

# Jewish String Musicians Throughout the Holocaust

## Music in Concentration Camps

- Music in concentration camps served many roles, from private performances for guards, informal music-making in the barracks, used as a tool for propaganda, or performed during marches and executions
- Playing music could offer prisoners brief relief or small privileges, but it also placed them in morally and physically agonizing situations
- Survivors had mixed feelings about music’s role—some found solace, while others saw it as a painful reminder of coercion and survival at a cost
- Some musicians were hired by Nazi officers—this prolonged their lives and increased their chances of survival by granting them better living conditions and reduced manual labor due to their musical talents

### Louis Bannet (1911–2002)

- Survivor of Birkenau as a trumpeter and told " . . . Louis, you play for your life. . . "
- Bannet suffered severe physical injuries from the amount of playing required



## Affected Jewish Composers

### Hans Krasá (1899–1944)



Hans Krása, a Prague-born composer, was influenced by the French modernist group Les Six and initially focused on piano lessons and vocal coaching. After being imprisoned in Terezín, he resumed composing and became a prominent musician in the camp. His final work, “Passacaglia & Fugue for string trio”

(1944), was completed shortly before his death in Auschwitz. Photo from: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans\\_Kr%C3%A1sa\\_\(1899-1944\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans_Kr%C3%A1sa_(1899-1944).jpg)

### Gideon Klein (1919–1945)



Gideon Klein, a Moravian-born composer, was a highly sought-after musician from a young age. Captured soon after finishing his studies, he was forced to compose under inhumane conditions in Terezín. His final work, a string trio, was completed just nine days before he was sent to Fürstengrube, where he was killed under unknown circumstances.

Photo from: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gideon\\_Klein\\_wiki.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gideon_Klein_wiki.jpg)

### Viktor Ullmann (1898–1944)



Viktor Ullmann, a former Austrian army lieutenant, studied composition with Arnold Schoenberg and wrote extensively for piano and opera. In Terezín, he became a leading musical figure, deeply influenced by the camp’s conditions. His third string quartet was composed just months after his arrival, reflecting the realities of his imprisonment.

Photo from: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Viktor\\_Ullmann\\_edit.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Viktor_Ullmann_edit.jpg)

### Hans Gál (1890–1987)



Hans Gál, born near Vienna, was a composer, scholar, and pianist who fled Nazi persecution after being removed as Director of the Mainz Conservatory. Interned in a Scotland camp in 1940, he suffered severe health issues but continued to compose as a form of escapism. After his release, he settled in Edinburgh, where he worked as a music librarian and composer including his “Sonata in C Major for two violins and piano”.

Photo from: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans\\_Gal.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans_Gal.jpg)

### Szymon Laks (1901–1983)



Polish composer and violinist Szymon Laks studied mathematics before pursuing music at the Warsaw Academy. Imprisoned in Auschwitz, he survived by playing in and later conducting the camp orchestra. After the war, he continued composing and writing, offering a nuanced perspective on music’s role in the camps.

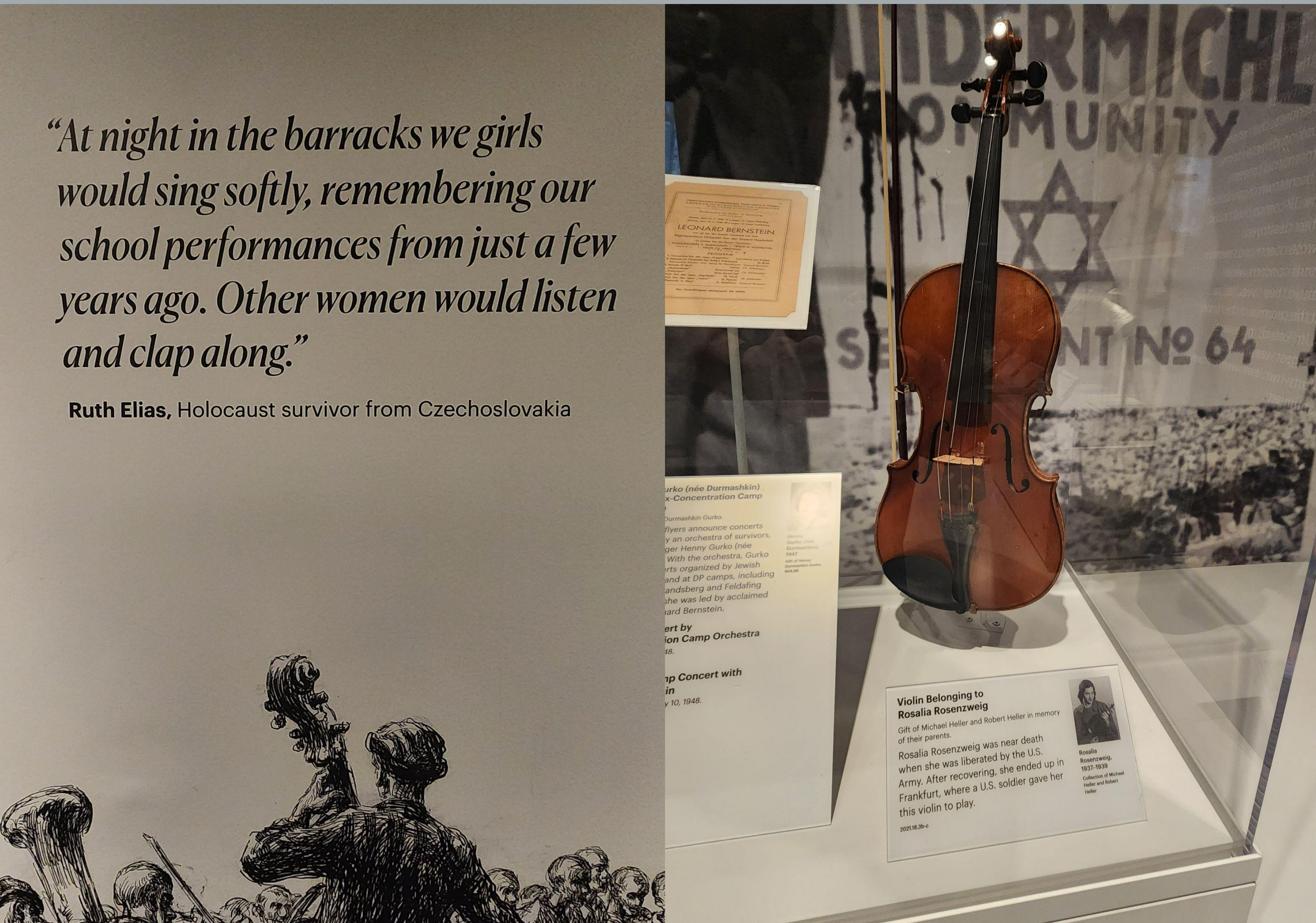
Photo from: <https://polishmusic.usc.edu/research/composers/szymon-laks/>

Alyssa Spina & Dr. Erin Brooks  
Learning and Research Fair Spring 2025

This project is supported by SUNY Potsdam’s Kilmer Program.  
To learn more about the program, search for SUNY Potsdam Kilmer Program.

## Research Process and Methods

- Conducted archival research at the Museum of Jewish Heritage and Amud Aish Museum in New York City, where I collaborated with experts in the field and museum studies, who assisted in documenting collections and providing access to exclusive documentaries and photos not on display
- Collaborated with my faculty mentor to refine my research approach and select key scholarly sources, ensuring a comprehensive and well-rounded historical analysis
- Prioritized primary sources from individuals with direct, personal connections to the Holocaust



## Lecture Recital Fall 2024

- Performed works by five selected composers while educating the audience on their stories and musical contributions.
- Presented to students, faculty, and community members across the North Country.
- Hosted a Q&A and reception to further discuss my research and engage with attendees.

