

Finding Harmony in Hell: Music in the Holocaust and Khmer Rouge Regime

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... There are enormous economic and socio-cultural differences between Western Europe and Southeast Asia. Yet both Germany and Cambodia share something in common through their histories: an ugly blight in the past which must be addressed to form a more beautiful tomorrow. Under the leadership of despotic rulers, both Germany and Cambodia participated in the mass murder of millions. It is estimated that nearly ten million Jews, Gypsies, and other “undesirables” died in the Holocaust, while in Cambodia it is believed that three million, nearly a third of the total population, died under the rule of the Khmer Rouge. While the sheer mass of this killing is nearly unfathomable, an understanding of the reasons behind such a gruesome history is equally evasive. This paper will not focus on the many that lost their lives, however, but rather on a few who survived to tell their stories. It will explore the differences and similarities between the experiences of those caught in the same murderous terror in different decades on different sides of the world. Specifically, it will compare the experiences of Fania Fenelon, a French Jew with that of Daran Kravanh, a Cambodian student, as recorded in their respective memoirs *Playing for Time* and *Music through the Dark*, noting the common themes of death, hunger, and especially the unique role that music played in their survival.

... While both Daran Kravanh and Fania Fenelon are fortunate enough to survive the arbitrarily pointing figure dictating death in the first selection, the fear of future selection is a constant motif in both memoirs. Death becomes so commonplace that they both become hardened to the scenes of horror, closing their hearts as a means of survival. Daran speaks of how he would talk to himself after witnessing the killings by saying, “Daran, think of yourself. Do not feel the pain of anyone else or you will die too” (Lafreniere 89). In Fenelon’s account, she becomes so accustomed to death that she finally sleeps on top of a pile of



corpses to escape the stench of those who were rotting alive. Fania recalls, “I climbed up [the pile of corpses] as one would a slope; at the top I stretched out and fell asleep. Sometimes an arm or leg slackened to take its final position. I slept on; in the morning when I woke up, I thought that I too must be losing my reason” (Fenelon 253).

Another common theme between Daran and Fenelon’s memoirs is that of hunger. In both worlds, where food is scarce and rationed, hunger is a way of life, affecting and controlling every moment. References to food fill nearly every page of both *Playing for Time* and *Music through the Dark* as the people grasp desperately for nourishment in a constant battle between life and death. Daran recounts his struggle in Cambodia as follows:

To fully describe that period of my life, I must emphasize starvation and the preciousness of food. I once saw a half-smashed kernel of corn on the dusty road and picked it up and enjoyed it as if it were a meal. We began to measure food for the days it would sustain us. An orange could sustain me for a day. Receiving a potato was followed by a proclamation: “Three days of life!” (Lafreniere 82)

The physical struggle to survive was so intense in both the concentration camps and the Cambodian cooperatives that in order to stay alive, people relied on theft and bribery to procure food, thereby also losing the inner peace of their former honesty. Daran talks about the dehumanizing effect of stealing food as he states, “I was not a pig but a man who, though dying of hunger, felt shame from having to steal” (Lafreniere 83) while Fania expresses her sorrow that her friend Clara would sell her womanhood for a parcel of food.



Playing for Time and *Music in the Dark* are most unique through the important role that music plays in the survival of both Fania Fenelon and Daran Kravanh. Both survivors attribute their continued existence to music. Fortunate enough to gain a spot in the women’s orchestra in Auschwitz, Fania and her orchestra mates escape the harsh physical labor, receiving preferential treatment, particularly in

living conditions, which allows them to survive against such great odds. In recalling their orchestra, a player named Irene recalls, “That orchestra saved our lives, didn’t it?” (Fenelon viii). Daran also feels indebted to music. His memoir begins as follows:

I cannot tell you how or why I survived; I do not know myself. It is like this: love and music and memory and invisible hands, and something that comes out of the society of the living and the dead, for which there are no words. Yes, music, the power within my accordion’s voice, saved my life and, in turn, the life of others. (Lafreniere 3)



Music would rescue Daran from his moments of deepest danger and darkness, becoming his “companion and [his] savior” (Lafreniere 155) both figuratively and literally.

Music plays a variety of different roles in both the Holocaust and the Khmer Rouge. For Fenelon and Daran as musicians, one of the most significant is that of identity. Through music, they are able to regain a piece of their former selves which has been taken from them. Both speak with glee of the moment they discover music again after having everything they own stripped from them. In rediscovering music, they discover themselves again. Fania recalls the moment when she first overlooks the scene of the orchestra where “pretty girls were sitting, well-dressed, with pleated skirts and jerseys, holding musical instruments . . . and a grand piano lording it over them all” (Fenelon 26). She further recalls how after the physical abuse she had just experienced, she literally thought she had died and gone to heaven. She reassures herself by saying “Your journey is done, you have come to the paradise of music; that’s only natural, since that’s your main love” (Fenelon 26). Daran speaks of the moment he found his

accordion with the same supernatural wonder. He writes, “It was an old, red accordion and it lay before me on the stump of a tree. Was it real or only wishful thinking? . . . I put down my saw and delicately picked up the accordion as if it were a newborn baby.” (Lafreniere 96). For both Fania and Daran, music is entwined so deeply in their souls that the privilege of rediscovering music is a gift from heaven, a sign that they are not completely abandoned.

Through music, Fania and Daran also are able to gain physical privileges. As an orchestra girl, Fania lives considerably better than the others in Birkenau, being privileged enough to have her own bed, adequate clothing, heating, a daily shower, and the right to use the restroom at will, although her food ration was the same meager allowance as the rest of the inmates. More importantly, she gains favor in the eyes of the SS and her Kapo, who literally determine her fate. She is watched over by SS Officer who nicknames Fania, “Meine kleine Sangerin” and even finds her a pair of shoes, stating “My little Butterfly will have warm feet. It’s vital for the throat” (Fenelon 35). Instead of being gassed, the orchestra in Birkenau is sent to Bergen-Belsen when the English are about to liberate the camp.



Daran also finds privilege and protection through his music. Left in the forest to survive with nothing but their musical instruments, his group plays music until children find them, bringing them hoes and seeds. Indeed their small ensemble is invited to “play for gatherings organized by the Khmer Rouge leaders” (109) just as Birkenau’s orchestra performs for the SS. As a musician he is granted a life of relative solitude which is “better than living in the cooperative” (Lafreniere 103). On more than one occasion, Daran’s life is saved by charming his murderers through his accordion. In one particular instance a young man comes to Daran stating “I’ve been ordered to kill you” (Lafreniere 152) but after listening to Daran play the song of his

soul, he asks in a small, quiet voice, “Will you teach me to play?” The soldier later recounts his own astonishment at the power of Daran’s music, recounting “I am a Khmer Rouge soldier. I am trained to kill my own parents if ordered to. So

why can't I kill you?" (Lafreniere 152). Daran's music acts as a protection, softening the hard hearts of his oppressors through its sweet melodies. Through music, both those in the cooperatives and those in the concentration camps find refuge from the strains of life through entertainment. Music is an escape through which they can flee the horrors of life surrounding them. It numbs the senses, allowing them to momentarily forget the nightmare of reality. In *Music through the Dark*, Daran wonders "Why do people come to listen to this music when they barely have strength to stand? Why don't they go looking for a potato or a few leaves to eat? And I wondered, why did I not do the same?" (Lafreniere 98). Answering his own question, Daran continues, "It seemed I was finding my strength in the music. . . These things were sometimes more important than food to sustaining me. So I played my music and survived one more day" (Lafreniere 98).



Unfortunately, in both Fania's and Daran's worlds, music is a two-edged sword, bringing pleasure and sorrow, refuge and danger. In *Music through the Dark*, Daran compares this uncertain quality of music to the song which he played in the forest, the first time attracting a deer, which subsequently brings life and food. The second time he played the song however, it entices a tiger and Daran must run for his life. He recalls, "After that I never knew if my song would draw a deer or a tiger—and whether I or a deer would be the sacrifice" (Lafreniere 62). Indeed, on several occasions Daran nearly does lose his life because of his music while absent-mindedly humming or whistling a tune forbidden by the Communist regime. The Khmer Rouge wanted to wipe out the past completely, and one way they tried to destroy it was by destroying the music. This oppression

and control over the music was a source of great sorrow for Daran. He talks about the changes that occurred in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge society as being revealed “not so much by words, but by silence. No one talked, no one laughed, no one sang.” In her short essay, “The Songs my Enemies Taught Me” Sophiline Shapiro recalls the same situation in Cambodia as she writes, “By 1977 there was no more singing, and there certainly was no peace.”



For Fania, the negative aspect of music was perhaps even more astounding as she and her fellow musicians were forced to create beautiful music for their executioners. There was terrible and bitter irony as they watched “tears as precious as pearls roll down (the commandant’s) carefully shaven cheeks” (Fenelon 92) at the sound of a Schumann Reverie, having witnessed him crush a woman’s skull just moment before. It is difficult to comprehend the mental agony of playing marches as masses of starved and beaten faces file past. Fania writes, “They were simply going to hasten their deaths. They, who had so much difficulty even in moving, were required to give their steps a military gait. Painfully, I realized that we were there to hasten their martyrdom. One, two . . . one, two” (Fenelon 47). At one point, Fania refuses to sing the word “Lächeln” because of its inappropriateness in Birkenau. At Auschwitz-Birkenau, there was indeed music, but there was no freedom. Just as in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, the musicians were not free to truly express the songs of their heart. Rather, they were forced to provide pleasure for the murderers of their families. It is of little wonder that the suicide rate amongst musicians was one of the highest in the concentration camps.

Despite the horror, those interned in the concentration camps and those trapped by the Khmer Rouge were able to regain a piece of their humanity through music. Extending even deeper than an escape through entertainment, music reaffirmed their humanness, awakening the soul. Music and the arts differentiate mankind from beasts. Through their songs, those dehumanized by the Holocaust and the Khmer Rouge were able to distinguish themselves from the animals they were seen as, thereby reasserting their humanity. A Cambodian survivor of the Khmer Rouge, Buna Prom, once confided to me that he never would have survived without music. Music provides an outlet for a grief, hope for the future, and perhaps most importantly, it is “a prayer of the heart” (Doctrine and Covenants 25:12). While Fania Fenelon and Daran Kravan’s experiences in the Holocaust and the Khmer Rouge have much in common, including death and hunger, it is the common theme of music which best knits their tragedy across the continents, giving them strength to continue in the future.

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