Between Collective Memory and Manipulation: The Holocaust, Wagner and the Israelis

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No need for fine distinctions here. There is no doubt that in the popular mind Wagner has become the classic symbol of anti-Semitism and the spiritual father of Nazism. There is nothing to argue about here, and we could line up a thousand proofs, but even if we don’t agree, this is what happened and it is an inalienable part of the culture of the State of Israel. The first boycott of Wagner was begun by the people in the art world themselves, by the Philharmonic Orchestra of the State of Israel, when, after Kristallnacht, it canceled its performance of a Wagner piece. This means that the musicians themselves felt they just could not do it.1

This pronouncement by Member of Knesset (MK) Shaul Yahalom at the opening of a special meeting of the Knesset Education and Culture committee in May 2001 highlighted Wagner’s unique status in Israeli culture as a symbol of anti-Semitism in general and National Socialism in particular — and, accordingly, as a part of the Israeli collective memory of the Holocaust. The subtext of Yahalom’s speech was as interesting as the speech itself. The fact that such a debate was even taking place in the Knesset was a measure of the degree of political involvement in the subject, and Yahalom’s membership of the National Religious Party suggests that the debate over Wagner reflected broad cultural characteristics of Israeli society. Even the date of the speech, 8 May 2001, was significant, inviting reflections on the fraught relationship between Israel and Germany. On the day that Europe was celebrating the 56th anniversary of the Allied victory over Nazi Germany, the organizers of the Israel Festival to be held in Jerusalem in late May—early July were asked to cancel a concert at which the Berlin State Orchestra, conducted by its musical director, Daniel Barenboim, was to play the first act of Richard Wagner’s Die Walküre.2

In this context, I would like to examine and analyze the process by which Wagner became a symbolic part of the commemoration of the Holocaust in Israel. After reviewing some of the stages in that process, many of which
coincided with climactic moments in the public discussion of the Holocaust, I will argue that the means by which Wagner became a symbol was closely related to the nature of Holocaust commemoration in Israeli culture.3 Moreover, I see a definite parallel between the character of the Wagner debate and the way that the public debate on the Holocaust has been conducted. In both cases the debate began among Holocaust survivors and the relatives of those murdered, and then expanded to the general public. Thus, each debate involved a transition from the private memories of those personally affected by the Holocaust to the collective memory of all Israelis, who see the Holocaust as a shared national experience. The issue is also a focus for yet another significant correlation, that between the development of ideology and the gradual formation of national identity — in other words, the Wagner debate has served as a catalyst in the creation of that specific part of the Jewish-Israeli identity that is related to the collective experiences of Holocaust survivors and their impact on Israeli society.4 Similarly, the public debate concerning the status Israel should assign German culture in general and Wagner in particular sometimes overflowed into concerns over the shaping of Israeli culture. In this respect it is notable that Israeli society tends to see ideological opposition to the Nazi heritage and the duty to remember the Holocaust as a unifying element in modern Hebrew-Jewish culture. Finally, I will examine Wagner's status as part of the Israeli collective memory of the Holocaust today, and try to determine whose memory it really is.5

Most of the rounds of the Wagner debate in Israel have coincided with other debates concerning the Holocaust and relations between Israel and Germany or between Israelis and Germans. Criticism of Wagner focused primarily on his anti-Semitic attitudes, which he expressed both privately and in a vituperative article entitled “Das Judentum in der Musik,” published initially under a pen name and later under his own name.6 In addition, the nationalistic interpretation given to his musical works both during his lifetime and after his death, his adoption by the Nazis and his characterization — refuted only in recent years — as the composer whom Hitler admired were the main reasons for his lasting rejection by Israel.7 These points against him were further reinforced over the years by the testimony of Holocaust survivors, for whom the sounds of Wagner's music could never be dissociated from the image of Jews being marched to their deaths in the concentration camps.8

As Yahalom mentioned, Wagner was taken off the program of the Palestine Symphony Orchestra (which would later become the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra [IPO]) for the first time immediately after Kristallnacht in November 1938. The program of the concert that was to open the season three days after Kristallnacht was changed at the request of the orchestra's management. The conductor, Arturo Toscanini, himself
a voluntary exile who had refused to put his art at the service of the Fascist regime in Italy, replaced the overture to *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* — a work popular at Nazi Party conventions — with another piece. Plans to play Wagner compositions in Israel were subsequently canceled on many occasions, always for ideological reasons.

In the 1950s and 1960s the Wagner issue became linked to the controversy over performing music by Richard Strauss, the first director of the Nazi Propaganda Ministry’s Music Division. Towards the end of 1952, about ten months after negotiations over German reparations to Israel were announced, the country was rife with rumors that the IPO was going to perform pieces by Wagner and Strauss, an idea that stirred up great public turmoil. In the spring of 1953, in the same week as the Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day, the Jewish violinist Jascha Heifetz played Strauss’s Sonata for Violin in the course of a series of recitals he was giving in Israel. He was fiercely attacked by the press, and ultimately physically assaulted on the street. In the summer of 1966, a year after the establishment of diplomatic ties with West Germany and five years after the Eichmann trial, the IPO printed an article in its concert programs announcing its intention of playing works by Wagner and Strauss. The ensuing public uproar led it to cancel this plan.

Another similar declaration of intent rekindled the conflict in the winter of 1981, a time when Prime Minister Menachem Begin was embroiled in a grim battle with West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt over a political statement made by the latter. Visiting Saudi Arabia earlier that year, Schmidt had taken responsibility for the Palestinian refugee problem, explaining that since the establishment of the State of Israel was the consequence of the Holocaust, the refugee problem it had created should be taken care of by the Germans. This phase of the controversy also featured elements of xenophobia and general pronouncements on the implications of adopting Western culture in the State of Israel. A new attempt to lift the boycott exactly one decade later again elicited protests. This time an aggravating factor was the recent Gulf War, during which newspapers in Israel had often compared Saddam Hussein to Adolf Hitler, and the modern threat of gas warfare to the horrifying use of Zyklon B in the past. In the spring and summer of 2001, the issue was not only the performance of Wagner’s music in itself, but also the fact that it was to be performed by a German orchestra in the Israeli capital.

On all these occasions, and on others not directly linked to other debates on the Holocaust and Israeli–German relations, the voice of Holocaust survivors was a central factor. Despite the process of fragmentation that Israeli society has undergone over the past 20 years, in which emphasis has been placed on the disparities between secular and religious Jews, Jews and Arabs, urban areas and peripheral settlements — in contrast to the unity and
solidarity that characterized it until the late 1960s — the hallowed nature of the memory of the Holocaust is still a common denominator in Israeli society. The survivors insisted that performing Wagner's works was an insult to the memory of the dead who had been marched to their doom to the strains of his music. At the very least, Wagner was beyond the pale by virtue of his proto-Nazi ideology, which had influenced National Socialism itself. The degree of Wagner's anti-Semitism has been seriously discussed in Israel only in the last 20 years, since the renewal of the controversy in 1981 and the publication of the first Hebrew translation of Wagner's diatribe against Jews, “Das Judentum in der Musik,” in 1984. Long before that quite a few caustic articles had been published associating Wagner with anti-Semitism in such terms as “the horrible influence that Wagner's music exercised on the German beasts of prey,” or, with respect to Strauss, “The sounds of spiritual and moral degeneracy arose from the magical violin [of Jascha Heifetz] and entered Jewish ears that remained attached to their heads after 10 years of total annihilation.”

Some of the authors of these harsh articles were themselves Holocaust survivors or relatives of those who had been murdered. In recent years, as their active lives as journalists and politicians draw to an end, some of them have been moved to appeal to Israeli courts for injunctions against the performance of Wagner's music in Israel. From September 2000 to May 2001, survivors took court action against Wagner's music both as individuals and through the umbrella organization of Holocaust survivors no fewer than five times. This development would seem to be a natural extension of the significant increase in legal actions in Israel in the last decades, and of the heavy involvement of the courts — especially the Supreme Court — in Israeli public life. Now, however, other survivors broke the traditional unified stand of the past to complain that they would no longer serve as tools in the hands of those who saw themselves as the representatives of all survivors.

This declaration underlined a very problematic factor in the Israeli attitude to Holocaust survivors: up to that point, and despite the theoretical recognition that every survivor had his or her own personal story, survivors had been perceived as a monolithic body in Israeli society. But now, in letters sent primarily to musical institutions and, less frequently, to the press, some survivors expressed contempt for those who had made a career out of being a Holocaust survivor. They exploit every opportunity to shout and cry . . . I, too, am a Holocaust survivor, left disabled after Nazi persecution. The Nazis murdered part of my family. Yet, despite that, I keep myself sane, distinguish between past and present, emotion and sense, and politics and art.
Thus, it appears in fact that survivors’ declining public activity and the courts’ increasing involvement in public life were not the only reasons for their more frequent recourse to the law. To a large extent, the open dissension among the survivors, their decreasing numbers and their fear of radical erosion in the special status Israeli society had accorded them for so many years were their real reasons for taking legal action. These may also be the reasons for the increasing involvement of politicians in the issue, an idea I will return to later.

Survivors had reacted strongly to the Wagner issue before this. In 1981 Dov Shilansky, the deputy minister in the prime minister’s office and a Holocaust survivor himself, made some very insulting remarks about Zubin Mehta, the IPO musical director, who was determined to conduct Wagner’s music in Israel. In a radio interview, Shilansky recommended that Mehta go back to where he had come from — India. This xenophobic message was in tune with some of the articles in the press, one of which, by another Holocaust survivor, asked:

how would Zubin Mehta and his people react if, for example, they were all brought into some place in which there were sacred cows, and someone stood up and said: “We are about to slaughter the cows. Anyone who doesn’t want to see it should leave.” Does that seem all right to Zubin Mehta?

Thus, on the public level Holocaust survivors and relatives of the dead seemed to be insisting on an Israeli monopoly on the right to make decisions concerning Wagner, and they were not willing to entrust this right to a foreigner — even a faithful friend of Israel, as Mehta was described in other articles.

Ten years later it became apparent that it was not only foreignness that disturbed the survivors. When Daniel Barenboim, identified as an Israeli, took up the daunting challenge of breaking the boycott on Wagner, he discovered that there were other factors that disqualified people from discussing the subject. Barenboim had led the anti-boycott movement since 1989, and, ultimately, after conducting a special concert of Wagner’s works at the end of 1991, he was attacked on account of his excessive youth — as someone who had been only a child at the time of the Holocaust and was therefore unqualified to debate issues connected with it, in this case the performance of Wagner’s music in Israel. Only then was it evident that nationality was not enough to entitle anyone to discuss Wagner; you had to be part of the right generation as well. In this respect, the 1991 conflict reflected Holocaust survivors’ eagerness to appropriate an exclusive franchise on decisions concerning Wagner and, perhaps, to retain the great power they had held during the initial debates over the Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day in Israel. It should be remembered, however, that most of the publicists
writing on the subject at the time were too young to have gone through the Holocaust themselves, and some of them did not even have any relatives who had. At this point an interesting contradiction was visible between the ambition to turn the Holocaust into a collective historical experience and the desire to maintain it as a private, personal experience.

Yet Holocaust survivors are not the only people who have tried to prevent Wagner's infiltration of Israeli society, nor are they the only ones accused of emotional manipulation with respect to this issue. The controversy has been fueled to a huge extent by politicians across the political spectrum. In the 1950s and 1960s members of both the right-wing Herut and the left-wing Mapam parties played the most prominent role, bitterly opposing Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's diplomatic gestures towards Germany — or “the other Germany,” as he called it. Since the 1980s they have been joined by Labor and National Religious Party MKs. All of them have pursued the matter in the Knesset by means of interpellations or debates in the Knesset Education and Culture Committee. All of them have made authoritarian, manipulative use of the Holocaust to resolve the Wagner-Strauss issue and to take it off the public agenda once and for all. Following a 1956 interpellation by MK Esther Raziel-Naor (Herut) on the subject of Strauss, during which she demanded that the orchestra lose its state funding if it played a work by Strauss, Menachem Begin, the head of her own party, intervened. He argued that the Education Ministry's policy of non-intervention in the issue undermined the commemoration of the Holocaust.24 Subsequent discussion in the Knesset followed the same lines, except that from the 1980s onwards personal notes were injected — for example, by survivor Dov Shilansky, and by Labor MK Hagai Meirom, who cited his mother's persecution by the Nazis in order to justify the ban on Wagner's music in Israel.25 As Begin had pointed out back in the 1950s, Israeli education ministers' basic policy on Wagner was non-intervention. Every education minister, regardless of political party affiliation, tried to avoid taking a stand on the issue, the sole exception being Professor Ben-Zion Dinur, one of the founders of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem; he appealed to Jascha Heifetz personally to stop playing Strauss in Israel.26 In general, the Wagner issue has given politicians a conduit for ideas and feelings that they usually have to suppress at the political level for pragmatic reasons. Thus, Israeli politics are responsible both for the rational measures taken with respect to Germany and for the emotional responses to German culture.

Of course, political pragmatism and cultural emotionalism cannot be compared. Economic or diplomatic decisions exist on a different plane from cultural rapprochement, which is emotionally based. Yet the perception of culture as unique in this respect merits further examination. Almost from the beginning the Wagner controversy has also symbolized a struggle
over the nature of Israeli culture, and to a large degree it has shown that an internalized resistance to German heritage has played an essential role in the formation of the new Jewish-Hebrew identity. An excellent definition of this role was written in 1991 by an Israeli publicist, Ariel Hirschfeld, who argued: “Abstaining from Wagner is one of the few truly cosmopolitan acts carried out here in the musical field, an act that does not resemble the provincial, imitative sycophancy typical of musical life here and of the Philharmonic in particular.”

This attitude dovetailed with the ideas that had already been expressed generally in the 1950s and 1960s, and which were recycled from the 1980s on, mostly at the initiative of religious Jews. In the 1950s and 1960s the managers of the IPO were not only compelled to defend the orchestra’s decisions with respect to Wagner and Strauss, on the grounds that artistic considerations were involved; they were also called upon to address other issues directly connected with the shaping of a modern, national Israeli culture. Thus, they were directly involved in the decisions made during the 1950s and 1960s in response to the controversies over vocal concerts in the German language—a language whose use on stage had been banned by the Film and Theater Review Board—and performances of Christian liturgical music. During those years, it was very clear that cultural affairs were closely linked with national issues, including the significance of the Holocaust in Israeli public discourse. The clearest evidence of this in the context of our subject was the censorship exercised against public use of the German language.

It may have been the demise of that censorship in the late 1960s, or fears that the slowly receding memory of the Holocaust would vanish altogether, that reawakened the polemic in the 1980s. This time the standard-bearers of the cause were mostly publicists and politicians from the religious sector. Religious papers presented the controversy over Wagner as evidence supporting their demand that every effort be made to foster the Hebrew character of the state. They also used it to attack secular Jews who complained that the Ultra-Orthodox did not heed the siren signaling the minute of silence on Holocaust Remembrance Day; generally their attitude was, “how dare you accuse us, when you listen with enjoyment to the music of an anti-Semite, Wagner?” In the latest clash, during the summer of 2001, the religious dimension of the debate achieved new prominence in a letter to the editor by a member of “Professors for a Strong Israel,” a group identified with the Israeli Right. After remarking that “undoubtedly Germany, with all its institutions, is trying to cleanse itself of the sins of the Holocaust, and there is no place like Israel to do that,” the author added:

How symbolic it is that precisely on the eve of 17 Tammuz, the date on which a fast-day was declared to commemorate the destruction of
the walls of Jerusalem, the representatives of German culture managed to undermine the walls of Jewish culture and honor, and, by playing Wagner, placed a German cultural icon on an Israeli stage.30

The increasingly shrill tone of the debate concerning the general cultural context of playing Wagner’s music in Israel seems to be linked not only to the growing combative nature of public expression in Israel in general, but also to the fears I have already mentioned. The increasing remoteness of the Holocaust, which might have been expected to moderate emotional attitudes towards it, is producing the exact opposite effect. This can probably be attributed to the fear that memory and the mechanisms of its conservation, imprinted in Israeli society and culture, are being eroded. Evidence of such fear can be found in the wide range of activities focusing on the Holocaust, which are based not only on a multifaceted approach to the subject, but also on the need to preserve the Holocaust as a living memory, regardless of the danger of over-saturation.

Another issue, no less central, concerns both the changing composition of Israeli society and the processes of commemorating the Holocaust that this society has internalized to date. In the 1950s, a quarter of all Israelis were Holocaust survivors; but today their numbers are naturally declining in society in general and in public life in particular. Yet in the 60 years that have passed since the beginning of the Final Solution up to today, the commemorative process has changed character twice. Initially Holocaust awareness erupted from the personal memories of survivors into the Israeli collective memory — and in this respect the central role played by the Eichmann trial testimony is well known. Later, the memory of the Holocaust returned to the personal level, with the invocation of individual Holocaust victims in the framework of the projects grouped under the slogan “Unto Every Person There Is a Name.”31

In these respects, the debates on Wagner in Israeli society and the changes they have undergone over the years are very similar to the debates on the nature of Holocaust commemoration in Israel. Thus, for example, in the 1950s — the decade when the Knesset twice enacted laws defining the character of the national Holocaust Remembrance Day as well as the Law for the Punishment of Nazis and their Collaborators, when the Yad Vashem museum was founded, and when Israeli society was watching the Kapo trials and the more publicized Grünwald-Kasztner case — the Wagner-Strauss issue came up three times, and in one instance went all the way to the Knesset.32 In the 1960s, when the Israeli public was coping with both the chilling testimony of the Eichmann trial and the establishment of full diplomatic relations with West Germany, there was talk of relaxing the ban on the performance of Christian liturgical music and vocal works in German even before
the perennial Wagner controversy broke out again. Israel's changing self-perceptions — conditioned by the Six Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973, oscillating between fear of annihilation and an intoxicating sense of power — also had implications for Holocaust memory, leading to a certain moderation of the Wagner controversy as well. However, everything that had seemed to be part of a rational process paralleling the increasing temporal distance from the Holocaust itself was undermined in the 1980s with respect to both Holocaust remembrance in Israel in general and the Wagner controversy in particular.

Since the 1980s, and particularly in the 1990s, there has been a growing awareness of the processes of Holocaust commemoration. Although the standard official ceremonies have remained unchanged, other forms of remembrance have multiplied alongside them: survivors are invited to school classrooms and special seminars to tell their stories; trips to the death camps are organized; intensive media attention is paid to the feelings of second-generation survivors; and there has been an outpouring of works in various artistic media on the subject of the Holocaust. Meanwhile, particularly fierce rounds of the Wagner conflict took place in 1981 and again in 2001. As mentioned, I attribute the intensive renewed activity in the field of shaping Holocaust memory both to the anxiety aroused by the increasing remoteness of the Holocaust experience and to the sweeping involvement of the entire Israeli society in the process of remembrance. Wagner, who had become a symbol in Israel in the early days of statehood because of his ideas, his writing on art, and the way he was viewed after his death, has, in more recent years, also served as a brick in the edifice of Holocaust remembrance; these years have shown that not only survivors see him as a symbol, but also the wider public, some of whom view the Holocaust as a collective historic experience rather than a personal one. Thus, the Wagner debate has come to reflect a strange and interesting juxtaposition of ideology and the part of Israeli identity that is based on the Holocaust.

In conclusion, I would like to raise a question concerning what participants in the Wagner debate view as “the ownership” of the decision to lift the boycott or not. As noted above, the last 20 years have seen an increasingly evident determination on the part of Holocaust survivors to keep the decision-making power in their own hands, on the grounds that only someone who lived through the horror can understand the musical and ideological implications of what Wagner represents. In the public debate that took place in November 2001 in Tel Aviv, a Holocaust survivor expressed this poignantly: “Wait a few more years, until we've left the world, and then go back to discussing the Wagner issue among yourselves,” she said with a simple candor that even the great cynics sitting in the auditorium could not withstand.”
Nevertheless, this attitude raises a number of important questions. One of them is whether, after going through the whole process of instilling the memory of the Holocaust in the entire Jewish population of Israel, it is reasonable to leave the task of coping with the painful past solely to the survivors who live among us. Do we not doom ourselves to that same threatening process of amnesia and oblivion once the Holocaust survivors pass away, as they are bound to do? Moreover, since it is clear to everyone that the Wagner issue cannot be divorced from the memory of the Holocaust, will waiting another 10 or 20 years to discuss it permit a different kind of debate? Is this a problem inherent in Israeli society, a problem closely linked to the way it wants to form its identity?

Undoubtedly the answers to these questions — like the entire Wagner debate — depend on our perspective. We might believe that preserving the memory of the Holocaust need encompass no more than it does right now — familiarity with the events of the Holocaust, honoring the memory of those murdered, and treating survivors with special marks of distinction — or we might believe that this is not enough, and that further essentials include understanding the very short road that links the blatant verbal anti-Semitism exemplified by Wagner with acts that can lead to genocide, or the even shorter path that permits a democratic society to change overnight into a violent, totalitarian society. To my mind, suppressing discussion of the Wagner issue repeats the same mistake that Israeli society has made by artificially separating discussion of the lessons offered by German history from discussion of the lessons that Jewish society learned from industrialized genocide. In addition, having given Holocaust survivors a special place in Israeli society, how can we then brazenly wait for their deaths in order to discuss more freely the difficult experiences that they have carried around with them all their lives? We must consider whether Wagner is indeed the right symbol for maintaining Holocaust awareness in Israel.

NOTES

This essay was translated from Hebrew by Martha Grenzebach.

1 Protocol No. 268, session of the Knesset Education, Culture and Sports Committee, 8 May 2001.

2 Following the Committee’s meeting, the Israel Festival Board and conductor Daniel Barenboim decided to replace the Wagner concert with another. At the end of it, Barenboim and the Berlin State Orchestra played a short excerpt from Tristan und Isolde, provoking yet another fierce debate about public performances of Wagner in Israel. Finally, the Knesset Culture and Education Committee declared Barenboim to be a “cultural persona non grata” in Israel. See Protocol No. 316, meeting of the Knesset Education, Culture and Sports Committee, 24 July 2001.

4 The last two decades have seen numerous studies on the shaping of national identities. Outstanding examinations of particular Jewish identity and modes of commemoration can be found in Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley, 1993); and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, 1982). I wish to thank Yosefa Loshitzky for her interesting comment on the formation of national identity.


6 The essay was first published in 1850 under the pseudonym K. Freigedank, and again in 1869 under Wagner's own name, when he was already a successful composer. See Richard Wagner, “Judaism in Music,” in *idem, Stories and Essays*, trans. C. Osborne (London, 1973), pp. 23–39.


8 Despite general testimony by survivors indicating that Wagner’s music was played in the concentration camps, two important witnesses give evidence to the contrary. See Fania Fenelon, *Playing for Time* (New York, 1977); and Moshe Hoch, *Hazarah mehatofer* (Return from the Inferno) (Hadera, 1988).


10 On the reparations agreement, see Nicholas Balabkins, *West Germany and the Reparations to Israel* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1971).

11 The attack caused a radical change in press attitudes towards Heifetz. See, for example, *Ha-Dor* and *Ma'ariv* on the day after the incident, 17 April 1953. It is important to note that most of the Hebrew press in Israel had taken part in the debate (Davar, Ha'aretz, Hanit, Ha-Olam ha-Zeh, Ma'ariv, Ha-Boker, *Ha-Dor* and Yadiot Aharonot), as had the non-Hebrew press (Jediot Hadashot, Emeth, Jerusalem Post, Ye'elot ha-Yom). Reports had also appeared in foreign papers such as *New York Post*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *Herald Tribune* (Paris), and *Buenos Aires Herald*.

12 The debate erupted after the publication of an article by first flutist and board member Uri Toeplitz on the IPO’s plans to play Wagner and Strauss. His original article claimed that: “a change has taken place in the nation’s attitude to the exterminators of our people.” The public uproar that followed the article’s publication led him to revise the passage to read: “We feel the time has come for a change, not only because of the paramount demands of artistic freedom, but also because the opposition to Wagner has become a mere gesture. Why should we go on denying ourselves some of the greatest music by forbidding the playing of Wagner, a loss that cannot be replaced by the works of any other composer, while a mere convenience like the German Volkswagen, with all its associations from the Hitler era, is allowed to crowd our streets? … Accordingly, this time we must take a rational and courageous stand and allow Wagner’s music to be played, thereby reopening the door to works included among the best of the music composed in the nineteenth century.” See Uri Toeplitz, “Al hashivut Shel Wagner” (On the Importance of Wagner), IPO program, June 1966.

13 This time the press discussed the matter for several weeks, and even more extensively; local and special-interest magazines, flourishing at the time, jumped on the bandwagon, as did the electronic media, which had previously avoided the subject.

14 Moshe Zuckermann, *Shoah ba-hader ha-atum: Ha-Shoah ba-iyunot ha-yisraelit bi-shafat milhemet ha-mifratz* (Shoah in the Sealed Room: The “Holocaust” in the Israeli Press during the Gulf War) (Tel Aviv, 1993).

15 The essay appeared in Rina Litvin and Hezi Shelach (eds.), *Mi mefahed me-Richard Wagner: Hebetim shonim shel dimeut shrayah be-mahloket* (Who’s Afraid of Richard Wagner: Different Aspects of a Controversial Figure) (Jerusalem, 1984), pp. 203–18.
"Im ha-Richardim o biladhem" (With or without the Richards), Davar, 1 December 1952.

D. Yishai, “Tzlilei ha-nivun bak'u be-yom ha-shoah” (Degenerate Music Burst Forth on Holocaust Memorial Day), Herut, 16 April 1953 (original emphasis).


This undated letter was sent by Shmuel Santo, a Holocaust survivor living in Rishon Le-Zion, to the managers of that city’s symphony orchestra, right after the performance of the Siegfried Idyll in October 2000. See also Moshe Zuckermann, “Zilut zekher ha-shoah” (The Abuse of Holocaust Commemoration), 7 May 2001, at http://www.y-net.co.il.

Dov Shilansky, in an interview to Radio 1, The Voice of Israel, 23 October 1981.

Noah Kliger, “Hirehashvut be-regashot” (Consideration for Feelings), Yediot Aharonot, 21 October 1981.

See the comment made by the editor-in-chief of Yediot Aharonot, Herzl Rosenblum, in “Le-Zubin Mehta, be-khol ha-kavod” (To Zubin Mehta, with All Due Respect), Yediot Aharonot, 19 October 1981: “This whole problem is an internal problem of our own, a problem that must be discussed inside our own house, and no foreigners, even if they are our friends, should enter into it. . . . This is also true for our dear friend Zubin Mehta, who loves us with all his soul, and we him, but he read about Auschwitz, and we were taken there. . . . He must leave us to ourselves, and not try to tell us what to do.”

“Higi’ah ha-sha’ah she-Wagner yahzor lihiyot rak muzikah” (The Time Has Come for Wagner to Be Just Music Again), Ha’aretz, 16 December 1991.

Interpellation 670, 26 November 1956. A copy of the question and its answer can be found in the IPO Archives, Tel Aviv, Wagner and Strauss file.

In his proposal Meirom detailed the history of Wagner’s anti-Semitism, noting that the composer had “lived in Germany between the years 1813 and 1883. He was born and grew up in the city of Leipzig. One hundred years later in the city of Leipzig my mother was born, and persecuted.” He went on to explain that the idea of playing Wagner in Israel was wrong, criticizing those “who try to take us out of our provincial attitude and to bring into our home the geniuses who lay the foundations for the racist creed.” Agenda Proposal 1699, submitted by MK Hagai Meirom, Divrei Ha-Knesset, Session 110, 12th Knesset (1990), Vol. 1, pp. 334–6.

Heifetz was described as a guest with poor manners, and the editor of Ma’ariv, Dr. Azriel Carlebach, expressed his displeasure in an editorial: “The education minister, Professor Dinur, requested that no Strauss be played. And the justice minister, Dr. Rosen, seconded that request (despite his different personal views on the identification of an artist with his art). . . . Yet Jascha Heifetz received the request from two ministers of Israel, shoved it into his pocket, said whatever he said about opposing musical censorship — and refused to comply. He played Strauss in Haifa, and afterwards in Tel Aviv as well.” “Nimusei ore’ah” (Manners of a Guest), Ma’ariv, 13 April 1953.

“Pashtuto ha-gluyah shel ha-kavod ha-zeh” (The Overt Simplicity of That Honor), Ha’aretz, 27 December 1991.

The Film and Theater Review Board (the state’s cultural censor) intervened in the question of whether to allow performances in the German language on Israeli stages following a concert by singer Kenneth Spencer in 1950. The board also sent a memorandum to the IPO before the production of Das Lied von der Erde by Gustav Mahler. The Kenneth Spencer affair is described by Itzhak Gilead, “Da’at ha-kahal be-Yisrael al yahasei Yisrael ve-Germaniyah ha-ma’aravit ba-shanim 1949–1965” (Public Opinion in Israel on Relations between the State of Israel and West Germany in the Years 1949–1965)
This sentiment was evident in several articles appearing in the religious press. See, for example: “Ha-hayim bli Wagner” (Life without Wagner), Yom ha-Shishi, 27 December 1991; “Akhshav pog'im gam be-regashot shel hilonim” (Now the Feelings of Secular Jews Are Being Hurt, Too), Yated Ne’eman, 20 December 1991.

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30 Israel Nevenzal, “Tzelem germani be-heikhal ha-muzikah” (German Icon in the Temple of Music), Ha’aretz, 15 July 2001.

31 The gradual personification of Holocaust survivors is notable in many art works of the last two decades. See, for example, the growing numbers of personal documentaries, such as Hugo (Yair Lev, 1989); Al tigu li ba-shoah (Don’t Touch My Holocaust) (Asher Tlalim, 1994); Ha-bnot mi-Libau (Girlfriends) (Yoel Kaminsky, 1994); Abbale bo la-lunah-park (Daddy, Come to the Fair) (Shmuel Yiloshny and Nava Semel, 1995); Shalosh Ahuvati (Drei Schwestern) (Tsipi Reibenbach, 1998); and Perla Ahuvati (Liebe Perla) (Shahar Rezen, 1999). This trend is also evident in literature, the most recent example being Amir Guttfreund’s Shoah shelanu (Our Holocaust) (Tel Aviv, 2000).


33 The open debate took place on 15 November 2001, at the Felicja Blumental Music Center and Library in Tel Aviv. Some of the papers delivered at the conference appeared in Moshe Zuckermann (ed.), Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte (Tel Aviv, 2003).