

On the centenary of the composer Mieczysław Weinberg (1919–1996)

By Clara Weiss
6 December 2019

December 8 marks one hundred years since the birth of the Polish-Jewish and Soviet composer Mieczysław Weinberg. A well-known saying suggests that books have their own destinies. The same might be said about music.

Weinberg's music, largely forgotten or ignored during his lifetime, has over the past 15 years enjoyed a slow but stubborn rediscovery. With an extraordinarily prolific output, including seven operas, 17 string quartets, almost a dozen song cycles, 22 symphonies and some 40 film scores, he is now generally recognized as one of the greatest composers of the 20th century.

Weinberg's work can be counted among the "lost music" of the 20th century. However, unlike many other Jewish and anti-fascist composers of his generation, he managed to survive fascism by fleeing to the Soviet Union. The Stalinist regime in the USSR bears a substantial portion of the responsibility for the long suppression of his music. Yet despite the horrors of Stalinism, whose roots he never grasped, Weinberg maintained an intense loyalty to the Soviet state, and to the ideals of justice, equality and humanism throughout his life, ideals that were expressed powerfully in his music.

The future composer was born in December 1919 in Warsaw, the capital of the newly formed Second Polish Republic. His father had fled the infamous Kishinev pogrom of 1903 in what is today Moldova. Both Weinberg's grandfather and great-grandfather were murdered in the pogrom, which went down in history as one of the most gruesome of the late Russian Empire. Before settling in Warsaw, his father toured Eastern Europe working as a musician for Yiddish theater groups.

The environment that Weinberg was exposed to in inter-war Warsaw was significantly shaped by the political and cultural impact of the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia. The Second Polish Republic was formed not least of all as a bulwark of French and British imperialism against the Soviet state. However, within the country's multi-ethnic and multi-religious working class, there was enormous sympathy for the Russian Revolution.

The successful struggle of the early Soviet government against anti-Semitism, in particular, and the Soviet policies of the 1920s that fostered previously oppressed cultures and peoples, inspired the development of Polish-Jewish culture and the labor movement. This sympathy was reinforced by a shared revolutionary tradition. For decades, the Polish, Jewish and Russian working-class movements and revolutionary intelligentsias had developed in so close a relationship to each other as to be almost inseparable.

Tragically, this close interconnection also made the impact of the rise of Stalinism and the political repression of the Left Opposition that was led by Leon Trotsky all the more devastating. The purges of the Bolshevik Party under Stalin, especially the Moscow Trials of 1936–1938, provoked enormous shock in Poland. In 1938, Stalin liquidated the Polish Communist Party. A vast number of Polish communists fell victim to the terror in the USSR. Despite these enormous crimes, the Russian and

Soviet tradition in literature and political thought continued to be enormously attractive to left-wing Polish intellectuals of the inter-war period. Weinberg himself was to a large extent a product of these traditions.

Warsaw between the world wars witnessed a flourishing of music, poetry, political cabaret, literature and painting, blending the long-suppressed traditions of Polish national culture with those of Yiddish, French, Russian and German arts. The work of his father made Weinberg well acquainted with Jewish and Polish folklore. Weinberg later recounted that he "was raised on national poetry (some of the greatest in the world) and in the musical environment in which the Chopin cult reigned." In addition, Polish musical life at the time was heavily influenced by the works of French Impressionist composers, especially Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, as well as the music of Béla Bartók. All of these influences would be very present in Weinberg's works, especially in the 1940s, but also beyond.

The young boy's musical gifts were soon discovered, and he was accepted at the Warsaw Conservatory, one of the finest in Europe at the time, when he was just 10 years old. Among those who took classes in composition and piano with Weinberg were Grażyna Bacewicz and Andrzej Panufnik, who would later become two of Poland's most famous post-World War II composers.

Almost as soon as he had entered the Conservatory, however, the world economic crisis began, striking Poland with particular severity. Weinberg's father lost his job and the young boy became the family's sole breadwinner. He later recalled: "In the morning, I took gigs at Jewish weddings where I would play folklore songs, 'mazel-tovs', accompanied the cantors, etc. I sight-read and improvised very well. Then I would run to [pianist and musicologist Józef] Turczyński's class, where I would play Liszt, Bach, Tchaikovsky ... Then at night I would play in a café: foxtrots, waltzes, slow dances ... I played that kind of music very well."

Weinberg also began composing. Although few of his compositions from the pre-Second World War period have survived, his first quartet did. He also composed music for films, something he would do throughout his life.

The rise of Hitler's Nazi Party to power in Germany in 1933 increasingly cast a shadow over political and cultural life in Poland. With substantial sections of the Polish state openly sympathetic to the anti-Semitic policies of the National Socialists, the government of Józef Piłsudski began to enact openly racist, anti-Jewish legislation. Warsaw became the scene of regular battles between fascist bands and groups of armed workers.

Weinberg, an excellent pianist, graduated from the Conservatory with a performance of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3, just weeks before the Nazis invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. The criminality of the Stalin-Hitler Pact, which enabled Hitler to launch the murderous attack, and the brutal character of the Stalinist dictatorship itself, have since often been used to equate the character of the Nazi occupation with that of

Soviet rule in Eastern Europe. The fate of Weinberg and his family graphically illustrates that this equation is profoundly false.

Weinberg, who fled almost immediately to Soviet territory, was the only member of his immediate family to survive the war. His parents and sister, who stayed behind in the German-ruled part of Poland, were murdered by the Nazis, although the exact circumstances and whereabouts of their deaths remain uncertain.

During his flight to the Soviet zone, Weinberg witnessed several massacres. He later recalled the crossing of the border, "I shall never forget how mothers with their children hugged the horses' legs, pleading to be allowed to cross to the Soviet side as swiftly as possible." A Soviet border guard gave Weinberg the name Moisei, the Yiddish version of his Polish *Mieczysław*. He would retain the Yiddish version in the Soviet Union until the 1980s. He eventually fled on to Minsk where he was able to study at the local Conservatory on a stipend provided by the Soviet state. In Minsk, he first became acquainted with the music of Dmitri Shostakovich.

Weinberg performed his graduation concert on June 21, 1941. Only hours later, in the early morning of June 22, the Nazis launched Operation Barbarossa—the code name for the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union—with almost 4 million soldiers, the largest invading army in modern history. Weinberg was able to flee to Tashkent in Central Asia (now Uzbekistan) before the German army overran Belarus in a matter of weeks.

Fleeing Nazi persecution to the USSR was hardly a guarantee of safety and security. In the spring of 1941, the Stalinist authorities deported many Polish-Jewish refugees to Siberia and Central Asia. Weinberg was no doubt fortunate to have avoided that fate. However, his survival as a refugee in the Soviet Union was not the exception but the rule. Up to 350,000 Polish Jews fled to the Eastern part of Poland in September 1939. The vast majority of Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust—only 10 percent out of the pre-war population of 3.5 million—did so in the Soviet Union.

Weinberg was acutely aware that he owed his life to the existence of the USSR, and dedicated his first symphony, composed in the summer of 1942, to the Red Army.

In Tashkent, Weinberg became integrated into the Soviet cultural elite. The city was transformed into a major cultural center during the war as a substantial section of the Soviet intelligentsia was evacuated there. He married the daughter of Solomon Mikhoels, a leading Soviet Jewish actor who had by then become the head of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. During those years, he also first came in personal contact with Shostakovich, who had been impressed with some of his early works and was then living in Kuibyshev. It was the beginning of an intellectual and musical friendship that would last for over three decades.

During the mid-1940s, Weinberg composed several notable works, most of them chamber music, a genre in which Weinberg particularly excelled. These included his Piano Quintet (1944) and his Fifth and Sixth String Quartets (1945/46). The latter, in particular, bears resemblance to the musical language of Shostakovich. His Fifth String Quartet, composed in 1945, is a moving work reflecting the horrors of the war. However, though conveying a sense of intense grief and loss, it does not succumb to despair, and ends on a serious yet hopeful note.

Enormous political and cultural pressure was imposed on artists such as Weinberg in the immediate post-war period. The Stalinist bureaucracy had been forced to loosen its control over political and cultural life to mobilize Soviet society against the Nazi invasion. However, once the war was over, fear of revolutionary opposition within the working class and intelligentsia gripped the regime.

In 1948, Stalin launched another round of purges, targeting above all Jewish intellectuals. Weinberg's father-in-law Mikhoels was arrested, along with other leading figures of Soviet Yiddish life, and soon

murdered. Fearing the public reaction to the assassination of the internationally well-known Mikhoels, the Soviet secret police, at the order of Stalin, disguised the killing as a hit-and-run car accident.

Artistic life was stifled during the infamous Zhdanovshchina (the Zhdanov Doctrine period—named after the arch-Stalinist cultural minister Andrei Zhdanov), which, from 1946 onward, included the ban on "formalist" art and music and reinforced the imposition of "socialist realism" as the only legitimate artistic form of expression. Among the works banned under "Order 17" was Weinberg's Sixth String Quartet.

Weinberg, who was under constant surveillance by the secret police starting in 1948, retreated, like virtually all of his contemporaries, into composing "safe," folklorist music. Among the most notable compositions of that time was his Rhapsody on a Moldavian Theme (it was actually a Jewish theme, but Weinberg for political reasons chose to call it Moldavian).

During the night following the work's premiere by the violinist David Oistrakh in January 1953, Weinberg's apartment was raided and he was arrested and imprisoned. The recollections of the raid on his home by his first wife graphically illustrate the politically counterrevolutionary character of the purges, which represented an open reversal of the struggle against anti-Semitism that had been waged by the Soviet government under Lenin and Trotsky:

"Do you know what this is?" the KGB man asked me and my sister menacingly, waving Lenin's *The Jewish Question in Russia* under our noses. 'What, is it also forbidden to be in possession of Lenin?' we asked in amazement. 'This is nationalist literature!' And he added the book to the confiscated papers. Among the 'dangerous' documents, by the way, were drawings by my seven-year-old daughter. When at last they departed, the house looked as though after a pogrom."

The arrest occurred most likely in relation to the notorious "Doctors' Plot," in which Stalin's Jewish doctors were arrested and accused of plotting to murder the dictator. Mikhoels' cousin, who had been Stalin's personal physician, was among those arrested. Shostakovich reportedly wrote a letter to Stalin asking for Weinberg's release (the letter has never been found), and he and his wife signed papers for the adoption of Weinberg's daughter should her father be killed.

Weinberg was released about six weeks after Stalin died on March 5, 1953. It took several years for Weinberg to fully recover as a composer from these shocks, although he managed to compose notable works, such as his Fourth Piano Sonata (1955).

Significantly improved conditions for his work emerged with the so-called Thaw period. The acknowledgment of some of Stalin's worst crimes in First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956 led to a relative relaxation of political and cultural censorship.

After years in which Soviet composers were almost entirely cut off from political and cultural developments in the West, they were suddenly (re)introduced to international musical life. Figures such as British composer Benjamin Britten became close friends with Shostakovich and many other leading Soviet musicians. In 1957, Canadian pianist Glenn Gould became the first North American pianist to play in the USSR since the Second World War, performing eight concerts in Moscow and Leningrad, along with a concert of works by Schoenberg, Webern and Berg for conservatory students and teachers in Moscow.

In Poland, the annual Warsaw Autumn Festival became the center for musical experimentation by the avant-garde. Like Shostakovich, Weinberg welcomed the opportunity to interact with international developments, while largely continuing to compose within the framework of tonality and remaining uninvolved with serialism.

Major social and historical experiences that had been essentially banned from public discussion earlier could now be addressed by artists in their work. While an honest and serious reckoning with the history of the

October Revolution, including Trotsky's role, remained taboo, the traumatic experiences of the Second World War and the Holocaust could now, if only in a limited manner, be addressed by artists and intellectuals. The Stalinist regime finally admitted that the war had claimed at least 20 million lives, not just 10 million, the absurdly low number given by Stalin. (Even this terrible number was a stark underestimation. It was corrected upward to 27 million in the 1980s, and may have been as high as 40 million.)

The genocide of the Jews, which had been subsumed into the general war against "the Soviet people," could be talked about, though in a restricted way and often with significant censorship. The most notable event in this regard was the publication of Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem "Babi Yar" in 1961. Shostakovich famously worked this poem into his monumental 13th Symphony, which he titled "Babi Yar."

The late 1950s and the 1960s would arguably become Weinberg's musically most significant decade. The central themes in virtually all of his compositions of that time were the Second World War and, increasingly, the Holocaust.

Among his compositions were the score for the anti-war movie *The Cranes Are Flying* (1957), four string quartets, eight song cycles, several sonatas and symphonies, a requiem, and his masterpiece, the opera *The Passenger*. In addition, he composed several works for cello solo, including 24 preludes. In most of these works, Polish themes and lyrics were dominant, and many were based on poems by the Polish-Jewish poet Julian Tuwim.

His Eighth Symphony (1964), for instance, is based on the poetic cycle *Polish Flowers* (*Kwiaty Polskie*) in which Tuwim, exiled in Brazil, recalled his youth in pre-war *Łódź*. It is one of Weinberg's earliest, direct reckonings with the Holocaust. Although references to Jewish characters were removed by the censors in the Russian translation of the poems, Weinberg counteracted this by using explicitly Jewish motifs in the music (along with Polish folk motifs). Weinberg later explained he had wanted "to write a work in which all the events would be reflected on which the poem was founded—the social contrasts in Poland before the war, the horrors of war, and at the same time the deep faith of the poet in the victory of freedom, justice and humanism."

Tuwim and Weinberg had moved in similar circles in pre-war Warsaw, where Tuwim was well-known for his poems denouncing Polish nationalism, anti-Semitism and militarism. After the war, which Tuwim survived in exile, the latter was one of several leading Polish intellectuals who returned to Poland, filled with admiration and respect for the Red Army's fight against the Nazis and believing that the newly established Soviet-controlled government would offer a better, socialist future. Soon disillusioned by Stalinism, he died in 1953. Weinberg no doubt recognized many of the central themes of his life and work in Tuwim's writings.

Weinberg also addressed the experiences of the war, including the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima, in his Requiem (1965), a beautiful and disturbing work. Perhaps Weinberg's most important work, however, was the aforementioned opera *The Passenger*. Based on a radio play by the Polish author and Auschwitz survivor Zofia Pomys, it is now slowly being recognized as one of the 20th century's most significant operas. A historically important and politically and musically challenging work, it betrays Weinberg's enormous artistic gifts as well as considerable political insights into the nature of the post-war political system, which saw the reentry of former Nazi criminals and collaborators into German society.

Weinberg's opera centers on a West German couple on board a ship bound for Brazil in the late 1950s. The husband is about to take up a position at the German embassy in the South American country. The voyage is thrown into turmoil when the wife thinks she recognizes one of her fellow passengers as a former inmate at the Auschwitz death camp,

where she had worked as a guard. The opera then moves to flashback scenes in Auschwitz. We learn that the former Auschwitz guard, in a fit of anger, hurt feelings and revenge, arranged for the woman inmate's lover, Tadeusz, a musician, to be murdered. The opera culminates in a profoundly moving and disturbing scene, in which Tadeusz begins to play, instead of the requested waltz, Bach's Chaconne, before he is murdered.

The Passenger was discussed twice by the Composers' Union. (A recording of the production in Russian and German is available [here](#).) Shostakovich said at the Union: "I'm in a state of extraordinary excitement ... Apart from its astonishing musical qualities this work is extraordinarily contemporaneous and extraordinarily important in our days." Not only Shostakovich, but also the composers Rodion Shchedrin, Aram Khachaturian, Alfred Schnittke, Sofia Gubaidulina, Edison Denisov and others were full of praise for the work. Conductor Gennady Rozhdestvensky, a life-long supporter of Weinberg, wanted to put it on as soon as possible.

The circumstances under which the opera's performance was prevented in the USSR have not been conclusively determined. However, everything indicates that it was precisely its musical power and contemporary political and intellectual relevance, alluded to by Shostakovich, that sealed *The Passenger*'s fate. The opera would not be fully performed until 2010, after both Weinberg and Alexander Medvedev, who authored the libretto, had died (See also: [The Passenger depicts the Holocaust and its aftermath in opera form](#)).

Weinberg began composing the opera in 1965, when the Thaw had already ended. He completed it in 1968, shortly after a general strike in France that shook the government of Charles de Gaulle to the core. Student protests in Warsaw were met with a vicious anti-Semitic campaign by the Stalinist bureaucracy, and in August the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia was suppressed by Soviet tanks.

The political climate in the Soviet Union shifted sharply to the right. While signs of renewed anti-Semitism had become apparent since the early 1960s (and Khrushchev, it must be said, was himself a well-known anti-Semite), the fear of a working-class uprising against the bureaucracy prompted the government to launch a massive, targeted promotion of Russian nationalism and anti-Semitism. The political and musical message of Weinberg's opera went against these political campaigns at virtually every level.

Substantial sections of the intelligentsia moved considerably to the right, abandoning all hopes in socialism, and turning, in many cases, to religion and nationalism. The Soviet avant-garde composers Schnittke, Gubaidulina and Denisov, who had championed the serialist music of Schoenberg in the 1960s, began composing religious music in the 1970s. Weinberg resisted these trends and fell out of fashion. The death of Shostakovich in 1975 considerably added to his growing isolation.

Nevertheless, he continued to compose important works. His String Quartet No. 16 (1981) is among his strongest works of that genre. Of great emotional intensity, it combines, in sharp rhythmic changes, expressions of enormous anger, even aggression, despair and pain, with very lyrical moments that convey hope and quiet conviction. His last string quartet, No. 17 (1986), though calmer and lighter, possesses great lyricism. One of his last works was the Symphony No. 21 (1991), among his most important symphonies, which he dedicated to the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto. Several of his late works remain to be premiered.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and restoration of capitalism threw Weinberg into poverty, leaving him without the means even to buy necessary medicine. He died, almost entirely forgotten by the musical world, in 1996.

Weinberg has long stood under the shadow of Shostakovich and has even been denounced as an epigone. This is an incorrect evaluation not only of Weinberg, whose remarkably prolific output bears the mark of

great originality, but also of the relationship between the two composers, and ultimately their approach to and understanding of music.

The musical influence, though perhaps not equivalent, was mutual. From Weinberg's 1943 move to Moscow right up until Shostakovich's death in 1975, the two composers met on an almost daily basis, and often vacationed together. They frequently played their respective scores to each other on the piano, including before works were completed, and then discussed them. Weinberg has been credited, in particular, with deepening Shostakovich's engagement with Jewish influences in music, and with the Holocaust. Both men were, by all accounts, exceptionally modest and devoted entirely to their work.

Both were part of an incredibly rich artistic and cultural milieu, which included figures such as Gilels, Oistrakh, and later Sviatoslav Richter, Mstislav Rostropovich, the Borodin Quartet, and the conductors Kirill Kondrashin, Evgeny Mravinsky and Rozhdestvensky. All of these figures nurtured each other artistically, intellectually and personally. Despite the murder of large sections of the socialist intelligentsia during the Stalinist Terror, the conception of art held by the most important Soviet artists was still significantly shaped by the powerful cultural and political traditions of the Russian intelligentsia: above all, they had a fundamentally social conception of the arts, and the conviction that art had to advance the best in humanity and express truthfully the experiences of individuals and society as a whole.

In his obituary for Shostakovich, Weinberg pointed out that the late composer had "liked those works ...in which the music carried an emotional charge, where it was pursuing highly ethical ideas, where it touched on the essence of human existence. The greatness of his music consists in the fact that it is inseparable from the most burning problems that stir the consciousness of our contemporaries." Similar humanistic convictions and ideals underlay the work of Weinberg. At its best, his music conveys the feelings of dislocation, loss, confusion, anger and grief, but also of hope and defiance, that were felt by millions.

This also helps explain how Weinberg could sustain himself artistically and intellectually during decades of extreme political and cultural repression and isolation. It also guarantees that his works retain to this day tremendous relevance and emotional immediacy. In a period that—like his own—is shaped by wars and revolutions, these qualities ensure that Weinberg's works will become meaningful to new generations of listeners.

Reference works:

David Fanning, *Mieczysław Weinberg: In Search of Freedom*, Wolke Verlag, 2010.

Verena Mogl, "Juden, die ins Lied sich retten"—*Der Komponist Mieczysław Weinberg (1919–1996) in der Sowjetunion* ["Jews who save themselves in song"—The composer Mieczysław Weinberg (1919–1996) in the Soviet Union], Waxmann Verlag, 2017.

Daniel Elphick, *Music Behind the Iron Curtain: Weinberg and his Polish Contemporaries*, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>