

Sound, Survival and Meaning in Diaries of Jews in Hiding During the Holocaust

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An aural approach to studying anti-Jewish persecution

Saul Friedländer's famous call for an "integrated history of the Holocaust" set the challenge to include not just the policies and the actions of the perpetrators, but also the perspectives of persecuted Jews (Friedländer 2012). A decade later, many threads from which such a tapestry might be woven are still just in their beginnings. Among the aspects that recently have received increased scholarly attention are the experiences of Jews who endured in hiding: Those who, in the 1930s and 1940s, took temporary or permanent refuge in attics, lofts, cellars, hovels, under floorboards, in haystacks, or camouflaged rooms across Europe (e.g. Aleksion 2014; Cobel-Tokarska 2018).

In such hideouts, which could range from elaborate constructions in urban tenement buildings to simple wooden boxes buried under an acquainted farmer's barn, Jewish fugitives attempted to survive the most intense periods of persecution. My project examines how life in such conditions was experienced and described by Jews at the time as they carved out a semblance of everyday life in such extreme conditions. The research takes advantage of the fact that many of those who hid wrote down their observations, thoughts, and experiences in diaries and journals. Notebooks and fragments filled with pencil or pen writing from eastern Europe – mostly in Yiddish, Polish, and German, ranging from a few torn paper scraps to 400-page volumes – survive in archives around the world. Many of these remain unaccessed (cf. Garbarini 2006). Marked by a relative lack of distance in time from the events, with less distortions introduced by the fallacies of memory, and with the absence of a retrospective viewpoint, these ego-documents provide a unique source for inquiry into the minutiae of the everyday, and can serve to inform of the emotions and social dynamics in hideouts at the time they were written down.

In order to understand the range of individual experiences and social dynamics in these conditions, my project applies a historiographical approach that has been variously termed sound history, or aural history. Studies of this genre have in common the underlying notion that examining sound can yield fundamental insights into wider structures of sensation, emotion, knowledge, and social attitudes. This is based on conclusions from sound studies saying that sounds reflect social conditions and relations, serve for community-building and

that, for the individual, hearing is of an existential, often upsetting character – not least because far from being just an experience of the ears, sound waves permeate the entire body. The history of sounds is a relatively young field, and with the exception of music has not been applied to research about the persecution of Jews during the Holocaust.

A historical study in this genre has to contend with the fact that, in situations in which no recordings remain, the specific sounds can no longer be heard; and that in the analysis of historical texts documenting them, the analyst and subjects can rarely interact. French historian Alain Corbin faced these challenges in writing his seminal *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside* (1999). Using numerous normative sources and local chronicles, he traced not primarily how the environment may have sounded, but how the presence of bell-ringing helped constitute the identities of French rural communities, structured time, and thus the course of villagers' lives. In reconstructing the sound world of antebellum America, Mark M. Smith made extensive use of descriptions of travel writers (2001). He highlighted how perceptions and imaginations of the non-industrial quietude of the American South and its slave labor plantations contrasted with those of the industrial revolution in the North. With a source base that included fiction, architectural and visual sources, Bruce R. Smith examined the experience and use of sound in Elizabethan England (1999). He emphasized the bodily practices of producing sound and listening, and was able to differentiate the domains of the court structured by speech and music, the city shaped by religious and civil institutions, crafts and trade, and the agricultural village. Studies by Emily Thompson (2004) and Jonathan Sterne (2003) shifted their attention towards technically mediated sound, emphasizing the political and social implication of perceiving, defining and controlling noise, and the cultural impact of the reproduction of sound, respectively.

With widely divergent source material and research interests, these studies had in common an approach that does not primarily aim at a reconstruction of past sound-worlds. Instead, they examined sounds through their descriptions and connected practices, and took them as indicative of individual experiences as well as social and political patterns and shifts of the time. Assessing the state of aural history research, historian Jürgen Müller argued for an integration of the study of sound environments to develop a full-bodied history (2012). He based his argument on psychological functions of sound. Sounds, he argued, can be seen as a source of information; a tool for orientation; a means to gather experience; and a component of communication. On this basis, he suggested that a focus on sound might help build

knowledge of how historical actors oriented themselves in the world, how they conferred sense to their experiences, and how they communicated.

My project applies this research interest to the topic of anti-Jewish persecution in the Holocaust. This subfield is at its very beginnings. Some studies exist on the broader impact of war and occupation. Presenting case studies for German cities, Carolyn Birdsall's *Nazi Soundscapes* examined how radio, loudspeakers and rally cries functioned to engage the German populace, and shaped the experience of urban spaces in the Third Reich (2012). Other examinations have dealt with the transformation of sonic ambience in selected European cities during and in the immediate aftermath of German occupation (e.g. Jacobs 2014; Tańczuk and Wieczorek 2018). These studies remained focused on urban sound and were not specific to the experience of persecuted Jews (cf. Gerlach 2018).

Applying the methods of such histories to Jewish diarists in hiding opens multiple vantage points which I pursue in my project. The raised and lowered voices, the rhythms and adjustments of speaking, whispering, singing within families and groups in hiding reflect social dynamics between Jews, as well as their often fraught relationships with assisting non-Jews over time. The language and imagery employed when describing sounds inside and outside of the hideouts give a sense of what it meant to the authors to experience and note their surroundings. At the same time, they highlight the cultural reference points different Jewish diarists had available and chose to employ in order to relate – and relate to – their situation.

This essay presents a small sample of these findings. It focuses on experiences described by select diarists who hid in rural attics and barn lofts in the Polish countryside. A focus on sounds as depicted in their notes shows these seemingly spacious and unrestricted hiding places to be sites of surprising restrictions for body and mind. After a short historical contextualization of the conditions encountered by the selected diarists, the following text outlines recurring themes around sound and hiding in their notes. It argues that the specific sonic ecology of barn lofts and attics in the rural environment profoundly shaped the diarists' subjective experience of being hidden. In particular, the sonic conditions impacted their sense of agency and speak to experiences of uprootedness and atomization. This extends and amends recent research on experiences by Jewish fugitives. This essay remains focused on the individual experiences of these diarists, with the complex social dynamics in and out of hiding omitted for the sake of this essay.

Hiding in the Polish countryside

Following the dissolution of most ghettos in 1942, Jews who managed to avoid deportation and death went into hiding. Those who sought refuge beyond the cities and larger towns had to account for and adapt to several factors specific to the Eastern European countryside. These factors limited and shaped patterns of hiding, and finally, contributed to the specific choice, or fate, of hiding in a barn or attic. The more remote or peripheral the hiding places of fugitive Jews, the more precarious the supply possibilities became. This all but eliminated hiding too far from inhabited places, as either those in hiding directly, or the farmers they relied on, were generally dependent on accessing food supplies from the villages. Those who hid beyond cities thus predominantly used or adapted spaces close to small towns, villages, and their immediate surroundings.

The aural environment of Polish villages was dominated by the sounds of nature and animals, by occasional building or home repairs, as well as low-energy transport on dirt or (in small towns) cobblestone streets. Sounds reaching the outside from the houses remained limited to house work and small crafts (Miliszkiwicz 2007). The conditions of occupation curtailed the already low presence of radio receivers, telephones, and gramophones (Gerlach 2017:12). Jews who went into hiding in the countryside thus found themselves in an environment with a low ambient noise level. This contrasts with urban settings of the time, where sounds produced could blend with other noises in the densely populated environments, even those who fell relatively quiet during the war (cf. Jacobs 2014).

Socially, eastern Polish rural communities during the war were characterized by a strictly limited, tight circle of social interactions between few neighbors. Those generally knew each other very well, in large part due to the mutual dependence of rural society. This engendered a rather close circuit of information in which no news would go undetected. The simplicity and monotony of rural life made events diverging from the routine stand out, causing comments and rumors. In such conditions, the consequences of attracting attention anywhere were potentially catastrophic. Cases of denunciation and even aggravated assaults against Jews, destroying their hideouts, or taking their lives, happened in Polish villages (Engelking and Grabowski 2018). For Jews, this meant the harsh reality that, in the words of diarist Irena Chess, “in such a small place it is known who is still alive, and they are looked for” (4).

Villagers hiding Jews thus had to take extreme precaution. Diaries written by hidden Jews reflect how unusually large purchases or meal preparations of their hosts easily aroused the

suspicious of neighbors. Even noticing the neighbor fetching an additional pail of water, or emptying a waste bucket, presented a possible information leakage about having additional members in the household, i.e. about hiding Jews. The same can be said of a host undertaking a regular trip to a neighboring town to collect or post mail. Overlaid over this social structure, the occupation realities meant that, as in the example of western Galicia, there existed a “‘village security system’ imposed by the German authorities, consisting of village heads, rotating village guards, a system of ‘hostages’ (*zakładnicy*), foresters, gamekeepers, messengers and the like” (Frydel 2018:190). Fortunate were those Jews whose “hosts” had their houses at the outskirts of the community, such as at the edges of forests.

Pharmacist Marcelli Neider and his companions were fortunate enough to hide in an elaborate earthen dugout located under a barn in Galicia. After nearly four months of life in this “*bunkier*”, he records in his diary plans to leave it and relocate to the attic of their peasant’s house. The discussion centers around organizing straw mattresses, because unlike their dugout, “in the attic we will only be able to lie motionless” (23.IV.1943). What Neider acknowledges is a significant aspect characterizing life hidden in a rural attic: The open, wooden architecture of the attics meant that every physical movement easily penetrated the space below and outside. For long stretches of the day, even moving about in the straw produced rustle that, in the hi-fi environment of the village, could be picked up by someone standing below. Thus, Zosia Zimmerman’s family is wary of farmers passing and working nearby, as well as women washing clothes. Several hidden Jews had to remain not just mute, but immobile. In his farm attic in Mazovia, Morris Breitbart had a place to stand, for long stretches of time, “petrified, unneeded, statue-like” (16.XI.1943). Selma Engel, hiding with her husband in a barn loft in Lublin district, noted regular periods of complete stillness “like mummies” while the cows were led back into the barn (22.VI.1944). Depending on the foot traffic around the hideout, such stillness could last for days on end. This was the case even when the larger barn attic structure allowed for creating an inner enclosure from straw, as noted by Miriam Guensberg, who despite this had to “lie entire days under blankets – and wait” (15.XI.1942). While rural attics, especially the large attic spaces located above barns, did not restrain those in hiding through physical limits (such as the brick walls in a residential area, the cement walls of converted basements, or the damp and tight earthen walls of a dugout under a barn), they effectively confined their Jewish inhabitants even more. Surrounded by air, those hiding in the attics were more constricted in their movements than those enclosed by the earth and walls of other hiding places.

This immobility prevented many practices that are described by Jews hiding in more insulated spaces: Preparing food using fire and stoves, listening to front news over a radio, modifying the hideout itself, and even pursuing handicrafts to pass time or economically sustain oneself in hiding. Instead, those in attics developed different strategies to cope with the day. When Irena Chess cannot quietly re-tell movies and events from her school days to her younger cousin, they read old calendars and “pamphlets from the time of Franz Joseph” scraped together by their hosts (16.VI.1943). She also devotes a lot of time to reveries, “I let my look drift far, through the cracks in the boards towards the featureless greenery... how good is it to lie, lie and not think, but just feel, feel, feel” (3.VIII.1943). For Brandla Siekierka, hiding in an attic in Mazovia, long summer days in the attic are spent with the collection of lice, an odious task that turns into rudimentary distraction (15.VI.1944). Maria Koper makes numerous references to the writing of the diary as her way of coping, a pattern also present in other attic diaries.

The reduced breadth of activities directly impacted the bodies of those in hiding: “The endless, forced lying, and we have been lying here for close to five weeks now, has emaciated us to the degree that we can’t stay on our feet. We try to walk below, but we stagger like small children” (Chess 10.VI.43). The effects of immobility in hiding, however, go beyond the physical. Underground hideouts allowed for movements and activities that provided psychological relief, allowed for killing time, and offered a certain degree of imaginary escape. For many diarists in rural attics, in contrast, the immobility and lack of stimulation provoked profound inner unrest. Suffering heat and insects in summer and the cold in winter, as well as illnesses, many found sleep was difficult, but when it was possible, it served as a welcome reprieve to kill time. Waking meant that “I am lying all day with different thoughts in my head. [...] Like a person who sits on hot coals or needles” (25.VI. 1943). On a particularly slow-moving, quiet, hot and motionless day, Chess notes that “even the life of a criminal is worthy of envy compared to ours” (Chess 16.VI. 1943). Milch’s verdict is similarly grim: “We felt worse than prisoners. Prisoners can talk aloud in their cell” (184). Perhaps not surprisingly, the experience of time becomes a major problem. The diaries are replete with complaints about the slow movement of time: Irena Chess compulsively checked a clock, counting every hour. Brandla Siekierka noted that for her, “each day is like a year” (14.VI.1944).

Of particular significance among the time-passing activities curtailed in the attic is social talking. For diarist writing in insulated underground dugouts, this activity regularly appears

as an important part of coping. Twelve-year old Melania Weissenberg, hidden with an older cousin under a barn in South Poland, writes that “the most bearable time of day are the evenings, when we lie under the warm eiderdown and Kitten tells me various stories, which often make me burst out laughing” (IX.1943). Further east, in an earth dugout in the Eastern Galician town of Krzemeniec, M. Landsberg and his companion Rudy spend half of their day on what the author terms “discussions after dark”. The loss of this ability to speak is experienced as particularly traumatic, as speaking is associated with exerting autonomy: Irena Chess notes that “When I was still in the house, I had at least the freedom of a dog on a leash, it was half bad. I could go to the garden, speak loudly, play with Onynia, listen to stories and news that Dr. R. brought from the town, chat with Sławek” (25.VI.1943). Fela Fiszbein writes that even while her husband is only feet away, for large stretches of time “I have nobody to talk to. I keep all of it inside. I look bad. So does my husband” (30.V.1942).

The open and conductive nature of the attic, then, robbed those hiding there of the possibility to be mobile, conduct their daily activities and distractions, as well as exert perceived agency by talking inside their hiding place. On the other hand, it allowed those in hiding to hear the outside. A striking feature of diaries written in rural attics in this respect are the extensive depictions of outside sounds of nature. Irena Chess illustrates how immediate such an acoustic contact with natural sounds could be: When she wakes up in the morning, “before my eyes I see the chipped boards that separate us from the supposed world, I can hear the gru-gru- of pigeons who grumble like old grannies”. With time, “I can even distinguish individual voices. Some small bird sings somewhere close in the garden, but it has such a colorful voice that it often seems to me to be that of a woman. One can also hear a myriad of other voices and the accompaniment of frogs” (25.VI.1943). If this is, on the face of it, a positive experience, it could also turn into a painful reminder of a distant life that was, in the typical words of Maria Koper, “not for me” (5.V.1943).

The second large category of external sounds cataloged in diaries of Jews hiding in open spaces such as attics are human voices. With these, the perceived disconnect is even more pronounced. Irena Chess notes: “Through the cracks in the boards one can see [...] the backyard and the neighboring garden, in which from dusk till dawn resound [*rozbrzmiewają*] happy children's voices” (25.VI.1943). Sosia Zimmerman opens her notes with playing children and their “ringing, little voices”, who for her are a stark reminder of her own imprisonment. Throughout these diaries, the sound of free people turns out to be the hardest to endure. Baruch Milch learns to dread Sundays, when local youths gather in a forest glade

to sing (179). Fela Fiszbein became an ear-witness to a wedding, and “in the morning, the musicians arrived. As soon as the first chords resounded, I burst out in tears, this was an extreme contrast to our deathly [*trupiego*] life” (2.X.1943).

Summing up the above observations, the following can be noted. The interplay of the rural socio-acoustic environment on the one hand, and the highly acoustically transparent space of the attic on the other, created a precarious situation. Unlike hiding places such as cellars and dugouts, rural attics lacked the proximity of earth or cement walls and ceilings. They provided ample physical space, as well as direct sensory contact with the outside world, including nature and voices. One might expect this to provide a feeling of physical freedom. However, as even the slightest sound immediately transmitted their presence to the quiet and often surveilled environment outside, Jews hiding in these spaces effectively found themselves immobilized for large stretches of time. For them, the enclosure of air turned out to be more restrictive than that of earth, cement, and clay.

This had two notable consequences. Firstly, the arrested movement restricted basic cultural and social practices that were available in more insulated hideouts, such as preparing food, holding conversations, or, with few exceptions, taking an active part in designing one’s surroundings. In doing so, it set a limit on exerting even the smallest measure of control over one’s immediate environment. In an article examining Jews hiding on the “Aryan side” of Warsaw, Małgorzata Melchior points out that Jewish fugitives experienced a partial or complete loss of power over the course of their life (2007). Understood in terms of qualitative and in particular life course sociology, such experiences, associated with feelings of chaos and suffering, highlight a relationship to the overall “trajectory” of one’s life (2010). This trajectory can be met with active attempts at regaining control, an aspect made prominent in the work of sociologist Anselm Strauss, or be accepted as fate, a reaction stressed by authors such as Fritz Schütze (Riemann 1991). In the case of Jews in hiding, Melchior identifies a counter-strategy in their seeking out and designing hiding places which gave fugitive Jews a small measure and sense of control over their life course. Almost all of such activity was arrested in lofts and attics. The survey of the diaries with an ear for sound shows that for Jews in such hideouts, the loss of these last tools to actively regain control take center stage. This indicates that in these circumstances, such assertion was perceived as more important than finding successful ways of acceptance and coping. Tentatively, the counter-strategies by fugitive Jews in the face of their life trajectories which were noted by Melchior can be extended. It is possible not just to point to the process of looking for and constructing

shelters, but also to the above-mentioned micro-exertions of agency – small measures that are lost in acoustically transparent spaces, leading to an almost entirely passive state.

Secondly, the loss of these bodily practices also meant a loss of the ability to produce “local” sounds in hiding. The acoustic ecology of these hideouts instead was marked by the sounds of the surrounding village. The spaces inhabited by Jews in hiding were filled with the alienating sounds of others. In describing these, the diarists noted fears of being discovered, but also, with at least equal extent and intensity, feelings of exclusion. Especially voices testifying to others’ free and communal life are consistently described as reminders of an environment that was “not for” hidden Jews. This can serve to extend observations made by Marta Cobel-Tokarska in her study on hiding places in occupied Poland. In it, she notes the importance of the spatial environment for establishing a place of one’s own. “An attic, shed, basement, bunker, and a dugout can qualify to be surrogate homes. Wardrobes, barrels, sheets of tin – not really. It is hard to pinpoint a terminal point in this continuum of spatial forms of the hiding places we know about” (241). By allowing movement or offering limited freedom to adapt and shape one’s hiding place, the different spatial forms thus provided different opportunities to turn bare sites of survival into places imbued with meaning and even rudimentary sociality. Sound studies scholars have noted that such functions of inhabiting and place-making are often assisted by sound-making and hearing. Sounds facilitate humans’ felt and cognized relationships to particular environments. One needs only to think of the familiar sound of local church bells, or the ever-present rhythm of waves in a coastal town, to appreciate how they can play into producing a visceral sense of place. As these examples underscore, sounds may even “help heighten a sense of where the body feels ‘at home’, or not, that might be expressed in terms of belonging and alienation.” (Duffy and Waitt 2013:467). In the rudimentary “surrogate homes” of hideouts such as cellars and dugouts, this role could be played by the sound of a radio, everyday sounds of cooking or handicrafts, or the voice or snore of a hiding companion. Without the insulation necessary for this, those in attics could not enact their sensory presence in a place, much less make this presence a shared one. What is curtailed is an instrument for producing individual or communal “hereness”. If the criteria for what constitutes Cobel-Tokarska’s “surrogate homes” are thus hard to define in spatial terms, the ability to create one’s own sound-world thus provides a useful and important metric. On the extreme end of this were those hiding sites that did not afford those hiding in them any own sound production whatsoever. At best, they allowed alienating reminders of the social life of others to fill the space. At worst, they engendered painful

experiences of atomization that did not even allow for a sense of shared inhabitation of the hideout.

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