

The Women's Orchestra and Music in Auschwitz-Birkenau: A Qualitative Study on Nazi Manipulation

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Abstract : Typically in war, force involves physical violence, though those who perpetrated the Holocaust expanded manipulation techniques to include mental violence. This qualitative research study was conducted to understand the effects that the music of the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau had on women prisoners during World War II. Over 100 testimonies from the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive reveal that the orchestra's music had a profoundly distressing effect on many of the women in the camp. Led by Gustav Mahler's granddaughter, Alma Rosé, the orchestra rhythmized the life cycle of the camp, from marching to and from work, Sunday concerts, welcoming transports, to the prisoners' walk to gas chambers. What surfaced from these testimonies was that the more technical the exposure a woman had to music before camp, the more disturbing its effect. The juxtaposition of beauty with the visible horror of the camp thrust them into an impossible state where suicide became a plausible alternative. By exploiting the Women's Orchestra, the Nazis made music a critical component of manipulation within Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Keywords : Alma Rosé, Auschwitz-Birkenau, camp life, concert, Holocaust, music, Oświęcim, Poland, women's orchestra

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