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Louis Bannet: Virtuoso of Birkenau[1]

The Dutch player and violinist Louis Bannet was born August 15, 1911, in Rotterdam. While his musical career in pre-war Holland was significant, as were his post-war appearances in Europe and later overseas, it is particularly his time spent in the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau as a musician[2] that is addressed in this paper. On this subject I interviewed him many times over the last few years at his home in Toronto.

Unusual as it may seem, and contradictory for an environment whose function was to eradicate lower forms of human life (as defined by the Nazis[3]), including all forms of their cultural expression, music was indeed played in many, though not all, camps. There is an important body of literature, based primarily on survivor testimonies, that illustrates musical life in the camps. There is, for example, *The Terezin Requiem* by Josef Bor, or *Music in Terezin 1941-1945* by Joza Karas[4], both of which describe the rich musical life in Theresienstadt, a ghetto that through subterfuge and propaganda was held up as a model camp by the Nazis in order to successfully assuage any doubts the Red Cross or other visiting international authorities may have had regarding the humanitarian treatment of prisoners.

Other memoirs in which music was at the foreground in the concentration camp include *Playing for Time* by Fania Fenelon, *Music of Another World* by Szymon Laks, *Het meisje met de accordeon: De overleving van Flora Schrijver in Auschwitz-Birkenau en Bergen-Belsen* by Mirjam Verheijen, and *Trompettist in Auschwitz: Herinneringen van Lex van Weren* by Dick Walda. These four sources concentrate on the musical activities within Auschwitz or more correctly its extension, Birkenau.

Of these authors, Louis Bannet did in fact know the Dutch trumpet player Lex van Weren from before the war — Bannet taught van Weren the trade and was related to him through a marriage in the family[5] — but they did not see each other in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Bannet played in the inmates' orchestra in Birkenau, a separately fenced-in camp a few kilometers away from the main camp of Auschwitz where van Weren was interned. Nor does Bannet seem to have had any contact with Flora Schrijver, a fellow Dutch woman and musician, or Fania Fenelon, who at one point was the conductor of the women's orchestra at Birkenau's camp for women. He did, however, know Szymon Laks, a fellow member of the men's orchestra at Birkenau and later the conductor of this forty- to fifty-odd group of musicians who were housed all together in Block 2, a large barracks they shared with inmates who were carpenters.

The ethnic make-up of Birkenau's male orchestra included many Jews from countries like Greece, Russia, Poland, Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Non-Jews were part of it as well and, in fact, it was stipulated by the commander of Birkenau that the conductor of the orchestra be a non-Jew. This position was held for a long time by Hermann Kopka, an abusive and power-hungry fellow inmate, put in charge of other inmates.[6] The orchestra at Auschwitz, on the other hand, consisted solely of non-Jewish musicians, as Jews were forbidden to be part of it. In the fall of 1944, when the entire Auschwitz orchestra was transported to destinations such as Mauthausen, Buchenwald, and Dachau, camp rules regarding

Jewish participation in the orchestra had to be eased, and Jewish musicians were allowed to play.[7]

When examining the phenomenon of music in the Nazi concentration camps, it is tempting to extrapolate some general conclusions from the data culled from specific sources. An entry on "Music in the Holocaust" in the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, for instance, lists a variety of contexts in which music was played in the concentration camps:

> ...(1) when Jews arrived at the camps to be killed there; (2) when the arrivals were on their way to the gas chambers; (3) during the *Selektionen*; (4) when the prisoners were marched to and from their places of work; (5) and also for the pleasure of the SS men.[8]

Regarding the last point, music was likewise played for the amusement of the so-called *Prominenten*, those prisoners who due to their supervisory functions as *Kapo* or *Blockälteste*[9] had some degree of status within the inmate hierarchy and could order musicians to play for them during privately held parties.

Other generalizations that can be made involve the life-saving role attributed to music making, since many musicians were assigned to less brutal work than their fellow prisoners and also managed to secure more food for themselves, enhancing their chances for survival. Much of the literature sees music in this light.[10] Music is discussed in connection with resistance, spiritual hope, and a general sense that where there is music, there is culture, and hence humanity. This was precisely one of the aims of the SS: to use music to pacify a potentially panicked and unruly crowd into complacency and trust.

However, to ignore some of the paradoxes in eyewitness accounts, for the sake of a cohesive-sounding treatment of this topic, is to miss valuable information that could lead to an enhanced understanding of the terribly complex, ambiguous and not easily definable role that music played in concentration camps. Take for instance Laks' own ambivalent feelings towards music. On the one hand, he says that it had a demoralizing effect, contributing to the inmates' "earlier demise," while on the other hand, he writes, "I was helped... by... music. And so many times I had been told that one could not survive by music."[11] There are many other cases in survivors' accounts where the idea of music as a saving grace for musicians and listeners is accompanied, if not replaced, by a view of music as a tool of humiliation and torture.[12] One could see the latter as an attempt by the SS to take away the power that music was traditionally perceived to have.[13] As such, it was a strategic subversion of the place of music in people's hearts and minds in order to achieve total control and submission of the victims: it forestalled any chance that they could derive mental strength from the meaning that music held for many of them.

Again, take the difference in composition, which I mentioned above, between the orchestras at Auschwitz and Birkenau, both of which used music for similar purposes. I must confess that were it not for Louis Bannet's insistence on difference and uniqueness of experience, I would have quite simply regarded some of the details as minor variations, hardly worthy of separate classification. But as it was, he fiercely and specifically pointed out to me the distinction between the conditions in the orchestras at Birkenau and the significantly better ones at Auschwitz.[14] In fact, in telling me stories about camp life and in responding to my questions, he insisted on certain details quite regularly, to the point where I could no longer treat them as unimportant. For example, when discussing some of the memoirs of other survivors, I was struck by how vehemently he would at times dismiss their recollections as being self-aggrandizing exaggerations, out of tune with reality as he remembered it, while at the same time he would rely on their words to give additional credence to his own reminiscences.

What I have found in working with him for the past two years to create his biography, is that his dualistic attitude regarding Holocaust memories

encapsulates the very issues that are at the heart of the German historians' debate, the *Historikerstreit*, which is about "the binary opposition between the unique and the comparable (or the general) — one of the oldest such oppositions in historical thought."[15] As Charles Maier writes of this debate in his 1988 book, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust and German National Identity*,

> [t]he central issue has been whether Nazi crimes were unique, a legacy of evil in a class by themselves, irreparably burdening any concept of German nationhood, or whether they are comparable to other national atrocities, especially Stalinist terror. Uniqueness, it has been pointed out, should not be so important an issue; the killing remains horrendous whether or not other regimes committed mass murder. Comparability cannot really exculpate. In fact, however, uniqueness is rightly perceived as a crucial issue. If Auschwitz is admittedly dreadful, but dreadful as only one specimen of genocide — as the so-called revisionists have implied — then Germany can still aspire to reclaim a national acceptance that no one denies to perpetrators of other massacres, such as Soviet Russia. But if the final Solution remains noncomparable — as the opposing historians have insisted — the past may never be "worked through", the future never normalized, and German nationhood may remain forever tainted, like some well forever poisoned.
>
> (Maier 1988:1)[16]

Whether we are dealing with perpetrator or victim history, in both instances the choice of presenting the facts as unique or comparable has far-reaching implications for identity construction, be it on a national or individual scale. To place the narrative of Louis Bannet within the context of music making in general in the concentration camps serves to legitimize his story so that we can intellectually grasp its meaning, but it also signals that Bannet's experience was not unique, as evidenced by the previously mentioned memoirs, among others. This possibility has obviously proven to be distressing to Bannet, and has to be taken into account during the process of reconstructing his role as a musician at Birkenau. In his essay "History, Counterhistory, and Narrative," Amos Funkenstein explains that

> [t]he systematic destruction of self-identity of inmates in concentration camps was also the attempt to destroy their narrative of themselves. Inasmuch as the history of a period ultimately depends on the identity of its agents, the reconstruction of a coherent narrative of the experience of the victims, individual and collective, is an almost insurmountable task...[17]

For Bannet, speaking about his life at Birkenau as number 93626[18] involves more than an attempt to impart a lesson to posterity so that this will never happen again — the frequently given reason why survivors decide to share their painful memories. For him, it is also a matter of refashioning himself as a successful and victorious musician-survivor. As will become clear, the question to what extent his relationship to music after the concentration camp experiences may have changed, if at all, is very much bound up with the specific oral construction of his life's narrative.

Born the youngest of eight children into a very poor family, Louis Bannet grew up in the Helmersstraat, which before the war was *the* Jewish street in Rotterdam, a city with a pre-war Jewish population of ten to twelve thousand people. The family was not religious, but did observe the Friday night dinner social custom, as well as major holidays such as Passover, the expensive traditional meal which they saved up for all year.

Although nobody else in the family played any music, little Louis early on became obsessed with the idea of playing the violin. At seven years of age his parents finally gave in, scraped some money together, and arranged for a violin teacher to come to the house. More often than not the

teacher was drunk, and young Louis was about to give up when his father insisted that he continue, since the family had made a big sacrifice by purchasing the violin for him. Conditions in the Bannet household were dire, so much so that when a string broke on the violin and had to be replaced, this meant that for a while there would be no butter available to go on the bread. Frequently the string was somehow retied.

After six months, Louis received a scholarship from the Jewish philanthropic organization "Ten bate der armen" to pay for his studies, which were now taking place at the conservatory. His violin teachers there were Karel Blits, Alexander Schmüller, and Isidoor van Baalen, whom Bannet many years later briefly saw and spoke to at Birkenau. Shortly after, van Baalen committed suicide by throwing himself on the electrically charged wires that surrounded the camp.

When Louis was fourteen years old, he graduated in record time from the Rotterdam conservatory[19] and began his career as a professional musician, supporting both his parents. Initially his focus was on classical music, but the work was sparse and not well-paid, leading him to consider jobs in the popular music genre. He decided to add another instrument to make himself more commercially competitive and learned to play the trumpet, for which there was a greater demand in dance and jazz bands. In the '30s he started his own orchestra: "Louis Bannet and his Adventurers." His fame was so great that when anti-Jewish laws finally forced him to cease performing and go underground in 1942 by taking on a different identity and moving to a small village in the country,[20] two Dutch policemen, after having been tipped off, recognized him from the many publicity photos in newspapers and on posters that had announced his performances. He was arrested on December 15, 1942, and taken to the Haagse Veer police station in Rotterdam. A couple of days later his interrogation became serious when he was taken to the offices of the Gestapo on the Heemraadsingel, where it was decided to send him to Westerbork, the transit camp in northeast Holland. Soon after, he was put on the train for Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he arrived on January 24, 1943.[21] Of the 516 Jews that came in on that transport from Westerbork, he was one of eighteen men and boys who survived the initial selection. Of the women and girls only two were assigned as prisoners to the camp. The remaining 496 people were immediately killed in the gas chambers.[22]

It was a pimp from Amsterdam, Hein Frank, a fellow prisoner who was administering the tattoos on the arms, who upon discovering Bannet took him to audition for the orchestra. "You play for your life," he told him. With that admonition in mind Bannet waited his turn to convince the orchestra's conductor, Kopka the fellow inmate, that he would be useful. Two Dutch musicians, who had been with him on the same train, were ahead of him. They were Poons, a respected trombone player from the Residentie Orchestra in The Hague, and de Leeuwe, a saxophone player from Zwolle. All three had been waiting for hours in the cold, and their mouths were frozen. When Poons and de Leeuwe were finally led into a little room filled with instruments, their lips were too stiff to produce a proper sound. They were harshly dismissed, never to be seen again. According to Bannet they were most certainly killed immediately. It was Bannet's luck that he was the last one to try out, giving him a bit more time to rub his face and warm it up before putting his lips to the trumpet's mouthpiece. His playing was more than adequate for Kopka, who exclaimed in awe: "Du bist eine Kanone!"[23]

Bannet's strong musicianship worked in his favor, earning him a place in the orchestra, and although during the hours that he wasn't playing he was assigned to a work commando that was responsible for emptying the makeshift latrines, it was a relatively safe job compared to the back-breaking conditions in many other kinds of work. Every morning and evening, for hours on end, the orchestra played marches at the camp gate, while the thousands upon thousands of prisoners were counted and marched to and from their work. With numb and bloodied lips, Bannet saw himself more as a machine than a musician. In fact, one of his often repeated phrases is that the playing had absolutely nothing to do with music, indicating

that he somehow dissociated himself from it. There was no place for lofty ideals and fine, nuanced artistry. It was all about creating a big, rhythmic and repetitive sound.

Bannet's skills as a virtuosic violinist and trumpet player were soon discovered by anyone who heard him play for himself. Although Bannet says that his heart wasn't in it, his playing made a lasting impression on his fellow prisoners. Elie Wiesel, for example, fondly wrote in his concentration camp memoir *Night* about how Louis, the Dutchman, played some Beethoven.[24] Joseph Gatenio, another Birkenau survivor, told me in an interview that Bannet was the number one musician in the orchestra.[25] Henry Meyer, violinist of the famed La Salle Quartet, similarly recalled Bannet as the star of them all.[26] Among the higher ranking SS too, his reputation was such that they regularly came to fetch him when they needed some entertainment. On occasion a car was sent for him in the middle of the night and he would be brought to play at lavish affairs in imposing castles. The reward would be to either receive some food or be in a situation where it was easy to steal some, temporarily easing the immense hunger and making physical survival a little less doubtful. There was a downside to this. The fellow prisoner Kopka, a conductor and Kapo of the orchestra, did not like anybody to outperform him, although by all accounts he was a mediocre musician and Bannet didn't even think Kopka played any music at all. Kopka's jealousy started to be dangerous for Bannet, who became subjected to beatings and then was kicked out of the orchestra in order to be assigned to a hard labour commando. It was only through the intervention of an SS officer at the camp gate, who spotted Bannet one day and valued his music making, that he was reinstated in the orchestra and Kopka reprimanded.

For almost a year Bannet was also active in the Gypsy camp of Birkenau, where he was a bandleader and taught the musicians daily to play the latest German popular music hits. The notorious Dr. Mengele, who was conducting experiments on Gypsy children in a hospital built there for that purpose, often came to listen. Thanks to his friendship with a couple of Dutch prisoners, Sal de Jong[27] and Anton van Velsen, who was the *Lagerälteste*[28] in the gypsy camp, Bannet was fed. Van Velsen, a colonel from the Dutch military,[29] saw to it that during mealtimes Bannet could sit down with the Gypsies and share their food. Because of the experiments, the physical conditions, which included the quality and quantity of food in the Gypsy camp, were far better than in the other sections of the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex, where prisoners were slowly and systematically being starved to death and where cannibalism was a reality. Through Sal de Jong, who had to work as an assistant to Mengele, Bannet was continuously updated on news in the Gypsy camp. On one occasion especially, he was able to relay information to a young Gypsy woman, Anita, who had befriended him, about a planned mass liquidation of her people in the camp. He told her to warn the Gypsies and to try to escape. He had little hope of ever being released himself, but as Anita was reluctant to leave the handsome Bannet behind, he gave her his brother's address in Holland and said that they would meet there after the war.[30] He didn't know what had happened to her or whether she had made it at all, but then, one day, after Bannet had returned to Holland as a survivor and had slowly begun to rebuild his life, she appeared on his doorstep. He was no longer an eligible bachelor[31] and encouraged Anita to marry too. He later played at her tenth wedding anniversary celebration and came to visit the couple at their home in Oegstgeest near Leiden. There were a handful of other survivors from Birkenau whom Bannet saw again, but most of his friends and family were gone.

Throughout his imprisonment at Birkenau, Bannet managed to make his musical skills work to his advantage, in the process saving himself, as well as some of the other musicians. As he put it, "Give me a musical instrument and I'll be stronger than any Nazi."

Towards the end of 1944, with the Allies drawing near, the Nazis began liquidating the concentration camps, sending the prisoners on veritable death marches. Bannet was moved to a

number of other camps: Oranienburg, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Ohrdruff. He was liberated at last by the Russian Army on Sunday, May 6, 1945, in the vicinity of Theresienstadt. The ordeal he suffered at the hands of the Nazis was brought to a close with the burning of his clothes. All freed prisoners were required by the Russians to take off and thus discard their mostly lice-infested garb. His socks, for example, had barely any threads left on them and in his words, "were held together by lice."

His career after the war culminated in a 3-year stint with the Royal Canadian Artillery Band, with whom he toured Korea in the 1950s, bandleadership at various big hotels in New York, his own highly successful weekly TV show in Montreal, and seventeen recordings for Franco-Elite[32] and Capitol. Today his trumpet is displayed at the Living Memorial to the Holocaust of the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York. However, he still picks up the violin every day, practicing scales, doing exercises, and revelling in his own playing of various violin concerti.

This is by no means the end of his story, nor is it the only version possible. The image that Bannet has of himself and that he wants us to be left with is that he had a wonderful musical talent, which together with a strong and endearing personality, endlessly optimistic and forever hustling, he was able to exploit to the fullest in order to escape from real poverty, and survive the unspeakable horrors and tragedies suffered during the Nazi regime. Louis Bannet, virtuoso of Birkenau, has survived, music and all.

NOTES

[1] A similar version of this paper was originally presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies, Learned Societies Congress, St. Catharines, Ontario, in June 1996.

[2] As a Jew he had gone into hiding during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, a very serious offense. After being arrested by the Dutch authorities, who collaborated with the Gestapo, he had to wear a band with the letter "S" around his arm, thus pointing to the severity of this case. Upon arrival in Birkenau this was replaced by a yellow triangle, indicating that he was Jewish.

[3] The range of concentration camp inmates included true career criminals (who often were assigned supervisory positions in order to police prisoners), ethnic and religious groups, homosexuals, the mentally ill, and political activists and resistance fighters.

[4] A Dutch translation of Karas' work by Theodore and Liesbeth van Houten was published in 1995. It contains a supplement about Dutch musicians in Theresienstadt, as well as the Dutch camp of Vught.

[5] An older sister of Bannet's had married van Weren's father. However, Lex van Weren was a child from a subsequent marriage of his father, who was widowed when Roos Bannet died (Louis Bannet was three years old at the time).

[6] An inmate in this position was called a "Reichsdeutscher Kapo". As explained in the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, a *Kapo* is a "term used in the Nazi concentration camps for an inmate appointed by the SS men in charge to head a *Kommando* (work gang) made up of other prisoners," (Gutman 1990:783).

[7] Cf. Dick Walda, *Trompettist in Auschwitz: Herinneringen van Lex van Weren*, p. 65-66.

[8] Moshe Hoch et al., "Music in the Holocaust," in Israel Gutman, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, vol. 3, p. 1023-1024.

[9] Block elder with some degree of responsibility over the inmates in his or her block.

[10] E.g., Hannelore Dauer, "Kunst im täglichen Schatten des Todes — Künstlerischer Widerstand in Konzentrationslagern und Ghettos," in Otto R. Romberg et al., ed., *Widerstand und Exil 1933-1945*, Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 1986:169-176; Fania Fenelon, *Playing for Time*, New York: Atheneum, 1977; Gila Flam, "Singing for Survival: Songs of the Lodz Ghetto, 1940-1945," doctoral dissertation, Los Angeles: University of California, 1988; Emilio Jani, *Mi ha salvato la voce*, Milan: Ceschina, © 1960, Editrici Centauro, 1961; Szymon Laks, *Music of Another World*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1989, © 1948; Karl Mellacher, *Das Lied im österreichischen Widerstand*, Vienna: Europaverlag, 1986.

[11]Szymon Laks, *Music of Another World*, p. 5.

[12] Cf. Hanns-Werner Heister, "Nachwort. Funktionalisierung und Entpolitisierung," in Hanns Werner Heister and Hans-Günter Klein, eds., *Musik und Musikpolitik im faschistischen Deutschland*, p. 306-307. Also, cf. Joseph Drexel, "Die Reise nach Mauthausen," in Wilhelm Raimund Beyer, ed., *Rückkehr unerwünscht*, p. 110, 113, 114, 115.

[13] The story of Orpheus and Eurydice in Greek mythology is an example that epitomizes the enormous power that was accorded music and in this case particularly to Orpheus' lyre and song. He thus managed to convince the underworld to let him fetch his beloved Eurydice and to bring her back to the living. That he didn't succeed was not due to his music, but rather his lack of faith, as he lost her a second time when he turned around to make sure she was indeed following him up to the living world from Hades. Cf. G.S. Kirk, *The nature of Greek myth*, p. 169-172.

[14] The difference was like "day and night", as Bannet put it.

[15] Dominick LaCapra, "Representing the Holocaust: Reflections on the Historians' Debate," in Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, p. 109.

[16] Also quoted in LaCapra, p. 109.

[17] Amos Funkenstein, "History, Counterhistory, and Narrative," in Friedlander, p.77.

[18] Several years ago Bannet decided, much to his own relief, to have this number — as with most concentration camp victims it was etched on his forearm — medically removed.

[19]At his senior recital he played the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto in E minor.

[20] Maden-Dribbelen, Brabant.

[21] According to Bannet the train ride must have been at least two days long, since more prisoners were picked up along the way, causing a number of stops a few hours in length each time. Cf. Danuta Czech, *Kalendarium der Ereignisse im Konzentrationslager Auschwitz-Birkenau 1939-1945*, p. 391.

[22] Ibid.

[23] "You're absolutely fantastic!"

[24] This information was given to me by Louis Bannet. When I tried to locate the exact passage I discovered that there may have been some confusion about who actually played the excerpt from a Beethoven concerto. Wiesel also described in connection with Beethoven, another violinist called Juliek. See Elie Wiesel, *Night*, pp. 47, 89, 90-91.

[25] Telephone interview, May 13, 1996.

[26] Personal communication through Louis Bannet.

[27] Sal de Jong was the twin brother of Dutch historian Louis de Jong.

[28] See note 9.

[29] See also Dick Schaap, *Het volk van Koka Petalo*, p. 94-95.

[30] Jacob Bannet had fled to Switzerland in 1942, but had kept his house in Dordrecht.

[31] He married Floor Sarfaty, a widowed Jewish woman from Amsterdam who had survived by spending the war years in hiding.

[32] Today no longer in existence, Franco-Elite, based in Montreal, was the largest record company in Quebec at the time.

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