar vielleicht verblüfft sein und sie werden sicher sowohl die Möglichkeiten bei der Aufführung von anspruchsvollen Werken als auch die Reichhaltigkeit der Auswahl bewundern. Auf knapp 30.000 Einwohner kommen wöchentlich sieben Solokonzerte, Instrumental- oder Kammermusik, weiterhin wenigstens drei konzertante Opern (d. h. ohne Inszenierung) und außerdem klassische Vokalstücke, z.B. das Requiem von Verdi oder Mendelssohn Oratorium *Elias*; außerdem finden hier Konzertreihen alter oder zeitgenössischer Musik statt.

He follows to compare this production with an average European city of the comparable number of inhabitants, and concludes that this is probably highly exceptional position. However, he points to the fact, that in order to allow such a high artistic production that would enable as many people to attend these events (800 seats in the hall), the musicians have to play quite often without having enough time to practice and prepare for their task, as well as the fact that not all of them were professional musicians before coming to Terezín, and therefore

> es läßt sich nicht leugnen, daß der heutige Kulturbetrieb nur mit diesem dilettantischen Element erhalten werden kann, doch muß man sich mit dieser Tatsache auch kritisch auseinandersetzen. ... An dieser Stelle zeigt sich der Mangel an Kontakten zur Außenwelt und die Isolierung von der Musikproduktion wie von der Reproduktion. Noch dazu kommt, daß der Zuhörer durch die ungefähr fünfjährige Isolierung vom Musikleben unserer Umgebung seinen Vorrat an kritischen Bewußtsein fast völlig verloren hat, der ja wohl früher einmal vorhanden war; der ausführende, aber auch der schöpferische Musiker verliert daneben noch viel mehr, besonders fehlt ihm aber die Möglichkeit, aus neuen Anregungen und aus neuen Quellen schöpfen zu können.

As elsewhere in his life and work even here we can see his deep desire for sublimity and perfection, his need for genuine understanding of music, but also the ability to come into terms with limited resources and possibilities. »Es ist doch klar, daß qualitative Unzulängichkeiten durch Enthusiasmus und mit Sinn für ehrliche und handwerkliche Arbeit, die hier häufig einen wirklich individuellen, intensiven, künstlerischen Ausdruck ersetzt, bewältigt und überwunden werden müssen.« We might try to imagine what inner strength it must have been to overcome the miserable conditions, constant deprivation of basic needs, exhaustion, pain, and the inevitable presence of death, by enthusiasm and strive for artistic excellence. From many other indications, in written texts as well as in memories of those who survived the war, we might feel the power of music to dignify

the present moment, allowing to forget for a while about the dusk and cruel reality of their lives, where they constantly experienced humiliation and denial of their humane and personal worth. Such occasions have also allowed people to experience a sense of continuity with their violently disrupted past, as most of them were coming from environment in which cultural life has played an important role. Participation on these activities also allowed mutual sharing of their artistic abilities, therefore allowing them to escape from hopelessness, powerlessness and dependence, and transforming the fragments of the individual memory into a mosaic of the novel whole, collective memory. This was of major importance as the resources for paper and material were rather scarce, so that artists and composers had to rely significantly on their memory, and the transmission of culture once again relied on oral means.

All these activities might then be understood as a process of creation of a ›parallel world‹, in which there was still beauty and truth, and which became a source of hope that the reality they experience is not the only and ultimate one, and consolidation of strength to survive despite the inhumane conditions. In many ways the music also allows to experience and express the emotions that resist the expression in words, the uneasy suffering, anxiety and pain, but also anger and rage, and grant the longed-for moments of relief and repose. According to testimonies, these were important factors for preserving the sense of human dignity that was essential for survival not only during but also after the war. As one of the listeners of Gideon Klein´s concert remarked: »Klein was playing so wonderfully that there were tears running down our cheeks. I also remember one another attic concert, with only three chairs, for the string trio. The audience stood still as mice. … someone kept lookout from an attic window, and guards stood on the steps. … these few hours of spiritual nourishment made many people forget the hunger and misery and long for another concert. … meanwhile for the artist that was the revolt against the regime.«[1]

Another aspect to this parallel world is its neutralization of differences in faith, former social status and political orientation. From another article by Gideon Klein, called Über die sogenannte politische Erziehung der Ju-

[1] Felstiner, John. *Speaking back to scripture: The biblical strain in Holocaust poetry.* In: *Humanity at the Limit: The Impact of the Holocaust Experience on Jews and Christians*. Ed. Michael Alan Singer. Indiana University Press 2000, p. 393.

gend (July 1943, in Slavický 1995), as well as from many other testimonies, we learn that this ›forced community‹ has to overcome many prejudices, misunderstandings, conflicts and reluctances, as the social backgrounds was at no sense homogenous and often the common platform on which they could meet was not to be find.

> Es war schon zu Beginn der Entwicklung der Verhältnisse im Ghetto klar, daß die verschiedenen Glaubensgruppen aneinandergeraten und zusammenstoßen müssen, weil die Menschen, die täglich im Ghetto hinzukamen, zwar mehrheitlich aus bürgerlichen Kreisen stammten, sich aber in ihren Ansichten bedeutend voneinander unterschieden. Erste Zwistigkeiten entstanden bezüglich der Frage der Assimilierung der Juden. Hier geriet zum erstenmal die Gruppe des nationalbewußten Juden bzw. derer, die unter dem Druck der Geschehnisse ein nationales Bewußtsein entwickelten, mit der Gruppe der assimilierten Juden einander, die das Judentum als ihnen aufgedrängt, vorübergehend und innerlich nicht verbindlich betrachteten.

And, although this never finds an explicit expression in the writings and testimonies, the art represented one of the possible common spaces where these differences were of secondary importance or of no importance at all. This applies not only to the issue of Jewish identity, but also to the domain of orientation and reference in the European culture. The works performed at Terezín do not bear a trace of dividing the world into ›pure‹ and ›impure‹, welcomed and prohibited, Jewish and not-Jewish. The tendency to strengthen the national identity was very strong in the religious and political terms (Zionism), but we have no indications of its importance for the domain of art and music especially. On the contrary, there seem to be absolute indifference to the national or social origins of music performed, works of German, Czech, Italian, Polish, French, Hungarian, British composers were welcome here.

We might see this clearly on the music played by Gideon Klein, either in solo concerts, chamber music, or adaptations of choral and orchestral works that he often accompanied (Scarlatti, Rameau, Bach, Händel, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Chopin, Liszt, Schubert, Schumann, Smetana, Dvořák, Suk, Janáček, Schönberg etc.). Folk songs of different national background were played and sung here, as well as liturgical music (Psalms, Prayers). In this sense, they never accept the rules of their incarcerators, and this is another important aspect of the resistance exercised there, the preservation of autonomy and freedom in

this parallel world of art, independent on any ideology. Similar phenomenon might be observed in the character of his works where various music traditions and forms were employed. Unlike other Terezín composers, like Viktor Ullman, Pavel Haas, Hans Krása and others, Gideon Klein actually never composed a piece with direct political or religious meaning, although there are pieces with reference to Psalms, Hebrew melodies and folk songs, both in his pre-war and Terezín years. As was typical for him, he often used indirect indications in his music, and often the texts he had chosen had allegorical or metaphorical meaning. One beautiful example is the lullaby written in 1943. The voice part was written by Ukrainian author at the beginning of 20th century, the Hebrew words were written in Tel Aviv in 1928. We might just guess how this song found its way to Terezín.

Schlaf, mein Kind, schlaf in Ruh,
weine nicht so bitterlich.
Neben dir sitzt deine Mutter,
hütet dich vor allem Bösen.
Es heult im Wald der Schakal,
der Wind pfeift dort.
Schlaf, mein Kind, schlaf in Ruh,
schlafe, schlummre sanft.

Die Schatten der Nacht entschwinden rasch.
Man darf nicht lange säumen!
Morgen muß man arbeiten.
Morgen wird Vater pflügen
in langen Furchen schreitet der Vater.
Doch du, mein liebes Kindchen,
schlafe, schlummre sanft.

Children

With this song, we shall turn our attention to another activity of Gideon Klein in Terezín, his work with children, who were forcedly separated from their parents and were housed in group accommodation according to gender and age. Gideon Klein, as well as his sister Lisa, and many other of his friends, was participating in education and upbringing of these children. In his description he states, that despite the fact that the children get used to their novel and unfavorable situation much easier then their parents, the depression and demoralization that was very common among

their parents exercised an indirect adverse influence on them. The parents often saw the young governesses as unwelcomed element which made their position even more difficult. Even here the social, religious and political orientation of various groups have been a source of constant conflicts:

> Die Tatsache, daß die Leitung des Ghettos in den Händen von Männern lag, deren politische Überzeugung auf ihrem national-jüdischen Bewußtsein basierte, diese Tatsache übertrug sich zwangsläufig auch auf die Institution der ›Jugendfürsorge‹, die ja ebenfalls von Zionisten geführt wurde und wird. Die Männer des Ghettos legten besonders großen Wert auf das jüdische Element der Erziehung, obgleich es offensichtlich war, daß die Eingewöhnung aus der vorherigen Atmosphäre in so grundsätzlich tiefe, gewaltsame gesellschaftliche Veränderungen nicht glatt verläuft.

Apart from the fact that most of these governesses had no previous training or experience, even here various parties could not find agreement on the purpose and means of education, where the strengthening of Jewish identity played an important role, and these questions were often source of conflicts among those who participated in the education activities. Gideon Klein belonged to those who criticized the universal demands of reinforcing a national-Jewish identity based on the identification with Zionism, which included learning in Hebrew without being able to grasp what the whole issue is about. He argued that most of the children stem from fully assimilated families, speaking Czech or German, with no inner relationship to Judaism, and therefore the more appropriate way how to transmit the Jewish identity would be in through the historical, cultural and social perspective, and he argued that this wider perspective does not necessarily lead to assimilation, but might actually strengthen the Jewish consciousness. He sees this as more appropriate as the situation offered more serious challenges than division of religious and political convictions. »Die erzieherischen Aufgaben wuchsen an, besonders als sich nach dem Verlauf von einem Jahr, ausgefüllt mit häufig plötzlichen Veränderungen im Leben des Ghettos (Transporte in den Osten, die katastrophale Sterblichkeit der Alten, die Not in den Unterkünften, die Verpflegung usw.)«.

We can imagine that music played an important role in the education of Gideon Klein´s wards, especially with respect to his pre-war activities in Jewish Orphanage, where he was teaching music. In this sense, we might see his understanding of art as an universal space of humanity, where people can meet each other without artificial divisions caused by social, poli-

tical or religious orientation, and this was the important message that he aimed to pass over to his children.

There is surprisingly very little reference to future in both of his texts (which is very uncommon when one writes about education, culture or politics...), and (apart from obvious reasons of censorship and perceived irrelevance). I am convinced this has a direct relationship to the fact that he was spending a lot of time with children. The children live much more in the present moment, not caring much about the past or future. This is also something that allows them to be playful.

Composition

The playfulness and certain lightness that abides his life is something ever-present in his music, which contrast very much the circumstances in which his music was composed. We shall see that his mastery of both classical and modern forms and techniques opens him very wide range of possibilities how to elaborate his compositions, which he employs like a palette of great diversity of colors to draw a picture of very clear contour, yet very complex in texture, combining folk with atonal music, simple and complex rhythms, accidental and well established harmonies. Despite the great complexity, his music is still accessible, light and playful, he takes various tones, melodies and rhythms and plays with them. I am convinced there is a direct influence and interrelationship between these aspects of his activities.

We shall now focus on the last piece he wrote, the String Trio (and he could only anticipate that it would be the last one – in retrospect it is easy to forget that we do not actually know our future) and especially on the second movement, which we consider as a very good example of the character of his composition. In the second movement Klein takes the melody of Moravian folk song as a theme and creates seven variations based on this melody. It is a good-bye song to a beautiful woman, quite a common theme of Moravian folk music, when the men were to leave for service in the army.

Tá kněždubská veža, ta je vysoká,
vyletěla na ňu, preletěla přes ňu, huska divoká.
Nebyla to huska, byly húsata,
sbohem ostávejte, dobře sa tu majte, švarné děvčata.

The Tower of Kněždub, the tower is high
and high up, over it, flew a wild goose.
It was not a goose but a gosling,
stay well and farewell, you beautiful girls.

The song is in Aiolian mode; the melody is descending in the first phrase, which is characteristic of a lament, and raising high, back, even higher, and falling back down, creates an arch, which is in accordance with the words of the song. The final imitation of the first phrase might be read as resignation as well as acceptance or reconciliation, and this is also very symbolic, as it does not give clear interpretation, leaving the question open. Klein also creates similar arch in the structure of the variations as well as in their tempo / character, first and last being lento and grave. Some of the variations confirms, elaborate and deepen the sad mood of the song, some of them ignore and yet other contradict it, making it light, playful and even laughable. He uses the whole 12-tone scale, changes the keys, rhythms, expressions, stressing various aspects of the theme and alternating the instruments and patterns to play the prominent role. He makes references to Janáček, Schönberg, but also Hába and Bach, and his expressiveness is somehow affined to the music of Bartók and Berg, although he could not have known them. Once we listen to these variations, we might observe how contrasting they often are in their expressive mood (deep sadness, wild dissonance, light pizzicato), techniques (imitation, polyphony, asymmetry of voices), rhythmical alterations (uneven rhythm, added echoes, synchronization / resynchronization of the voices), harmonies (modalities, alteration of leading voices). He comes back to the lamento theme in the last variation, which is definitely lighter than the introduction, and there is a certain relief in this, although left open, which might be consider rather symbolic.

Conclusion

Our interpretation of these variations – taking a sad, good-bye song and playing with it, making it light and somehow discharged, transcending the possibly anticipated future – demonstrates possible reading of his compositions as a story of creation: from the folk melodies heard in childhood, the patterns and complex structures of the long tradition of music that he

entered as a pianist and student of music history, and the flashes of innovation of contemporary cultural scene, with relentless quest for sublimity and transcendence, yet very earth-bound and humble, he creates the parallel world distinguished by lightness and playfulness that contrasted the dun and compelling vicinity of concentration camp epitomizing the ideology of hatred, the world that was able to experience and transmit hope and sense of significance resistant to the violence of trampled humanity.

Gideon Klein was sent to Auschwitz with the transport in October 1944 and later to Fürstengrube, where his last traces disappear in January 1945. Although he has not to survive the war, his work is nevertheless a testimony of hope which confirms life, as expressed in the words of Václav Havel, »(Hope) is the state of mind, not the state of the world. It is a dimension of the soul, orientation of the spirit, orientation of the heart. ... It transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. ... It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. The deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from ›elsewhere‹.«[2]

The power of Klein´s music to transform and enrich the life of his fellows in concentration camp is best captured in the words of a poem written in Terezín by a teen-age boy Michal Flach, as a reflection of a concert of Gideon Klein, which gives us sense of the actual presence of his work in the minds of his listeners (in Slavický 1995):

schon ein halbes Jahrhundert hat keiner dieses Klavier mehr angerührt

unser guter Freund die Zeit
hat sich von allen Zifferblättern befreit wie eine Biene
die ziemlich lange lebte
und genug Honig hatte
um nun irgendwo an der Sonne zu sterben

hinter verschlossenen Augen sitzt immer ein anderer Mensch
mit verschlossenen Augen blickt man auf die Tasten

[2] Havel, Václav. *Disturbing the Peace* (1990). In: *The Politics of Hope*, pp.180–182.

wie auf Adern in denen weiches Blut fließt
wenn du sie mit einem Messer küßt entlockst du ihnen den Gesang

und jener Mann durchschnitt gestern alle Adern
öffnete alle Orgelpfeifen
und bestach alle Vögel damit sie sangen
damit sie sangen
auch wenn die weißen Finger des Kirchendieners fest über uns schlafen
herabgeneigt zum Tode bist du wie Beethoven
deine Stirn war schwer gleich dem Himmel voller Regen

es spielte Gideon Klein.

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