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VOICE FROM THE WOUND  
SELECTED POST-WAR WORKS BY SZYMON LAKS  
AS A COMPOSER'S PATH TO RESILIENCE

INTRODUCTION

The notion of trauma has been immensely multifaceted, as its conceptualizations range from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to cultural aspects.<sup>1</sup> Reflection upon trauma, originally associated with medicine and psychology, found its place in the humanities, especially within cultural and literary studies,<sup>2</sup> even though those disciplines tend to depreciate the possibility of recovery facilitated by certain level of resiliency.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, recent studies prove resilience to be possible among Holocaust survivors, many of whom were able to live meaningful, creative lives despite extreme adversities.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christa Schönfelder, *Wounds and Words. Childhood and Family Trauma in Romantic and Post-modern Fiction* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Mariko Hori Tanaka, Yoshiki Tajiri, and Michiko Tsushima, eds., *Samuel Beckett and Trauma* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore–London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Resiliency defined by A. Masten as the ability to maintain competence across the life span. Roberta R. Greene, and Sandra A. Graham, “Role of Resilience Among Nazi Holocaust Survivors. A Strength-Based Paradigm for Understanding Survivorship,” *Family & Community Health* 32, no. 1S (2009): S78.

<sup>4</sup> Greene and Graham, “Role of Resilience,” 77.

Growing interest in trauma studies resulted in musicological research as well;<sup>5</sup> however, specific relation between trauma and music has yet to be explored. The presented article is an attempt to provide extended perspective – in the context of trauma, resilience and recovering processes – on the works of Szymon Laks (1901-1983), a composer and writer, survivor of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Nazi concentration camp.

### TRAUMA OF THE CONCENTRATION CAMP

Szymon Laks' pre-war music was purely neoclassical, described as very optimistic<sup>6</sup> and marked by the influence of Karol Szymanowski's style. In the 1920s, the composer, following the example of many Polish artists of his generation, came to Paris where he enrolled in Schola Cantorum and afterwards in Conservatoire National de Musique (1927-29), simultaneously being an active member of the Association of Young Polish Musicians in Paris (since 1927).<sup>7</sup>

Relying on a promising career prospect, Laks decided to stay in France. On May 14, 1941, he was detained because of his Jewish origins and brought to Auschwitz-Birkenau the following year. The composer owed his survival to music: thanks to Ludwik Żuk-Skarszewski, he became a member and later – due to outstanding skills in musical arrangement – a director of the camp's orchestra, which freed him from gruelling physical work. Being held captive in Auschwitz as a potential victim and witness of Shoah resulted in severe trauma. Despite the difficulties with defining trauma unambiguously, many statements of Laks bear witness to its undeniable features: he interprets specific *split in the psyche* as being torn out of his world into another, incomprehensible one;<sup>8</sup> he explicitly describes

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<sup>5</sup> Maria Cizmic, *Performing Pain: Music and Trauma in Eastern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Patrick Zuk, "Mourning the Revolution. Nikolay Myaskovsky's *Sixth Symphony*," in *Twórczość kompozytorów słowiańskich I połowy XX wieku. Zagadnienia wybrane*, ed. K. Krzymowska-Szacoń (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2017), 169-85.

<sup>6</sup> *The fundamental idea of Szymon Laks' compositions is to manifest joy through music*. See Molly J. McCoy, "Szymon Laks – 3 pieśni do wierszy Juliana Tuwima (*Przymierze, Staruszkowie, Erratum*)," in *Muzyka źle obecna*, vol. 1, ed. K. Tarnawska-Kaczorowska (Warszawa: Sekcja Muzykologów Związku Kompozytorów Polskich, 1989), 370.

<sup>7</sup> For more details about the association, see: Renata Suchowiejko, *Paris, capitale musicale polonaise dans l'entre-deux-guerres: Artistes – événements – contextes*, trans. Alexandre Dayet, linguistic and musicological rev. Sylvie Douche, *Ad Parnassum Studies* 14 (Bologna: Ut Orpheus Edizioni, 2023), 169-226.

<sup>8</sup> *As if I had been catapulted to another planet* – Szymon Laks, *Gry oświęcimskie* (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, 1998), 22. Trauma causes *split* in the psyche, which can

memory losses, along with lethargy and so called survivor's guilt.<sup>9</sup> The composer recalled:

I spent ... almost three years in Auschwitz, and what I saw and experienced there must have had an impact on my biography, not only in terms of my psyche, but musically as well. After returning from there, I abandoned composing for many years. It was difficult to return to a normal life.... It took a long time before things calmed down and composing made sense to me again.<sup>10</sup>

The composer's words were later confirmed by his friend Halina Szymulska: "The exposure to death and cruelty took an incredible toll on his psychological state. I know that he did not leave the house in the evenings and avoided travelling. He was reserved and probably distrustful."<sup>11</sup>

In the autumn of 1945, Laks was taken to Dachau. After the liberation of the camp in 1945, he returned to Paris, still having to readjust from a state of freeze and alienation towards the regained free world. However, since trauma is not only the outcome of destruction but a mystery of survival as well, it results in the imperative of witnessing. Under the influence of the war tragedy, Laks' creative philosophy has changed. His art, which could not remain the same, became a testimony, but instead of being a memorial music, it became a vehicle for a specifically encoded *message*: "the moving and sorrowful *voice* that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*."<sup>12</sup>

#### VOICE FROM THE WOUND – ENCODING THE MESSAGE

Primarily, one should ask a question about the medium of this *message*. Laks did, after all, write down his memories twice: initially in the book *Musiques d'un*

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be described as the experience of unexpected shock: a wound inflicted on the mind which causes the victim to experience a radical breach in their sense of self as well as their relations to the world. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 3-4. All translations by the author.

<sup>9</sup> Laks, *Gry oświęcimskie*, 21-22. Caruth cites the Freudian story of a man who discovered sense of guilt after surviving the train crash (*Unclaimed Experience*, 16-17). Laks, who had been frequently asked how he managed to survive Auschwitz, wrote: *This question always made me feel embarrassed.... I felt guilty*. Laks, *Gry oświęcimskie*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Tadeusz Kaczyński, "Rozmowa z Szymonem Laksem," *Ruch Muzyczny*, no. 21 (1964): 16.

<sup>11</sup> Halina Szymulska, [untitled], in *Muzyka źle obecna*, vol. 2, ed. K. Tarnawska-Kaczorowska (Warszawa: Sekcja Muzykologów Związku Kompozytorów Polskich, 1989), 100.

<sup>12</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 2.

*autre monde*<sup>13</sup> and then 30 years after the war in *Gry oświęcimskie*.<sup>14</sup> So why was it necessary that music also become the carrier of his *message*? The answer, given by the composer himself and confirmed by many others, suggests that for this kind of trauma there are no words because “the world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason.”<sup>15</sup> In fact, trauma constitutes a crisis of representation since the truth is not entirely available to be told. Trauma disrupts the language of consciousness, while demanding a testimony transmitted with a language of a different kind.<sup>16</sup> Pain itself is resistant to language as well, which can implicate “the dense sea of artifacts and symbols,”<sup>17</sup> thus enabling an artist to create a *message*. This kind of (musical) symbol may become “a form of ‘perpetual troping’ around primary experience that can never be captured.”<sup>18</sup> Knowledge on trauma is possible through the symbolic process, and music, with its ambiguity, can serve here well.

Before defining the *message* itself, one should also determine who the sender is. Laks was born in 1901 in Warsaw to a family of assimilated Jews (liberal assimilationist ideas were not unusual among the then Jewish community in Poland<sup>19</sup>). Consequently, there were no Jewish themes in Laks’ music at the time, and his neo-classical style was shaped by both Parisian artistic circles and *significant encounter* with the music and ideas of Szymanowski.<sup>20</sup> However, after traumatic events, one’s identity dimensions are usually actualized, and Laks’ case was no different. The next

<sup>13</sup> Co-written with René Coudy and published in 1948 by Mercure de France.

<sup>14</sup> Written in 1978, published in Oświęcim in 1998, in the English edition retitled *Music of another world*.

<sup>15</sup> George Steiner. Quoted after: Amy Lynn Włodarski, *Musical Witness and Holocaust Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 165. See also: Laks, *Gry oświęcimskie*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Cathy Caruth, and Katarzyna Bojarska, “Teoria traumy jako siła lektury. Cathy Caruth w rozmowie z Katarzyną Bojarską,” trans. Katarzyna Bojarska, *Teksty Drugie*, no. 6 (2010): 129-130. Crisis of representation is recalled in: Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London–New York: Routledge, 2008), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 170.

<sup>18</sup> Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 7. The term “perpetual troping” has been proposed by Geoffrey H. Hartman, “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies,” *New Literary History* 26, no. 3 (1995): 537.

<sup>19</sup> Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, “Żyd – Polak – artysta. O budowaniu tożsamości po Zagładzie,” *Teksty Drugie*, no. 1(66) (2001): 130. One could mention here the profiles of Kazimierz Brandys or Julian Tuwim.

<sup>20</sup> Significant encounter with a distinctive work or personality is a term proposed by Mieczysław Tomaszewski for an inspiration that allows the composer to begin a creative dialog and develop his mature style. See: Mieczysław Tomaszewski, “Odczytywanie dzieła muzycznego. Od kategorii elementarnych do fundamentalnych i transcendentnych,” *Teoria Muzyki*, no. 1 (2012): 18.

phase of his life is related to the question of the artist's identity.<sup>21</sup> This was also the case of other Jewish artists who – after the World War II – defined themselves as Jews – Poles – artists.<sup>22</sup>

This reconstructed identity allowed the composer to transform his style (or – in Leonard Meyer's sense – *dialect*) into *idiom*,<sup>23</sup> with such distinctive features as the greater structural, technical and expressive flexibility and stronger emotional content with a wide range of frequently changing moods (with an emphasis on drama, intensity and rather reflective endings), all of which can be read in the context of his traumatic past. However, the most important feature of Laks' compositional idiom is the symbolic presence of Jewish and Polish folklore, which manifested itself both in musical language (scales, melodic and rhythmic motifs etc.) and non-musical aspects (lyrics, sources of inspiration, symbols). It is therefore justified to claim that the composer's main *message* was demanding the preservation of the Polish and Jewish culture – the two identities that suffered significantly in the course of the World War II.

In this context, the *String Quartet No. 3 "On Polish Folk Themes"* appears as the work of particular importance. Its four-part form is filled with Polish folk songs from various regions. Part I is highly energetic, and its second subject introduces the motifs of *W polu lipieńka*. In the second, rather lyrical part, one can find motifs of *Uwoz mamó* and *Idzie żołnierz* performed with *un poco dolente* character, enhanced by the warm viola sound with significant references to hunger as well as verse "czapka na nim" [hat on the soldier's head]. It must have been a painful symbol for the composer, who mentioned the orders to put on and take off their hats as very onerous for prisoners.<sup>24</sup> In the following parts, the melancholic character is overcome by references to life: wedding rites, the Slavic tradition of welcoming spring – symbol of new life (*gaik*) and folk dancing (*podkoziólek*). Finally, the composer turns to the Polish Highlands folklore, referring once more to the tradition developed by Szymanowski.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This phase fulfils the features of the *shadow line*. Tomaszewski, "Odczytywanie dzieła muzycznego," 18.

<sup>22</sup> This triple formula – which emerged in response to the Holocaust – was proclaimed by Tuwim. Prokop-Janiec, "Żyd – Polak – artysta," 125.

<sup>23</sup> Leonard B. Meyer, *Style and Music. Theory, History and Ideology* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 23–24. Dialect is defined as a style of a group of composers, who choose the same rules and strategies. Idiom, on the other hand, is specific for a particular composer.

<sup>24</sup> Laks, *Gry oświęcimskie*, 26.

<sup>25</sup> Antoni Buchner, "Szymon Laks: III Kwartet smyczkowy," *Muzykalia VI/Judaica 1* (2008), [http://demusica.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/buchner\\_muzykalia\\_6\\_judaica1.pdf](http://demusica.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/buchner_muzykalia_6_judaica1.pdf). Taking into account the symbolic character of the given folksongs motifs, Buchner validly classifies them as Boris Asafyev's *intonations*.

Laks' compositional idiom is complemented by *Huit chants populaires juifs* (*Eight Popular Jewish Songs*) for voice and piano, written in 1947 (i.e. alongside the first version of his memories from the camp). Both lyrics and melodies were published in Fritz Kaufmann compilation in Berlin (1920) and represent vanishing folklore of Ashkenazi Jews with typical modal features of its music. Though this population suffered immensely during Holocaust, Laks does not focus on death – at least not only, presenting different aspects of life, including love and faith. Nevertheless, trauma of being witness to thousands of people marching to gas chambers is still present here. Antoni Buchner stresses the symbolic meaning of the ritual bath mentioned in the 6th song *Gwaldże brider*, where marching to a mikvah seen in the context of Auschwitz gains a completely different meaning.<sup>26</sup>

#### READING THE WOUND – DECODING THE MESSAGE

According to the Holocaust Survivorship Model (HSM), survivors feel strong “social obligation to tell and warn the world about the Holocaust”<sup>27</sup> and “pursue intentional acts that have symbolic meaning.”<sup>28</sup> Musical witness creates a specific dialogue, and a recipient begins the process of interpretation, choosing the degree of involvement.

The function of Laks' post-war music is testimonial on both structural and symbolic level, bearing witness not only to the source of trauma but also to its effects. However, the interpretation of an artwork is always fraught with a certain risk. Hermeneutic experience proves that it can be carried out even beyond the area limited by the creator's consciousness. Decoding the piece that echoes trauma can be particularly ambiguous, as it involves an encounter between knowing and not-knowing.<sup>29</sup> Trauma disrupts the symbolic order, interferes with the timeline and the victim's memory. It needs a different kind of reception: “more *listening*, more *hearing* [of music within music – KKSz], and a greater openness to *testimony*.”<sup>30</sup> That kind

<sup>26</sup> Antoni Buchner, “Laks's *Huit chants populaires juifs*,” 2014, eda-records.com/177-1-CD-Details.html?cd\_id=91.

<sup>27</sup> Roberta R. Greene et al., “Holocaust Survivors. Three Waves of Resilience Research,” *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work* 9, no. 5 (2012): 492, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2011.566797>.

<sup>28</sup> Greene et al., “Holocaust Survivors,” 495.

<sup>29</sup> Hartman, “On Traumatic Knowledge,” 537, 543. *Traumatic and artistic kinds of knowledge conspire to produce their own mode of recognition* (545). This may lead to an interesting (though overstepping the scope of this article) thread of reading musical trauma symbols as a language of unconsciousness in the context of Jacques Lacan's theory.

<sup>30</sup> Hartman, “On Traumatic Knowledge,” 541.

of listening can lead to the encounter with Another's wound and suffering, as well as to creation of the so called "memory through art", which allows "tragic memory"<sup>31</sup> to be preserved and presented in a non-direct, symbolic manner, harming neither the sender nor the recipient of the *message*.

Decoding Laks' *message* remains constricted. His works were rarely performed in the second half of the 20th century. In 1960, the composer wrote to Szymulska that the indifference of the audience manqué "became his daily bread, causing his own indifference towards musical activity."<sup>32</sup> Laks would have probably remained one of the least-known Polish émigré composers had it not been for the recent recordings of his works.<sup>33</sup>

### PATH TOWARDS RESILIENCE

After the World War II, the spectrum of PTSD was not strictly defined yet, and narrativizing the experience was considered one of the basic ways of recovering from trauma.<sup>34</sup> However, the contemporary research proves that narrativization of traumatic experiences may not be as essential as it was believed.

Some researchers point out that active involvement in different forms of music-making (including composition) can become a "sensorial stimulus that bypasses linguistic ... mediation" and therefore maintain integration, which seems crucial in the process of recovering.<sup>35</sup> Music, in its non-verbal nature, is able to "transcend the many traps that language can set in the path of expressiveness and thus recovery."<sup>36</sup> Moreover, "the essence of trauma is feeling godforsaken, cut off from the human

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<sup>31</sup> Memory of sadness, horror, tragedy, suffering, etc. Alicja Kuczyńska, "Oczy pamięci," in *Pamięć Shoah: kulturowe reprezentacje i praktyki upamiętnienia*, 2nd ed., ed. T. Majewski, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska (Łódź: Oficyna, 2011), 688.

<sup>32</sup> See: Irena Poniatowska, "Laks – Szymulska. Przyczynek do dziejów przyjaźni artystycznej," *Ruch Muzyczny*, no. 9 (1985): 3.

<sup>33</sup> Many of them came into existence due to the efforts of Frank Harders-Wuthenow and the EDA Records label.

<sup>34</sup> According to psychoanalysis, it was crucial to integrate traumatic memories in the psyche. See: Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 82.

<sup>35</sup> Moshe Bensimon, "Integration of Trauma in Music Therapy: A Qualitative Study," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* 14, no. 3 (2022): 367, <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001032>.

<sup>36</sup> Marie Smyth, "Culture and Society. The Role of Creativity in Healing and Recovering One's Power after Victimisation," in *Music, Music Therapy and Trauma: International Perspectives*, ed. J. Sutton (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2002), 78.

race.”<sup>37</sup> One of the central features in the process of healing – as well as regaining resiliency – is the rediscovery and re-establishment of the creativity of the victim, who by this means overcomes helplessness.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, an act of creation can be seen not only as a sign of fertility but also in a broader physical context, which indeed strengthens the possibility of healing. Allowing the body for certain experiences can make a significant improvement in a person’s condition: “Imprints from the past can be transformed by having physical experiences that directly contradict the helplessness, rage, and collapse that are part of trauma, and thereby regaining self-mastery.”<sup>39</sup> According to this theory, Laks enhanced his resilience by regaining the sense of self-agency through the compositional process.

To gain a complete perspective, it should be mentioned that neurobiology also provides tools to determine the level of resilience. Due to neuroimaging techniques, we know that music can *activate, coordinate, and engage* (and therefore alter) different pathways in the brain, including those controlling the stress response – whereas an imbalance of these particular pathways is one of the symptoms of PTSD.<sup>40</sup> In many music interventions for PTSD, scholars observed satisfying treatment responses, i.e. reduction of PTSD symptoms, such as numbing, hyperarousal, depression and stress reactivity. The best results, as it seems, were seen among respondents actively *making* music: creating, songwriting, etc.<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, it would appear that artists may have better predispositions to recover from trauma. It is further confirmed by Glenn Richardson’s metatheory of resilience and resiliency, according to which personal “gifts and strengths can be accessed to

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<sup>37</sup> Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Group, 2014), 360. Szymon Laks writes about *non-people* or *those who used to be people* repeatedly in *Gry oświęcimskie*, 28 and 30.

<sup>38</sup> Smyth, “Culture and Society,” 76.

<sup>39</sup> Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 15.

<sup>40</sup> Crystal C. Wang et al., “Music Interventions for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Systematic Review,” *Journal of Mood & Anxiety Disorders* 6 (2024), available online, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2950004424000075>, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.xjmad.2024.100053>.

<sup>41</sup> Wang et al. synthesized the existing literature on PTSD and music, e.g. studies related to active music-making conducted by Hirshberg et al. (*Collaborative Songwriting Intervention for Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* [2020]: creation of musical sound and content by war veterans with PTSD resulted in reducing PTSD symptoms, specifically numbing, hyperarousal, depression and stress reactivity), Carr et al. (*Group Music Therapy for Patients with Persistent Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – An Exploratory Randomized Pilot Study* [2012]: results: significant reduction in severity of PTSD symptoms and marginally significant reduction in depression) and Gever et al. (*Comparing the Effect of Social Media-Based Drama, Music and Art Therapies on Reduction in Post-Traumatic Symptoms Among Nigerian Refugees of Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine* [2023]: music improvisation and songwriting proved effective in reducing PTSD symptoms among refugees).



grow through adversity.”<sup>42</sup> As an adversity in one’s life results in disruption, people can choose to reintegrate resiliently, go back to “homeostasis”, reintegrate with loss or even with disfunction, depending on protective factors as well as developmental assets and resilient qualities. Richardson lists many of them; however, in the context of Laks’ life, we can indicate critical thinking and humor (both of which the composer presented in his essays and during friendly conversations<sup>43</sup>), supportive family environment, as well as features closely connected to music: purpose of life, locus of control (at least in the field of composition), the need to give something back to society (to contribute) and – above all – creativity.<sup>44</sup> The assumptions of this theory have been applied in the HSM, whose authors stress the role of inner processes, such as fostering and activating growth-producing forces.<sup>45</sup> Again, the scholars list creativity as well as starting new activities and doing meaningful things for other people and next generations, which can also be associated with composition.

Apart from psychological and neurobiological arguments, there is also a strictly musicological justification in favor of the thesis of Laks’ path to resiliency through music. It lies simply in the distinctive features of the neoclassical style, which he chose to study in interwar Paris, and which became his own. As Jillian Rogers states, the number of French casualties of World War I was so high that trauma of being witness of death and suffering, as well as losing the loved ones, became an important concern for French post-war artists. Music was considered *la plus grande consolatrice* not just in a poetic way, but rather as “an embodied, therapeutic mean of coping with trauma.”<sup>46</sup> It was strictly connected with the physiological aesthetics and its corporeal understanding of music, especially rhythm.<sup>47</sup> The latter was generally attributed with therapeutic properties by its direct impact on physical and mental health. Therefore, many believed that music-making was a vital medium for

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<sup>42</sup> Glenn Richardson, “The Metatheory of Resilience and Resiliency,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 58, no. 3 (2002): 307. Richardson defines resilience in multidisciplinary context, as *the force that drives a person to grow through adversity and disruptions* (307).

<sup>43</sup> *A specific humour tinged with mockery (self-irony) was typical for Szymon Laks.* Szymulska, [untitled], 100.

<sup>44</sup> According to the given theory, resiliency requires energy as well. With this statement, we go back to neurobiology, as resilience presumes the existence of the energy available through neuropeptides, which can be formed by music. See: Richardson, “The Metatheory,” 315-16.

<sup>45</sup> Greene et al., “Holocaust Survivors,” 482. In general, studies carried out by Greene et al. proved that Holocaust survivors displayed high level of resilience (486).

<sup>46</sup> Jillian C. Rogers, *Resonant Recoveries: French Music and Trauma Between the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2-3.

<sup>47</sup> French psychology (“physio-psychology”), in its early anti-Freudian oriented years, preceded contemporary theories (van der Kolk et al.), seeing body not only as a mean by which signs of trauma occur but also as a site for healing it (Rogers, *Resonant Recoveries*, 25).

expressing grief and trauma, as well as treating it. Studies show that those tendencies were well known to and practised by many French musicians (including Nadia Boulanger, who had a great impact on the Association of Young Polish Musicians in Paris, Igor Stravinsky, whose works formed the roots of neoclassicism, and the environment associated with L'École Normale de Musique de Paris and the Paris Conservatoire, where Émile Jaques-Dalcroze gave his lectures on *gymnastique rythmique*), as well as symbolist poets, whose works were used by modernist composers.<sup>48</sup> It surely must have influenced the style of Laks, who joined Parisian artistic circles in the 1920s.

Among the neoclassical features recognized as having therapeutic qualities, one can name:

- repetitive, ostinato-oriented rhythms,<sup>49</sup> giving the “comforting sense of stability;”<sup>50</sup>
- multifaceted rhythmic layer, which – according to Dalcroze – prepares musicians “for whatever might come their way provided important tools in helping trauma survivors to feel prepared for difficult life events;”<sup>51</sup>
- dissonances and tonal instability, that created specific “expressive modality for performing grief and trauma;”<sup>52</sup>
- high level of difficulty of musical works, which gave both the composer and the performer a chance to express the pain of their emotional state.<sup>53</sup>

Laks included those elements in his *Poème* for violin and orchestra. It was written in 1954, as the only work during the long 10-year “period of silence”: between the post-war compositions from 1945-1950, strongly expressing trauma and relating to Polish or Jewish folk tunes, and before *Trois poèmes chantés* for voice and piano (1960). This silence was caused mainly by his health problems, and *Poème* seems to be the first piece written at some distance from trauma, as well as the first attempt at composing a demanding orchestral work.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Rogers, 27.

<sup>49</sup> Incorporated mainly in *musique dépouillée*, specific sub-style of neoclassicism.

<sup>50</sup> Consistent pulse stabilizes the body and mind, helping to cope with hyperarousal (Rogers, *Resonant Recoveries*, 183). Repetition is also mentioned as a crucial feature of trauma writing: Schönfelder, *Wounds and Words*, 32.

<sup>51</sup> Rogers, *Resonant Recoveries*, 189. In my opinion, it does not exclude the previous one, as the repetitive rhythm can occur persistently even in one voice.

<sup>52</sup> Rogers, 190.

<sup>53</sup> *Music offers a venue to consider physical sensations of pain as an important element of trauma.* Cizmic, *Performing Pain*, 68.

<sup>54</sup> Not including the orchestral versions of two chamber pieces, since creation of orchestral work from the beginning requires a different approach.

The genesis of this violin-and-orchestra genre dates back to the *Poème élégiaque*, Op. 12 for violin and orchestra by Eugène Ysaÿe, written at the end of the 19th century and being followed by one of the most popular examples of the same kind – *Poème*, Op. 25 by Ernest Chausson.<sup>55</sup> Both those works are shaped rather freely (rhapsody-like), their character is floating with inclinations towards melancholy, the harmony is audacious and intense, whereas melody arranged in dramatic phrases. All these features are also visible in Laks' work. There is even certain similarity in the ascending (yet fluctuating) type of melodic line that opens the solo part in all three poems,<sup>56</sup> as if it was the voice from the depths. Concurrently, the composer deliberately returns to the well-known neoclassical style, choosing modern harmony and unusual scales, with a slight reminiscence of Szymanowski's music and with some references to Polish folklore as well as – to a lesser extent – Jewish tradition.<sup>57</sup>

Laks realizes here the above-mentioned neoclassical therapeutic qualities. Repetitive, ostinato-like rhythms occur in the accompaniment to the main theme, as well as in some parts of the soloist. However, the rhythmic layer is actually multifaceted, ranging from quintuplets to multiple meters. *Poème* is challenging and difficult, with its counterpoint elements, virtuoso parts, variability, double, triple and quadruple stops, etc. Unusual scales as well as modern, often dissonant and unstable harmony carry significant emotional weight. When composing, Laks was able to reestablish self-mastery over the possible choices, even the smallest ones.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, by writing a demanding, orchestral piece, he has transcended his trauma, faced a challenge and somehow reconnected with himself by means of neoclassical features and Szymanowski's style, so important for him in his younger years.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, *Poème* still bears the marks of trauma, indicating that the process of healing has not been completed. Those are equally signs of the composer's post-war compositional idiom: fluctuating moods, melancholy and drama instead of joy, the presence of folklore. Moreover, the recapitulation of the first theme sounds different

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<sup>55</sup> Ysaÿe provided him [Chausson] with more than mere inspiration, therefore Chausson called this work *mon-ton poème*. Jessica Duchon, and Philippe Graffin, "Love triumphant?" *The Strad* (January 2005): 45.

<sup>56</sup> In the case of Ysaÿe's *Poème*, also the repetitive accompaniment of the first episode.

<sup>57</sup> Polish Highland folklore with its specific scale and "blank" fifths, folk-style pizzicato, mazurka rhythm with shifted accents, pentatonics etc. Jewish elements are less clear, although we can specify rhapsodic form, highly expressive character, quasi-improvisational cadenza *ad libitum*, etc.

<sup>58</sup> Greene and Graham, "Role of Resilience," 76.

<sup>59</sup> *The process of „resilienting,” or activating resilience, can be viewed as beginning when someone perceives a challenge ... that motivates him to set and carry out new goals. In this sense, the person does not have ongoing resilience, but resilience is triggered by demanding situations.* Greene and Graham, 76.

when the preceding *mazurka* has been meaningfully ended with *marcia funabre* – a symbolic elegy for Polish tradition.

## CONCLUSION

Taking all the above-mentioned, multidisciplinary aspects into consideration, it seems justified to claim that after 1945, Laks began the process of regaining resiliency. According to HMS, it was connected not only with music, but also starting a family and undertaking general creativity, such as writing.<sup>60</sup> The artist himself confirmed this assumption in *Gry oświęcimskie*, stating that in 1978, his condition was better, and he might have seen the described events with more objectivity.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, we are still considering it as the *process* which could have no actual ending, since PTSD in case of Holocaust survivors can last a lifetime.<sup>62</sup> We cannot determine whether Laks has fully recovered from traumatic events; we know that he considered it unlikely.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, it has been established that people can consciously choose responses associated with PTSD and even reverse the healing process “as a means of politicizing the wrongdoing that contributed to or even caused their grief and trauma.”<sup>64</sup> It could have been the case of Laks’ decision to abruptly abandon musical creativity after the Six-Day War: “He said that there was no sense in writing music any more ... This war meant that the Jewish nation was in danger again. Aggression made the music quiesce in him.”<sup>65</sup> Hence the conclusion about the fragile nature of the process discussed above – further studies are crucial to establish the possible role of music in its particular aspects: as a medium of testimony to the outside world, as well as a tool for shaping resiliency and facilitating recovery processes in the inner world of the composer.

<sup>60</sup> His 8 books were published in the years 1977-1984.

<sup>61</sup> Laks, *Gry oświęcimskie*, 10.

<sup>62</sup> Greene and Graham, *Role of Resilience*, 77. Holocaust survivors’ posttraumatic healing has not been sufficiently researched yet.

<sup>63</sup> Laks, *Gry oświęcimskie*, 11.

<sup>64</sup> Rogers, *Resonant Recoveries*, 13.

<sup>65</sup> André Laks, “O moim ojcu Szymonie Laksie i jego książce ‘Gry oświęcimskie,’” *Muzykalia VI/ Judaica* 1 (2008): 8.

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## VOICE FROM THE WOUND

SELECTED POST-WAR WORKS BY SZYMON LAKS  
AS A COMPOSER'S PATH TO RESILIENCE

### S u m m a r y

Szymon Laks was a Polish composer of Jewish origin, which led to his imprisonment in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Nazi concentration camp. In the years preceding the World War II, he wrote mainly neoclassical works, whereas after 1945, his individual idiom has been established, shaped by tragic events and clearly readable in such works as *String Quartet no. 3*, *Huit chants populaires juifs* et al. The article aims at exposing that in his post-war music Laks encoded a unique *message* – a testimony of trauma. According to the trauma theory, it not only enabled the composer's recovery process but also became an appeal to decode the *message* demanding the preservation of the Jewish and Polish culture – the two identities that suffered significantly during the war. Moreover, in the light of Glenn Richardson's metatheory, the post-war output of Laks, including the *Poème* for violin and orchestra and his literary works, can be interpreted as a path to resilience.

**Keywords:** Szymon Laks; trauma; music and trauma; music and resilience; Holocaust

GŁOS DOBIEGAJĄCY Z RAN  
WYBRANE POWOJENNE DZIEŁA SZYMONA LAKSA  
JAKO DROGA KOMPOZYTORA KU REZYLIENCJI

Streszczenie

Szymon Laks był polskim kompozytorem, który z powodu swojego żydowskiego pochodzenia stał się więźniem nazistowskiego obozu koncentracyjnego Auschwitz-Birkenau. W latach poprzedzających II wojnę światową Laks pisał głównie dzieła w stylu neoklasycystycznym, podczas gdy po roku 1945, w wyniku tragicznych wydarzeń, ukształtował się jego indywidualny idiom kompozytorski, wyraźnie obecny m.in. w *III Kwartecie smyczkowym* oraz *Huit chants populaires juifs*. Celem artykułu jest wykazanie, że w swoich powojennych dziełach Laks zakodował unikatowe przesłanie (*message*) – swoiste świadectwo traumy. Zgodnie z teorią traumy nie tylko umożliwiło ono kompozytorowi rozpoczęcie procesu wychodzenia z traumy, lecz także – po odkodowaniu – stało się wezwaniem do zachowania kultury żydowskiej i polskiej tradycji ludowej: dwóch obszarów, które znacznie ucierpiały w wyniku wojny. Co więcej, powojenny dorobek Laks, m.in. *Poème* na skrzypce i orkiestrę oraz jego twórczość literacka, w świetle metateorii Glenna Richardsona może być interpretowany jako droga ku rezyliencji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Szymon Laks; trauma; muzyka i trauma; muzyka i rezyliencja; Holocaust