



FROM RESEARCH TO POETRY  
JUDIT FRIGYESI

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Judit Frigyesi studied with leading artists and scholars of musicology and ethnomusicology in Hungary, France, and the United States. After teaching at Brown and Princeton Universities, she has become an associate professor at Bar Ilan University, Israel. She has developed a wide scope of interests ranging from European folk and Middle Eastern art music to contemporary works. Her book *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest* is one of the first attempts to consider literature and music together: The book explores the meaning of music through poetry and of poetry through music. Since the beginning of her university studies in Budapest, she has been working on the music of the Eastern European Jews. She was the only scholar who systematically collected Jewish music in Communist Eastern Europe after the Holocaust. Her personal archive contains prayer tunes, songs, interviews, and life stories. She has been active also as a writer and creator of projects that combine her works in various media (poetry, film, audio, photography). Presently, she is working on an autobiographical novel recounting her musical experiences among the traditional Ashkenazi Jews. – Address: Department of Music, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 52900, Israel.

I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg with a lengthy draft: the residue of over twenty years of anthropological research on the traditional prayer chant of the East European Jews. I had been storing this “book almost written” on my computer for many years and was not certain that I wanted to write it at all.

Since the beginning, I was troubled by the ethical consequences of my research. Being a non-religious, assimilated Jew, I felt that I was intruding into the life of the Orthodox com-

munity. I took the “material” outside of the sphere of their control. I piled up melodies and life stories mostly of old people from remote villages, survivors of the Shoah. In the safety of my ethnomusicological laboratory, I tried to make sense of it all according to my professional standards and worldview. I was spinning myself in and out of this tradition, their memories and unspoken pains, not being able to find peace with it, among them and with myself. Our lives and our beliefs were vastly different, and I knew that I could never really understand them. Yet I felt that on a deeper level, I understood it all: music was the territory where our spiritual worlds met.

I always regarded my role to be that of a messenger, rather than a scholar. But to whom, why, how and what exactly was I to report? How much of this was I doing for myself, how much for scholarship – collecting melodies among these men whose dry eyes closed for me the path to the understanding of their horrendous century? What was I doing for *them*, for these people who were generous enough to share with me what they valued the most?

The issue of the responsibility of the scholar is often discussed in anthropology (ethnography, sociology), but in spite of lengthy debates and theorizing, at the end, most of us are left with doubts. Of course, there are always those who see no problem with anthropological undertaking and settle the question with a shrug. But I knew scholars who were so troubled by the situation that they left the field entirely.

Three months into my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg I began composing poems and short stories. Some dealt with Berlin, but most of them recounted my experience among these people, with their past and their music. I made a transition, involuntarily and perhaps unconsciously, from scholarly writing to artistic expression. Besides drafts for a novel and poems, I created a theatrical collage from my literary writings, together with excerpts from my audio and video field recordings. This material was complemented by live music performed by Ben Niran. This project was performed at the Wissenschaftskolleg in May, and later at the Theater im Gewölbe in the Cranach-Haus of Weimar. In July, I contributed three video images – excerpts from a collage about Berlin – to an exhibit at the Wissenschaftskolleg. I don’t think I have ever had a year that took me creatively in so many new directions.

I thank the staff of the Wissenschaftskolleg and my fellow scholars for their understanding, interest and encouragement. They created a uniquely intense and inspiring environment. Without their support I would not have had the courage to make these steps toward new forms of expression. The future will tell how far I can travel on this road.

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... collecting ...  
(Unfinished sketch)

This is a tape, magnetic band, disks, ssskssskks,  
scrape on the face of remembrance,  
rattling wheels of flurried frenzy,  
the complete collected unnecessary weeping words,  
he did not look at me, while informing,  
producing data, as it is written in the accounts:  
“My first informant was an old man who refused to tell me his name.”

... ? ...

The document of existence,  
in the crowd, by accident, trod on life,  
the staggered nothing wondered,  
and when you exited,  
we faced that ourselfness,  
which without leaving a trace,  
was gasped and gulped by darkness,

... hearthorror ...

And it still grows, the “there isn’t any  
trace” where I trace after my self,  
among the scanned, typed, recorded,  
among them,  
it is impossible that it happened as he said:  
„the darkness spread its wings and sheltered the frozen...”

Unglueable smells, torn sounds,  
we steal our way out, slip and sneak  
through the breaths between words,  
through the cracks of the objective,  
silence, buzz, murmur, sigh,  
consonants, rattle, clank, broken  
glass sprinkled over the sounds of memories,

The microphone in his mouth  
did not record that I no longer listened,  
because I dreamt of shards,  
although I know that it is only because of the smoke,  
that my hands are always cold when I reach after them,

My pillow was snow, the wind blew upward,  
magnetic dust fell into the skies,  
the sounds tumble-rattle-collapse,  
someone entered, noise of steps on the tape,  
you hear my voice, although I was not yet alive,

These are only fragments which will be corrected into  
a coherent and unified and scholarly,  
but for now I keep on talking with myself  
about that I don't know whether he is still alive,  
he survived everything already twenty-five years ago,  
but perhaps he survives this as well,  
this passing of time,  
the glass-membrane of the number of years  
cracks in the snowfall,  
and over the window, in front of my eyes,  
the branch brakes,

I pull my chair into the corner,  
so not to see what goes on outside,  
I listen to the torn chords  
from the other room,  
without the fear of the mirror.

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From the series "Berlin Shadows"