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# The Undercurrent of Music in the Burgeoning Spirituality of Etty Hillesum from 1941 to 1943

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**The Undercurrent of Music in  
the Burgeoning Spirituality of  
Etty Hillesum (from 1941-1943)**

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Christian Spirituality

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Date: 2017



*Etty Hillesum, ca 1941*



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## **ABSTRACT**

### **The Undercurrent of Music in the Burgeoning Spirituality of Etty Hillesum from 1941 to 1943**

How is music described in the burgeoning spirituality of Etty Hillesum in her journals and correspondence from 1941 through 1943? I discuss the influence of music in her life, the number of references to musical terminology in the literature, and the undercurrent of music in her spirituality. This area of Hillesum's writings has not been critically studied as of this project date. Explored are: the role music played in Hillesum's social sphere, music as metaphor for Hillesum's spirituality in her journals and correspondence, and the connection between music and spirituality, in general, and more specifically as it appears in her writings. Hillesum's spirituality started as a personal quest to understand and describe her inner journey. As an aspiring writer, she used many metaphors for her journey. Music is one of those metaphors.

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the professors of theology

—past, present, and future—

at St. Catherine University in Saint Paul, Minnesota,

and to my parents, Paul K. Peterson and Florence M. Zumberge.

You inspired me to dream bigger, reach higher, and

think deeper than I could ever imagine.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the following people who have made this work possible:

- William C. McDonough, PhD, St. Catherine University who introduced me to Etty Hillesum in 2001, who encouraged my continuing interest in her, and who skillfully guided me through the Master's Thesis process.
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- My editors: Ann Machmeier of Eagan MN, Carol Lallak of Ft. Myers FL; and translator, Claire de Vos of Baarn Netherlands. Their attention to detail and tone made this a coherent and well-developed paper.
- Pilgrimage companions: my best friend, Ann, who traveled with me to the Netherlands to visit Amsterdam, Middelburg, and Camp Westerbork; and my brother, Jon, who traveled with me in Poland to visit the Auschwitz Camps.
- My children, Paul, Luke & Meredith: Your support and encouragement through this has meant the world to me.

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# **The Undercurrent of Music in the Burgeoning Spirituality of Etty Hillesum**

## **Introduction**

I used to be naïve about the concentration, deportation, and death camps of the Third Reich. All I truly knew of these camps was from the intermittent black and white documentary images—still shots, and grainy, 1940s newsreels—and films that Hollywood made about specific situations. My dad, The Reverend Paul K. Peterson, served in the U.S. Army during World War II from May 1943 through the summer of 1945. He was captured in the Battle of the Bulge on December 21, 1944, on the outskirts of St. Vith, Belgium. Besides walking all day and sleeping in previously-used livestock railcars, he was held in three prisoner-of-war camps in Germany. The remnant of his company was liberated from Stalag XI-B on April 16, 1945 by British troops. His horror stories, which were staggering to hear, are nothing compared to what I have learned about the Nazi final solution for the Jews through my study of the narrative of Etty Hillesum.

I have been surrounded by music my entire life. I have sung in choirs since the early 1960s and learned to play the piano and oboe. I enjoy music and incorporate it into my daily spiritual practices. I am a feminist theologian, specializing in the theology of spirituality. These are the lenses through which I read and study Etty Hillesum. I do not attempt to categorize her spirituality as adherent to any specific dogma, doctrine, or way of being in the world. Hillesum is exploring a spiritual relationship with a reality she calls “God”.

I met the work of Esther “Etty” Hillesum while studying Christian Ethics as an undergraduate at St. Catherine University in Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA during the Fall semester of 2001. One of our textbooks was the 1996 edition of *An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork*, the most complete and affordable English publication of her work at the time. It was

during that semester that the United States felt the harsh reality of being attacked within our own borders by the Al Qaida commercial airliner attacks on September 11. It was an amazing time to be studying the spiritual expansion of this young woman whose exterior world became more confined simply because she was Jewish.

There are two phrases in Hillesum's final postcard that strike a chord in me. Hillesum's final postcard, written on 7 September 1943, reads:

Christine, opening the Bible at random I find this: "The Lord is my high tower." I am sitting on my rucksack in the middle of a full freight car. Father, Mother, and Mischa are a few cars away. In the end, the departure came without warning. On sudden special orders from The Hague. We left the camp singing, Father and Mother firmly and calmly, Mischa, too. We shall be traveling for three days. Thank you for all your kindness and care. Friends left behind will still be writing to Amsterdam; perhaps you will hear something from them. Or from my last long letter from camp. Good-bye for now from the four of us. Etty<sup>1</sup>

The two phrases are: "The Lord is my high tower." And "We left the camp singing." Spirituality and music spontaneously come together in her farewell to her friend Christine in handwriting that fills both sides of a small postcard.

---

<sup>1</sup> I cite the English and Dutch texts from the Bilingual Edition: Hillesum, Etty. *Etty Hillesum: the Complete Works 1941-1943. Bilingual, Annotated and Unabridged*. Editors Klaas A.D. Smelik and Meins G.S. Coetsier. Translations by Arnold J. Pomerans. Two Volumes. (Maastricht:Shaker. 2014.) Hereafter, Bilingual.

At certain points, my Dutch friend and translator, Claire de Vos, suggests a different word or phrase in translation. This will also be noted in the footnotes with the original specific text in Dutch.

Aan Christine van Nooten. Nabij Glimmen, dinsdag 7 september 1943: --Christien, ik sla de Bijbel open op een willekeurige plaats en vind dit: *de Heere is mijn hoog vertrek*. Ik zit middenin een volle goederenwagen op m'n rugzak. Vader, moeder en Mischa zitten enige wagens verder. Het vertrek kwam toch nog vrij onverwachts. Plotseling bevel voor ons speciaal uit den Haag. *We hebben zingende dit kamp verlaten*, vader en moeder zeer flink en rustig. Mischa eveneens. We zullen drie dagen reizen. Dank voor al jullie goede zorgen. Achergebleven vrienden schrijven nog naar A'dam, misschien hoor je iets? Ook van mijn lange brief? Tot ziens v. ons vieren. *Etty* 1081-1084.

Following the brief biography of Etty Hillesum, I will provide a framework for how I place my research within the scope of scholarly work on music, spirituality, and Etty Hillesum.

Esther “Etty” Hillesum was the first child born to Levie and Riva Hillesum. Etty Hillesum was born on 15 January 1914, when the couple had been married just over a year. Younger brothers, Jaap and Mischa, were born in 1916 and 1920 respectively. Her mother, Riva or Rebecca, was an Ashkenazi Jew who emigrated from Russia in 1907 following a pogrom. Hillesum’s father, Levie or Louis, was a native Dutch person and a highly assimilated Jew. Both were teachers, Levie within the Netherlands’ education system and Riva as a Russian-language instructor. All three of the Hillesum children were well-educated and assimilated into Dutch culture. Jaap went on to become a medical professional, finally working within the Jewish community during the Nazi occupation of Amsterdam. Mischa was a well-known, virtuosic pianist and composer whose compositions have been preserved and are played in concerts and recorded to this day. None of this family survived World War II. Levie, Riva, Etty, and Mischa died at Auschwitz-Birkenau, between September 1943 and March 1944. Jaap was deported from Westerbork camp to Bergen-Belsen, and did not survive a partial evacuation of that camp via train in April 1945.<sup>2</sup>

When her diaries began, Hillesum was living in the Wegerif household in Amsterdam as a housekeeper and also had an ongoing, intimate affair with the elder Han Wegerif. She began her introspective journaling in March 1941 upon the recommendation of her psychochirologist, Julius Spier—himself a recent German-Jewish immigrant to Holland.<sup>3</sup> Her journals started as discourses of angst typical for a distressed young woman in her late-twenties. Internally, she was full of self-

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<sup>2</sup> Smelik, Klaas A.D. “A Short Biography of Etty Hillesum”. *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, November 2008*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik, Ria van den Brandt and Meins G.S. Coetsier. (Leiden | Boston: Brill, 2010) 21-28. Hereafter: Smelik, Short Biography. Klaas A.D. Smelik is the son of Klaas Smelik, of whom Hillesum writes in her journals.

<sup>3</sup> Julius Spier studied psychology under C.G. Jung and was a respected practitioner of psychochirology or analytical reading of the hands.

doubt, concerned about being mentally ill, and perceived herself to be impulsive and emotional. Outwardly, she had many friends and was an approachable, outgoing young woman.

Etty Hillesum hand-wrote eleven day-books (journals) and numerous letters which have been preserved in the Netherlands. The books were given to a friend before leaving permanently for Camp Westerbork with the instructions “to pass them along to the writer Klaas Smelik” in hopes that the journals would be published if Hillesum did not return.<sup>4</sup> Her works have been posthumously published, in part, in 1981 in a book titled *An Interrupted Life*. And in 1986, a comprehensive collection of the writings of Etty Hillesum was published in Dutch. Since 1981, her works have been published in several languages. The Dutch-English two-volume edition published in 2014, cited above, is the most comprehensive and authoritative collection of Etty Hillesum’s work to date.

In this paper, I am seeking to understand the connection of music and spirituality in the span of Etty Hillesum’s life from 1941 to 1943. Many scholars have noted Hillesum’s music metaphor to describe her deepening spirituality. One such scholar, Carol Lee Flinders, writes, “At the beginning of her diary Etty had lamented the absence of a *tune* in her life—a thread, or an underlying theme. But by now all the old anxieties ... have slipped away. She has her calling now—the tune, the underlying theme that had eluded her before. People come to her (at Camp Westerbork), ‘bundles of human misery, desperate and unable to face life’, and she knows what to do. She listens.”<sup>5</sup> The recognition of Hillesum’s search for a tune, an underlying source for her spirituality, is also noted by others. I will examine these sources in chapter two of this work. To the best of my knowledge, no one has yet examined all the references to music and musicality in

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<sup>4</sup> Smelik, *Short Biography*, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Flinders, Carol Lee. *Enduring Lives: Living Portraits of Women and Faith in Action*. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2013), 58. Hereafter, *Enduring Lives*.

Hillesum's writings to determine what light they may shed on her spirituality. I began the research by using *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943*, published by Eerdmans in 2002. I searched for terms related to music and spirituality. I read thousands of results in their complete contexts. I discovered significant use of musical terms and references to music in the diaries of Etty Hillesum.<sup>6</sup>

The course of this paper will continue on the following path. In chapter one I will illustrate the music in Hillesum's writing broken down into the following three categories: music in Hillesum's social sphere (pre-Westerbork internment), music as metaphor in Hillesum's journals, and music at Camp Westerbork.

Chapter two will bring this work into the context of scholarly work regarding spirituality in general as well as the spirituality of Etty Hillesum. I will utilize the work of scholars Meins Coetsier, Rachel Feldhay Brenner, Ria van den Brandt and others to explore and describe Hillesum's spirituality. After specific notations, I will summarize the chapter.

In chapter three, I seek to elucidate the connection between music and spirituality, beginning with a general description of this connection, then exploring it in Hillesum's writings. Ending this chapter, I will explain, in summary, my understanding of the role music played in the burgeoning spirituality of Etty Hillesum.

Finally, in conclusion, I will bring this thesis together by summarizing what I have discovered and what questions I believe remain for further study. I will also disclose how this young woman's writings have become important and inspirational in my own life.

My thesis question, then, is this: What is the role of music in the burgeoning spirituality of Etty Hillesum? What is the flow between the following phrases:

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix I: Abridged Table of Search Terms.

- I surprised myself with a need for music” (19 March 1941)<sup>7</sup> to
- There is a strange little melody inside me that sometimes cries out for words. [...] And then again it fills me with gentle, melancholy music” (12 October 1941)<sup>8</sup> to
- Let some music flow from me, let what is within me be given expression, it longs so desperately for that.” (24 November 1941)<sup>9</sup> to,
- I have my own inner scale and [...] a melody is emerging” (7 June 1942)<sup>10</sup> to finally
- We left the camp singing” (7 September 1943).<sup>11</sup>

Let us now explore the answer in the following pages.

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<sup>7</sup> Bilingual, 53|54; Woensdagochtend [19 Maart 1941], half 11: Ik betrap mezelf op een behoefte aan muziek.

<sup>8</sup> Bilingual, 211|212; Maandagochtend, 20 Oct. [1941] 9 uur: Er zit een eigen melodietje in me, dat er soms zo naar verlangt in eigen woorden te worden omgezet. [...] Soms holt het me helemaal uit en dan weer vervult het me met een hele zachte, weemoedige muziek.

<sup>9</sup> Bilingual, 249|50; Maandagochtend [24 November 1941], ‘s middags half 6: En laat U wat muziek uit me komen, laat dat wat er in me zit vorm vinden, het verlangt er zo naar.

<sup>10</sup> Bilingual, 635|636; Zaterdagochten [6 Juni 1942], 11 uur ‘s morgens.: er toch een eigen toon in me zit en er zich een melodie ontwikkelt.

<sup>11</sup> Bilingual, 1083|84; Aan Christine van Nooten. Nabij Glimmen, dinsdag 7 september 1943: We hebben zingende dit kamp verlaten.





## Chapter 1. Music in the Life of Etty Hillesum

In searching for the answer to the question of whether or not music played a role in the spirituality of Etty Hillesum, I found that it did, indeed, play a role. In this chapter, I will show how Hillesum writes about music in her social sphere in Amsterdam, her use of the terminology such as “inner melody” to describe her inner journey in her diaries and references to three specific genres of music at Camp Westerbork: cabarets, in the barracks, and singing at deportations.

### Music in Etty Hillesum’s Social Sphere

The public world of Etty Hillesum was heavily restricted in Amsterdam in the early 1940s simply because she was Jewish. Very limiting curfews were strictly enforced. Bicycles, tramways, and access to public roads were controlled and, finally, restricted from the Jews altogether. Gold stars were required on outer clothing at all times. Food shopping and rationing were even *more* strict for Jews than other Dutch citizens. The ability to get together to appreciate art and music in public forums was severely limited for the Jews under Hitler’s control in 1940. It became completely illegal for Jews to gather in this way in 1941.

Etty Hillesum’s journals begin on 9 March 1941. The first reference of any kind to music makes its appearance in the late evening of that same day when she recalls a line of poetry by Verwey, “‘Melodiously rolls the world from God’s hand.’ This line by Verwey was stuck in my head all day. I too wanted to roll melodiously out of God’s hand.”<sup>12</sup> A few days later, she journals about her experience when she registers her blood group with the Nazi government—which every Jew across the expanding German empire was required to do. On 19 March 1941, while standing

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<sup>12</sup> Bilingual, 9|10; Zondag, 9 Maart [1941] Zondagavond in de badkamer: ‘Melodisch rolt de wereld uit Gods hand’, deze woorden van Verwey gingen me de hele dag niet uit het hoofd. Ik wilde dat ik zelf melodisch uit Gods hand rolde.

in the “silent and depressed” line, Hillesum hears children singing in the next room and found the singing “almost touching.”<sup>13</sup>

Even though it was illegal for them to do so, Hillesum and her friends found ways to come together regularly to perform for each other and/or to listen to music. Hillesum called these gatherings “musical soirees.” Of the specific term “musical,” which appears thirty-three times, the term “musical soiree” appears nine times. The close-knit group of Hillesum’s friends would gather weekly or bi-weekly in someone’s home to listen to live music provided by themselves or played on a gramophone.

These (musical soirees) were pleasant, informal gatherings where music was played and songs sung. Spier, Tide, and Adri Holm sang Lieder<sup>14</sup> for a small group of friends. [...] After Rauter’s (Nazi Chief of the SS and Police in The Netherlands) prohibition of public performances by Jews [on] 25 July 1941 which included concerts—Jewish musicians such as Mischa Hillesum were only able to play at illegal private concerts.<sup>15</sup> [...] Mischa Hillesum’s recitals were more like formal concerts, even though they were held at houses due to the anti-Jewish measures.<sup>16</sup>

After one such soiree, Etty Hillesum wrote the following about the Wegerif household in Amsterdam and how the soiree had served a social purpose for the group: “Our living room, which used to be rather gloomy and ‘unlived-in’, is now gradually beginning to acquire a history of many atmospherical musical afternoons and evenings.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bilingual, 51|52; Woensdagochtend [19 March 1941] 12 o’clock: Eerst stonden we met een hele rij in de gang van die school, het leek een wat zwijgende en gedrukte ... Uit de nabij zijnde klas kwamen kinderliedjes, heel zuiver en bijna aandoenlijk klonk het.

<sup>14</sup> *German: songs*

<sup>15</sup> Bilingual, 66; footnote 61.

<sup>16</sup> Bilingual, 226; footnote 9.

<sup>17</sup> Bilingual, 353|354; 5 Januari 1942, Maandagochtend, half 10: Onze vroeger wat sombere en “unbelebte” huiskamer begint nu langzamerhand z’n geschiedenis te krijgen van vele stemmingsrijke muziekmiddagen en -avonden.

Later, on 19 March 1941, Etty Hillesum recognizes a need for music for herself. She writes introspectively, noticing the way music has become more present in her life and that her true artistic gift is her writing:

I surprised myself with a need for music. I don't seem to be unmusical, am seized (*touched*)<sup>18</sup> with interest whenever I hear a piece of music but have never had the patience to sit down specially to listen to it; my full attention has always been reserved for literature and the theater, areas that are within the province of my own thoughts. And now, quite suddenly, music is beginning to press its claims, and once again I find that I am open to an experience that makes me forget myself. And it is above all for the limpid, serene classics that I long, not for those mangled modern composers.<sup>19</sup>

Apparently, she had no desire to listen to the contemporary music of her time—jazz and swing—and rediscovered that music helped her forget herself, even for a short time. Hillesum preferred the music of Beethoven, Bach, and Rachmaninov, which were often played by Mischa Hillesum at his private concerts.<sup>20</sup>

### Music as Etty Hillesum's Inner Melody

The phrase 'basic tune' is used to describe the inner voice Etty Hillesum listens for within herself. Hillesum first uses the metaphor inner tune or melody as a descriptor for her interior self

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<sup>18</sup> *touched* recommended instead of *seized* by translator, Claire de Vos; original Dutch: Ik schijn niet onmuzikaal te zijn, ben altijd zeer gegrepen als ik eenmaal muziek hoor. Bilingual, 53.

<sup>19</sup> Bilingual, 53|54; Woensdagochtend [19 March 1941] 12 uur: Ik betrap mezelf op een behoefte aan muziek. Ik schijn niet onmuzikaal te zijn, ben altijd zeer gegrepen als ik eenmaal muziek hoor, maar heb nooit het geduld gehad er speciaal voor te gaan zitten, de aandacht ging altijd uit naar literatuur en toneel, dus de gebieden, waarop ik zelf kan blijven denken, en nu begint, in deze fase van m'n leven, de muziek z'n rechten op te eisen, ik raak dus weer in staat om iets te ondergaan en mezelf uit te schakelen. En het zijn vooral de klare en serene klassieken waarnaar ik verlang en niet de verscheurde modernen.

<sup>20</sup> See Appendix II: Programme from one of Mischa's Home Concerts.

on 4 August 1941. She was seeking a steady stream inside of her. “I still lack a basic tune; a steady undercurrent; the inner source that feeds me keeps drying up.”<sup>21</sup> This metaphorical theme occurs three times over the next several months, between August 1941 and June 1942.

Her desire to be a published writer assisted her in developing various metaphors: a deep well, inner melody, thinking heart, etc. She continued to develop the metaphor of her inner melody on 20 October of 1941:

There is a strange little melody inside me that sometimes cries out for words. But through inhibition, lack of self-confidence, laziness, and goodness knows what else, that tune remains stifled, haunting me from within. Sometimes it wears me out completely. And then again it fills me with gentle, melancholy music.<sup>22</sup>

One month later, on 24 November 1941, Hillesum writes, “Look, God, I’ll do my best. I shall not withdraw from life. I shall stay down here and try to develop any talents I may have. I shall not be a saboteur. But give me a sign now and then and let some music flow from me, let what is within me be given expression, it longs so desperately for that.”<sup>23</sup> Her writing is her art form; her art gives voice to that inner tune. Through journaling, Hillesum can return to herself, her God and her inner tune whenever she finds it necessary to reconnect with that component of her life.

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<sup>21</sup> Bilingual, 119|120; Maandag, 4 Aug. 1941. ’s middags half 3: Ik heb nog geen grondmelodie. Er is nog niet één vaste onderstroom, de innerlijke bron waaruit ik gevoed word, slibt altijd weer dicht.

<sup>22</sup> Bilingual, 211|212; Maandagochtend, 20 Oct. [1941] 9 uur: Er zit een eigen melodietje in me, dat er soms zo naar verlangt in eigen woorden te worden omgezet. Maar door geremdheid, gebrek aan zelfvertrouwen, luiheid en ik weet niet wat nog meer, blijft het nog steeds verstikt in me zitten en spookt in me rond. Soms holt het me helemaal uit en dan weer vervult het me met een hele zachte, weemoedige muziek.

<sup>23</sup> Bilingual, 249|50; Maandagochtend [24 November 1941], ’s middags half 6: Weet U, God: ik zal m’n best doen. Ik zal me niet onttrekken aan dit leven. Ik zal mee blijven doen en proberen alle gaven die ik heb, als ik die heb, te ontplooiën. Ik zal niet saboteren. Maar geef me af en toe een teken. En laat U wat muziek uit me komen, laat dat wat er in me zit vorm vinden, het verlangt er zo naar.

The final specific reference we have to her spirituality as her inner tune is in her diary entry from 6 June 1942, “I have returned to myself again, all my certainties are back, [...] and have discovered that I have my own inner scale and that a melody is emerging, one to which I must give every chance and lots of space, and to which I must be true.”<sup>24</sup> By the end of the following month, July 1942, she would be visiting Camp Westerbork for the first time as an employee of the Jewish Council’s Social Welfare for People in Transit committee. She found the work somewhat satisfying, though depressing and frustrating. Her writing about her inner tune and melody comes to a close, but her inner spirituality continues to nourish and refresh her in her work at Camp Westerbork, as we will see in chapter two, when her tune supports her and she uses it to support others.

### Music at Camp Westerbork

Camp Westerbork had been set up by the Dutch government as a refugee camp for German-Jewish refugees who fled Germany in the late 1930s. In 1941, Camp Westerbork became a concentration and transit camp for all Jews in the Netherlands before they were deported to Theresienstadt, Bergen-Belsen, or Auschwitz-Birkenau death camps. Prior to the Dutch-Jews arriving, the German-Jewish refugees had set up their own hierarchy and governing system under the Nazi commandants. The more recently imprisoned Dutch-Jews were viewed as “less than” by their German-Jewish co-prisoners.

Jacob Presser writes in the introduction to Philip Mechanicus’ *Year of Fear*, “[...] bear in mind that Westerbork camp was organized in a virtually unique manner: it was a unit managed almost entirely by the German-Jewish camp inmates themselves, who had taken the initiative in

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<sup>24</sup> Bilingual, 635|636; Zaterdagochtend [6 Juni 1942] 11 uur ‘s morgens: nu ben ik al weer bij mezelf teruggekeerd en zijn al de zekerheden weer in me ... en gehoord ondertussen hoe er toch een eigen toon in me zit en er zich een melodie ontwikkelt, die ik de kans en de ruimte moet geven en aan welke ik trouw moet zijn.

this at an early stage so as to avoid the intervention of the dreaded SS.”<sup>25</sup> This clout—being *German-Jews*—gave them special treatment from the German guards and commandants of the Camp and created a grave abyss between the German-Jews and the Dutch-Jews.

There was plenty of music at Camp Westerbork. The camp became known for having an excellent performing group under Nazi Commandant Gemmeker. There are many studies on the performances, music, and the entertainers on display in remarkable exhibits at the Camp museum near Assen, Netherlands.<sup>26</sup> Commandant Gemmeker enjoyed attending the regular performances he demanded which were put on by mostly German-Jewish inmates. He would invite Reich dignitaries from The Hague to come and enjoy the entertainment. Some of the performers were given special privileges and housing in the camp.

There were three primary categories of music in the camp: musical revue/cabaret, social music within the barracks, and Jewish chants/prayers in the barracks and near or on the train during Deportation Tuesdays. Eyewitness accounts provided by Presser in *Ashes in the Wind* state that Jewish prayers and Dutch nationalist songs were sung as people were on the *Boulevard de Misères*<sup>27</sup> and while boarding the trains. Hillesum herself writes of people reciting the Shema<sup>28</sup> as they are being deported.

When Hillesum became a permanent inmate at the camp on 6 June 1943, her letters became requests for blankets, coats, butter, coffee, sugar, bread, money, tea—whatever those in

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<sup>25</sup> Presser, Jacob. “Introduction.” In *Year of Fear: A Jewish Prisoner Waits for Auschwitz*, by Philip Mechanicus, 5-12. (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc. 1968) 6.

<sup>26</sup> In 2016, I made pilgrimages to Poland and Netherlands. I laid five roses on the Dutch memorial at Auschwitz-Birkenau. I walked on the *Boulevard de Misères* and around the premises of Camp Westerbork, strolled the Jewish quarter in Amsterdam, visited multiple museums, and walked from Etty’s home to Spier’s home, just as she had done so many times seventy-plus years ago. I visited EHO (the Etty Hillesum Research Center) in Middelburg and spent a few hours talking with Prof. Dr. Klaas A.D. Smelik.

<sup>27</sup> *Boulevard of Miseries*: The main street in the Camp which was also the railway platform for deportees.

<sup>28</sup> The Shema is a Jewish prayer said in the morning and evening; from Deut. 6:4-9, it is transliterated: *Sh'ma Yisra'el Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad*. (Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.)

Amsterdam or elsewhere could spare. Her currently published letters do not mention much of music. When she does mention music, it is very disparaging of what is publicly offered at the camp.

### *Musical Revues, Cabarets, and Performers*

There is a stark contrast in the prose of Etty Hillesum between the social, musical soirees she attended in Amsterdam and in the musical revues and cabarets of Camp Westerbork. Hillesum writes of her distaste for the cabaret and revue performances and performers at Westerbork. In a letter to Han Wegerif and others written on 24 August 1943, she writes disapprovingly of entertainers Max Ehrlich and Willy Rosen, describing them as the “commandant’s court jesters”:

There is more and more movement now along the asphalt path beside the train. Men from the “Flying Column”<sup>29</sup> in brown overalls are bringing the luggage up on wheelbarrows. Among them I spot two of the commandant’s court jesters: the comedian Max Ehrlich, and the songwriter Willy Rosen, who looks like death warmed up. [...] And over there is another court jester: Erich Ziegler, the commandant’s favorite pianist. Legend has it that he is so accomplished that he can play Beethoven’s Ninth as a jazz number, which is certainly saying something ...<sup>30</sup>

There is another reference in Hillesum’s letters regarding the musical revues. There are not enough overalls for the day-workers to wear, yet new overalls were sewn as costumes for the

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<sup>29</sup> The “Flying Column” consisted of prisoners who brought the luggage from the barracks to the train.

<sup>30</sup> Bilingual, 1067|1068; 24/8/43: Er komt steeds meer beweging op de asphaltweg langs de trein. Mannen van ‘Fliegende Kolonne’ in bruine overalls rijden bagage aan op kruiwagens. Onder hen ontdek ik o.a. enige hofnarren van de commandant: de komiek Max Ehrlich en de Schlagercomponist Willy Rosen, die er uitziet als de wandelende dood. [...] Daar gaat nog een hofnar, Erich Ziegler, de lievelingspianist van commandant. Van hem gaat de legende, dat hij zo geweldig is, dat hij zelfs de Negende van Beethoven als jazz-muziek spelen kan en dat wil toch wel iets zeggen...

entertainers to put on while performing at the revue. From a letter to Maria Tuinzing dated 2 September 1943:

When I went into our little office this morning, it was in a terrible mess; it had been requisitioned as a dressing room for the revue. The revue is taking over the whole camp. There are no overalls for people on outside duty, but the revue has an “overall ballet” — so day and night people sewed overalls with little puffed sleeves for the dancers. ... Everything here has an indescribably clownish madness and sadness.<sup>31</sup>

She not only witnessed the panic and sheer horror of the weekly transports every Tuesday, but also the other-worldly scene of preparing for a cabaret performance.

The insanity of life at Camp Westerbork must have been overwhelming to someone who cared about people as much as Hillesum did. As for the cabaret performances, the coordinators did their best to get as many *German-Jews* involved in the performances as possible so they would be viewed as invaluable to the camp chorus and, thus, their deportations delayed. Music, despised or not, played an important role in the lives of the inmates at Camp Westerbork.

### *Music in Daily Life at Camp Westerbork*

Music also played another, less formal role in camp life. Inmate Philip Mechanicus pens images of what music was like on an informal basis at Camp Westerbork. Philip Mechanicus was an inmate at Camp Westerbork from 7 November 1942 to 8 March 1944. This coincided, in part, with Hillesum's permanent inmate status at the camp from 6 June to 7 September 1943. His journals were posthumously published in Dutch in 1964 under the title *In Dépôt*. The English translation was published in 1968 with the title *Year of Fear: A Jewish Prisoner Waits for*

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<sup>31</sup> Bilingual, 1077|78; donderdag 2 september 1943, 2/9: Toen ik vanochtend in ons kantoortje kwam, was het er een janboel, het werd in beslag genomen voor kleedkamer voor de revue. Het hele kamp staat in het teken een “overall-ballet” voor en dag en nacht worden daarvoor overalls genaaid, met pofmouwjtjes. ... Het is hier alles van een onbeschrijfelijke en paljasso-achtige waanzin en treurigheid.



*Auschwitz*. Mechanicus arrived at Westerbork after having been tortured at a punishment camp at Amersfoort, Netherlands. He spent several months in the hospital barracks at Westerbork where he got to know the doctors, nurses, and social workers of the camp. This may be where he met Etty Hillesum. Hillesum mentions Mechanicus by name fourteen times in her correspondence. Mechanicus was deported to Bergen-Belsen, then to Auschwitz-Birkenau on 9 October 1944, where he was shot to death with one hundred twenty (120) others on 12 October 1944.

Mechanicus writes evocatively of life at Camp Westerbork in *Year of Fear*. He bears witness to the daily, unrehearsed, and uncoerced music of Camp Westerbork when he writes:

*Friday, August 6 (1943):* An evening stroll with an intelligent young woman. [...] It was pouring. So we stood up against a hut under an overhang and went on talking. A window opened and a man's head popped out. Come inside! A camp friend had recognized our voices. With muddy shoes we clamored in through the window. We found ourselves in the midst of baptized Jews, the *geschmadden*.<sup>32</sup> We were in a party with a balalaika. We made friends. 'Are you the man at the hot water tap?' 'Yes.' 'Are you the lady from the Jewish Council?' 'Yes.' 'Are you Russian?' 'Yes.' My companion, the daughter of a Russian mother, [...] 'Will you play a Russian song for me?' A Russian song on the balalaika. Two, three, four Russian songs. [...] A strange combination—a Jewish camp, a hut with baptized Jews, a Russian colony, visited by full-blooded Dutch Jews—and yet there was a feeling of brotherhood at once. [...] Fond farewells. How fortunate that there is something

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<sup>32</sup> "*Geschmadden*" has no English translation in either Dutch or German; in Yiddish, it translates to "neglected"

else in the world besides war, National Socialists, parcels and weariness. We returned to our huts in a good mood as if something big had happened in our lives.<sup>33</sup>

Even though Mechanicus is careful not to name anyone in his journals for fear of reprisal, from the surrounding text one can surmise that this may very well be Etty Hillesum with whom he is strolling. Music continues to be part of Hillesum's life—even in serendipitous meetings in the barracks. The community or “brotherhood” music creates speaks to the bonds music can create among disparate persons (“strange combination”) facing the same harsh and difficult situations.

Earlier that summer, Mechanicus described the following scene of conflicting genres of music in a crowded hospital barracks:

*24 June 1943* Cabaret this evening in one wing of the hut. Crammed with people. *Café chantant* songs accompanied on a harmonica. An Italian opera for two baritones. Yiddish humor. [...] Cabaret mood in the ward. A lot of applause. Contentment. A glimpse of Old Amsterdam, the Rembrandtsplein. At the same time in a corner of the other wing of the hut a religious service was going on. Old men with grey beards, learned in the Mosaic Law and decked out in sober parchment-coloured praying shawls reaching almost to the ground, with black diagonal stripes. Men who are averse to frivolity and levity and here more than ever withdraw into prayer and bow down again and again and again, appealing to the Lord God of Israel to deliver them from misery and slavery. No babbling voices, empty and uninhibited, but the almost inaudible mumbling of words from the Talmud. Two worlds absolutely foreign to each other, separated by a small doorway.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Mechanicus, Philip. *Year of Fear: a Jewish Prisoner Waits for Auschwitz*. Translated by Irene S. Gibbons. (New York: Hawthorn. 1968) 115-16, 117. Hereafter, Mechanicus.

<sup>34</sup> Mechanicus, 62

It must have been bizarre to have the dichotomy of cultures and music in one place doing what each knew best how to do to survive: sing and pray.

### *Singing at Deportation from Camp Westerbork*

Singing and praying. Both Jacob Presser and Etty Hillesum write about singing on the trains as the overcrowded cars pull away from the Camp. Singing on the boulevard to the train and from within the train itself as it was leaving the camp was not an unusual occurrence. Presser survived the Holocaust by going into hiding. His wife, however, died in a concentration camp. Presser's work, *Ashes in the Wind: The Destruction of Dutch Jewry*, first published in 1968, was commissioned by the Dutch government, and took more than fifteen years to complete.<sup>35</sup> His book provides descriptive remembrances of the music on deportation days at Camp Westerbork.

According to Presser, one eyewitness described the most unbelievable scene from the *Boulevard de Misères*:

When the train finally pulled out, the adults and remaining children stood by, helplessly struggling with their own anger, misery and despair: 'Almost unconsciously, somebody began to chant a prayer and, hardly knowing what we were doing, we all joined in. From the train we could hear the children, singing away happily [...]'<sup>36</sup>

Presser adds these eyewitness accounts to singing on the trains:

[...] something that must be taken into account—notwithstanding the strange fact that trains leaving Westerbork would sometimes be filled with singing people.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> From the back cover of the 2010 paperback edition of the book, *Ashes in the Wind*.

<sup>36</sup> Presser, Jacob. *Ashes in the Wind: The Destruction of Dutch Jewry*. London: Souvenir. 2010) 462. Hereafter, Presser, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Presser 2010, 436.

[...] Another eye-witness had this to say [...] ‘the men and women who sang “Holland for ever” [*sic*] as they stepped into the trucks for Poland [...] But if I gave you a hundred more such instances, you could never understand what it was like.’<sup>38</sup>

[...] More than one eye-witness has told us that the ‘passengers’ burst into song.’<sup>39</sup>

Etty Hillesum’s eyewitness accounts are incorporated into her letters to friends in Amsterdam, Deventer, and The Hague. In a letter which was surreptitiously published with a pseudonym in 1943, Hillesum writes from Amsterdam to two sisters in The Hague at the end of December 1942:

The people from Rotterdam were in a class by themselves, hardened by the bombing raids. “We don’t frighten easily anymore,” you often heard them say. “If we survived all that, we’ll survive this, too.” And a few days later they marched singing to the train.<sup>40</sup>

Hillesum also writes, on 25 August 1943, just two weeks prior to her own sudden deportation from the Camp on 7 September 1943:

I see a dying old man being carried away, reciting the Shema to himself. Saying Sheymess [*sic*] means saying a prayer over a dying person. It consists mainly of the constant invocation of the name of God in the Highest, and is done when the dying person himself is still able to join in the prayer.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Presser 2010, 463.

<sup>39</sup> Presser 2010, 464.

<sup>40</sup> Bilingual, 945|46; Aan twee zusters in Den Haag, Amsterdam, eind december 1942: De Rotterdammers waren een klasse op zichzelf, gestaald door het bombardement in de oorlogsdagen. ‘Wij zijn voor geen kleintje meer vervaard’, hoorde men van velen, ‘als we daar doorgelopen zijn, komen we hier ook wel door’ en ze trokken enige dagen later zingende naar de trein.

<sup>41</sup> Bilingual, 1065|66; Aan Han Wegerif en anderen; dinsdag 24 augustus 1943: Ik zie een doodzieke oude man wegdragen, sjeimes zeggende over zich zelf. Sjeimes zeggen betekent het gebed uitspreken over een stervende. Het bestaat hoofdzakelijk in het voortdurend aanroepen van de naam van God en het hoogste is wel, wanneer de stervende zelf in staat is dit gebed mede uit te spreken.

Ultimately, nearly all the Jews imprisoned at Camp Westerbork were deported to death camps in the east. Overall, nearly 100,000 Jews were deported to points east from Camp Westerbork. There were only 876 prisoners remaining at Camp Westerbork when it was liberated by Canadian Forces in April of 1945.<sup>42</sup>

In summary, Etty Hillesum appreciated listening to music and writes about music very early in her diary. Her awareness of music around her is acute, even in the early days of her writing. The “undercurrent” of music as a metaphor for her spirituality was used only a few times, but with a growing awareness of this part of herself that she wanted to share with others. While at Camp Westerbork, Hillesum had disdain for the musical revues and the performers who participated in them. She witnessed heartbreaking scenes of people on the *Boulevard de Misères* saying their goodbyes and repeating prayers to themselves as they were loaded onto the departing trains. Music was part of Hillesum’s life, even after she became a permanent inmate of Camp Westerbork. Her inner journey—her spiritual path—expanded as her exterior world closed in around her. In the next chapter, we will speak of the development of Hillesum’s spiritual journey.

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<sup>42</sup> *Westerbork*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed January 9, 2017. <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005217>.



## Chapter 2. Spirituality

In this chapter, I transition away from the theme of music in the life of Etty Hillesum to the discussion of her spirituality. My aim is to share my working understanding of spirituality in general, as well as the personal spirituality expressed by Hillesum in her diaries. My general comprehension of spirituality primarily reflects the work of John Shea as a dimension of the human journey. Regarding the spirituality of Etty Hillesum, I rely on the work of Rachel Feldhay Brenner, Ria van den Brandt and others. At the conclusion of this chapter, I will summarize the discussion of spirituality, in general, and as expressed in the journals of Etty Hillesum. This will effectively lead us to the third and final chapter on Music and Spirituality.

### The Inner, Spiritual Journey

In order to explain what the term spirituality means, I must explore the understanding of the term as proposed by academics. I believe spirituality is a connecting dimension of the holistic elements of the human being: physical, psychological, social, and spiritual. Inner strength provides the scaffolding on which outer strength can be draped. Spirituality is the deepest inner, integrated part of the whole person. A robust spiritual strength—in whatever form that means for an individual—will allow that person to be stronger in the face of adversity. The spiritual “weaves the physical and psychological, and social into one and grounds it in the transcendent source of all existence.”<sup>43</sup> How one develops a strong spirituality is as different as the myriad descriptions and definitions of the inner journey.

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<sup>43</sup> Shea, John. *Spirituality and Health Care: Reaching Toward a Holistic Future*. (Chicago: Park Ridge Center. 2000.) 106.

John Shea is an international teacher and author on Christian spirituality. His works include books and articles on holistic health care—incorporating spirituality as a specific dimension in that field—and spiritual storytelling. He explains spirituality this way:

The spiritual...is a complementary dimension to the already established physical, psychological, and social dimensions. [...] Attending to the spiritual is envisioned as an inner journey of awareness into the soul space, a space that both connects with the transcendent source and informs and vitalizes everything in people and in the world. [...] Staying in touch with this resource is not easy.<sup>44</sup>

Developing a strong, healthy spirituality initially requires as much attention as creating a strong, healthy emotional, physical, or social life. Some find this through organized systems like religion or support groups. Others find their path is discovered through experiences like reading, listening to music, being in nature, or meditating. “Attending to the spiritual entails going within to the soul space, opening both the eye that looks into the Spirit and the eye that looks into the world, and learning how to receive and give Spirit.”<sup>45</sup> Tending to this part of being human starts with awakening to a need for this inner space to be developed; an awareness that there *is* a spiritual side to each of us that needs recognition and tending to. In due course, one’s spirituality cares for them as long as one is attentive to it and allows it to sustain them.

Frequently, in my conversations with people about spirituality, they will say that they are very spiritual, “but I don’t go to church. I’m not ‘into’ organized religion.” For Shea, this comment is typically made by people who have awakened to their inner, spiritual dimension and are conscious of this aspect of their humanity. Once our spiritual eyes are opened, he says, “we see

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<sup>44</sup> Shea, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Shea, 111.



the world from a spiritual perspective.”<sup>46</sup> The spiritual path is multifocal. It is both inward, looking into our soul space, and outward, looking into the world to embody giving and receiving the Spirit.

It is through going inside that we discover the outer spiritual connections. Shea cites Cyprian Smith, “God cannot be found or grasped in the external world, but only in the inner world. If we seek him [*sic*] outside, we shall find him nowhere; if we seek him within, we shall find him everywhere. [...] Having discovered God within, we can discover him without; but never the other way round [*sic*].”<sup>47</sup> To me, this paradox means through discovering, exploring, and caring for one’s inner spiritual journey, the outer connection with God is found. In order to experience a deeper sense of spirituality, too, we must wake up and discover the inner path that lies within us, which will lead us to greater communion with humanity, God, and/or the cosmos.

This holistic understanding of the human being also begins to deconstruct our dualistic understanding about God and humanity. Sister Madonna Kobenschlag, a feminist theologian and psychotherapist, replied to the question of her belief in God’s transcendence in a May 1991 article in *Sojourner*:

I think our concept of God is a product of our own dualistic thinking, which is that things are either transcendent or immanent. And I don’t believe that anymore. Spirit and matter are not split in the manner that we have stereotypically thought of it. My experience of God is of being transcendent and immanent all at once ... I no longer believe that God is up there, and I don’t believe that God is only within me, and I don’t believe that God is merely out there in history. I think we are actually in God at all times.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Shea, 101.

<sup>47</sup> Shea, 95.

<sup>48</sup> As cited in Flinders, Carol Lee, *Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of Seven Women Mystics*. (New York: HarperOne. 1993), 234.

Being “in God” as a state-of-being is how Etty Hillesum discussed her own inner spirituality within her journals and in her correspondence with others.

Taking the first steps on a spiritual journey is important for every human being, but not everyone takes those initial steps. As Shea puts it, “We need to distinguish between ‘the *presence* of the spiritual and the *awareness* of the spiritual... Although the spiritual dimension is always present, people are not aware of it.’”<sup>49</sup> We are more or less out of touch with the spiritual dimension of ourselves. Or, as Shea cites Philip Novak, we are asleep and need to wake up.<sup>50</sup>

### The Spirituality of Etty Hillesum

Before I present my understanding of Etty Hillesum’s spirituality, I need to restate that I am not limiting her to any specific religion or spiritual context. I have read her texts and the scholarly work around her spiritual development. I acknowledge and agree with what Klaas A. D. Smelik and Ria van den Brandt have written. Smelik addresses scholars who try to categorize Hillesum’s spirituality through her diaries with these words:

Anyone wanting to situate Etty Hillesum within some (spiritual) group ends up placing her with the group of Dutch Jews who had become assimilated before the Second World War. Assimilated means that her parents did not keep a kosher home, [...] Etty Hillesum was certainly not totally unfamiliar with Judaism.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Shea 2000, 94.

<sup>50</sup> Shea 2000, 109-110.

<sup>51</sup> Smelik, Klaas A.D. 2010. “Etty Hillesum and Her God.” In *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, November 2008*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik, Ria van den Brandt and Meins G.S. Coetsier, 75-102. (Leiden | Boston: Brill. 2010.) 78.

Hillesum's identification with the Jews becomes stronger as her journals and letters record her life across thirty months.<sup>52</sup> The Germans did not differentiate between practicing and non-practicing Jews. Being Jewish was an ethnicity for them, not a religious practice.

In the essay, "*Etty Hillesum and her 'Catholic Worshippers'*", van den Brandt cautions the student scholar against reading too much into Hillesum's writings in order to affirm the scholar's own interpretation of Hillesum's works. Van den Brandt writes,

For theological interpreters, the suggestion to read Etty Hillesum in a *different* way means, first of all: being more sensitive to textual complexities and resisting the temptation to read the texts within a framework of supposed and unverifiable biographical facts. In daily research, this implies, I repeat, that both the study of the complete and scholarly edition and of the relevant secondary literature have to be taken seriously. These elements are necessary for a critical, serious and scholarly reception within theology and other disciplines. [...] for Etty Hillesum herself *writing* functioned as *empowerment*. She wrote herself an identity. Also for other people, the *reading* of her texts turns out to be an act of *empowerment*: present-day readers feel nourished and strengthened by her words and insights. [...] What Etty Hillesum in her texts *shows*, can be understood as a pioneering act of religious individualization. [...] (this is) why theologians and non-theologians should be obliged to read her texts: *not* as an implicit confirmation of one's own religious

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<sup>52</sup> There is an article, *Etty Hillesum in Joodse Contexten*, by Piet Schrijvers, originally published in Dutch in 2003, that could be helpful in this matter. The English translation (*Etty Hillesum in Jewish Contexts*) is pending publication in 2018/late 2017.

tradition but as an example of a very successful and creative form of religious or philosophical individualization.<sup>53</sup>

I have striven to be open-minded in discovering Etty Hillesum's spirituality. The empowerment she gained out of creating an informal autobiography for herself—internal and external—has been empowering for me as I have studied her works.

Etty Hillesum began her inner journey through her diaries and because of her relationship with Julius Spier. Julius Spier's recommendation to Hillesum that she begin journaling was a way of starting her on her inner, spiritual journey and bringing order to her chaotic inner life. As Hillesum's psychoanalyst, Julius Spier awakened her to her inner self. Upon his death on 15 September 1942, Hillesum knew she was now most certainly on her own. She knew she could do what she had learned how to do from Spier as his secretary and student. "What energies I possess have been set free inside me. You taught me to speak the name of God without embarrassment. You were the mediator between God and me, and now you, the mediator, have gone, and my path leads straight to God. [...] And I shall be the mediator for any other soul I can reach."<sup>54</sup> She has the inner strength she believes she needs to face the world on her own, and to bring this strength to those with whom she comes in contact.

She believes she can be the mediator or invites people to return to themselves, and she has known this for some time. Hillesum writes on

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<sup>53</sup> van den Brandt, Ria. "Etty Hillesum and Her "Catholic Worshippers"." In *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, November 2008*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik, Ria van den Brandt, and Meins G.S. Coetsier, 215-231. (London: Brill. 2010) 230-31.

<sup>54</sup> Bilingual, 823|824; 15 Sept. 1942 Dinsdagnacht, 1 uur: Die krachten, die mij ter beschikking staan, heb jij in me vrijgemaakt. Jij hebt me onbevangen de naam van God leren uitspreken. Jij bent de bemiddelaar geweest tussen God en mij en nu ben jij, bemiddelaar weggegaan en nu gaat mijn weg regelrecht tot God. [...] En ik zal zelf weer de bemiddelaarster zijn voor al die anderen, die ik bereiken kan. (*Written on the day Julius Spier died.*)

“Monday, 8 June 1942, at night: To take yourself seriously and to be convinced that it makes sense to find your own shape and form. And something you can do for your fellow men is this: keep turning them back towards themselves, catch and stop them in their flight from themselves and then take them by the hand and lead them back to their own sources.”<sup>55</sup>

The seventeen months she has been working with Spier (up to this point) has given her the inner strength she needs to face the outer world of fear and bleakness.

Hillesum’s fearlessness in the face of oppression and danger are exemplary for me. Another way of looking at this is similar to the way Frederick Buechner describes spirituality in his book *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter’s Dictionary*. He writes this about the perseverance we can possess due to a strong spirituality:

I think of [*spirituality*] as a kind of whistling in the dark, [...] it helps to give us courage and to hold the shadows at bay. To whistle in the dark isn’t to pretend that the dark doesn’t sometimes scare the living daylights out of us. Instead, I think, it’s to demonstrate, if only to ourselves, that not even the dark can quite overcome our trust in the ultimate triumph of the Living Light.<sup>56</sup>

Through her journals and letters, Etty Hillesum shares her own unique way of “whistling in the dark.” Transcribing her desire to help others face their own fears while she is still facing her own is her way of whistling. I believe she wanted to teach others how to whistle in the dark, too, by taking them by the hand and leading them back to themselves. This courageous spiritual attitude

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<sup>55</sup> Bilingual, 639|640; Maandagochtend [8 Juni 1942], ‘s Avonds: het ernstig nemen van zich zelf en er van overtuigd zijn, dat het zin heeft z’n eigen vorm te vinden. En dit is ook het werk, dat men aan medemensen verrichten kan: ze steeds terug te drijven naar zichzelf, ze op te vangen en tegen te houden op hun vlucht voor zich zelf en ze dan aan de hand te ‘nemen en terug te voeren naar de eigen bronnen.

<sup>56</sup> Buechner, Frederick. 1993. “Introduction.” In *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter’s Dictionary*, by Frederick Buechner, xi-xiii. (New York: HarperOne. 1993.) ix.

matured in Hillesum throughout the thirty months of her writing wherein she revealed that the ultimate triumph over fear and hatred is love.

Yet, Hillesum did not journal specifically as a way to record her spiritual growth. Her work is an intensely personal, literary work. Her audience was, at least initially, only herself. She wanted to be a great author someday. On the first day of her journaling, Hillesum writes to Spier, “I write with the greatest reluctance, and always feel inhibited when I do. Yet I want to become a writer one day [...]”<sup>57</sup> Hillesum’s writing is truly her art form. As her personal insight and authorship improves from journal to journal, she nurtures her inner spiritual journey, but also reflects on what she has already written, striving constantly to improve her written words. She ‘woke up’ to her spiritual self, as Shea puts it. Hillesum became aware of her inner strength. This ‘knowing’ became her strength—the asset which held her together holistically.

In *Etty Hillesum: A Portrait of a Holocaust Artist*, Rachel Feldhay Brenner succinctly categorizes Hillesum’s spiritual and artistic development as witnessed through Hillesum’s journals. Brenner writes:

Hillesum’s growth as a thinking artist evolved in two stages and roughly in two places. The first stage, which I call the stage of preparation, took place in Amsterdam; at this stage, she prepared to face the reality of the ultimate destruction through self-exploration as thinker and artist. The second stage, which I call the stage of the test, began with Hillesum’s first departure for Camp Westerbork in the

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<sup>57</sup> Bilingual, 1|2; 8 March 1941: ...ich schreibe furchtbar ungerne, fühle mich dabei immer so gehemmt und unsicher. Und ich möchte später Schriftstellerin werden.

reality of the deportation camp, Hillesum put to test both her ethical perspective and her art she had been striving to shape in defiance of the increasing Nazi terror.<sup>58</sup>

The “stage of test” undertaken at Camp Westerbork is edified in Carol Flinders’ work *Enduring Lives*. Hillesum’s action/reaction to “lead them back to their own sources” would be what Flinders—whose characterization of Hillesum we saw earlier—might call ‘tending and befriending’ or ‘compassionate witnessing’.

Compassionate witnessing means making oneself completely available to another.

It means standing before ‘the other’ with heart and eyes and ears wide open, ready to hear the person out no matter what. By bearing witness to another human being who has endured terrible trauma, ... we can set that person on the first steps toward being healed.<sup>59</sup>

Hillesum did not exhibit “fight or flight” tendencies. In fact, she repeatedly writes of wanting to face what her people are facing, all the way to the end. She refuses to go into hiding and struggles away from being kidnapped by well-intended friends who want to keep her safe. While at Camp Westerbork, Hillesum lived out the late-twentieth century discovery about women Flinders calls ‘tend and befriend.’ When faced with a traumatic or threatening experience, women have a greater tendency to gather others together to face the challenge as a group. They befriend those also in harm’s way. In Hillesum’s case this would be to befriend and try to protect as many inmates at Camp Westerbork as possible. In Exercise Book Eleven, the final journal we have of hers, Hillesum writes, “My heart is a floodgate for a never-ending tide of misery.”<sup>60</sup> She spends

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<sup>58</sup> Brenner, Rachel Feldhay. “Etty Hillesum: A Portrait of a Holocaust Artist.” In *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, November 2008*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik, Ria van den Brandt and Meins G.S. Coetsier, 235-252. (Leiden | Boston: Brill. 2010.) 235.

<sup>59</sup> Flinders, *Enduring Lives*, 67.

<sup>60</sup> Bilingual, 841|842; 20 Sept. [1942]: Zondagavond: Mijn hart, dat een sluis is, waardoor steeds weer een nieuwe stroom van leed gestuurd wordt.

her time at Camp Westerbork caring for the incoming inmates from the round-ups in the cities and for those on the list for deportation. She listens—to them and to herself.

For Hillesum, learning to listen-in to herself—finding her burgeoning authorship and spirituality—was not a simple task. She kept at it and discovered a whole new space inside herself. Meins G.S. Coetsier puts the following perspective on the spirituality revealed in Hillesum’s journals:

Her experience within the ‘space’ opened by her turning inward to listen to herself, her ‘*hineinhorchen*,’<sup>61</sup> altered what might have been expected in an ordinary diary. [...] Hillesum touched on the divine presence. [...] The divine presence, however, constituted her as a human being as such, as the creature made ‘in’ or ‘toward’ God’s image, and thereby enabled her human experiencing in the first place.<sup>62</sup>

The divine presence experienced by Hillesum is why the expression of her developing spirituality is studied by theologians. We recognize that this connection with ‘the Other’ offered her inner support to which she could turn repeatedly. “The process of self-analysis empowered her; the sense of her growing self-understanding and the ability to express her progress in her diary made her feel stronger and allowed her to construct defenses against the increasingly forbidding reality.”<sup>63</sup>

As the journals unfold from their very beginning and Hillesum records her conversations with her God, we catch glimpses of her spiritual side. In *The Carnavalesque in the Writings and Spirituality of Etty Hillesum*, Cartner writes, echoing Shea, “It is clear that Hillesum’s holistic

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<sup>61</sup> *Hineinhorchen*: German for ‘listen in’.

<sup>62</sup> Coetsier, Meins G S, PhD. ““You-Consciousness” -- Toward Political Theory: Etty Hillesum's Experience and Symbolization of the Divine Presence.” In *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, November 2008*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik, Ria van den Brandt, and Meins G.S. Coetsier, 103-124. (Leiden | Boston: Brill. 2010.) 107 & 109.

<sup>63</sup> Brenner 2010, 241.



vision of life and the value she placed on her contribution to it, far from dwarfing her place in the event of being, actually enhanced it. That Hillesum felt a part of something larger than herself, facilitated the conviction that the significance of her life would extend beyond the confines of the years allotted to her.”<sup>64</sup>

Hillesum writes a resonance of Cyprian Smith’s paradox mentioned earlier when she writes of her life being expanded by death, and living a full life while able to do so.

Yes, we carry everything within us, God and Heaven and Hell and Earth and Life and Death and all of history. The externals are so many props; everything we need is within us. [...] Such an awful lot has happened inside me the last few days. Something has crystallized. I have looked our destruction, our miserable end, which has already begun in so many small ways in our daily life, straight in the eye and accepted it into my life, and my love of life has not been diminished. [...] It sounds paradoxical: by excluding death from our life we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life we enlarge and enrich it. (Friday, 3 July 1942) <sup>65</sup>

Hillesum expands on her inner relationship with God in a letter written from Camp Westerbork to her friend Henny Tideman on 18 August 1943:

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<sup>64</sup> Cartner, John. “The Carnavalesque in the Writing and Spirituality of Etty Hillesum.” In *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, January 2014*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik, Meins G.S. Coetsier, and Jurjen Wiersma. 120-143. (Leiden | Boston: Brill. 2017.) 124.

<sup>65</sup> Bilingual, 739|740; [Vrijdag 3 Juli 1942] Ach, we hebben het toch immers alles in ons, God en hemel en hel en aarde en leven en dood en eeuwen, vele eeuwen. Een wisselend décor en handeling van de uiterlijke omstandigheden. [...] Er is zo verschrikkelijk veel in me gebeurd de laatste dagen, maar nu heeft zich eindelijk iets uitgekristalliseerd. Onze ondergang, onze waarschijnlijk ellendige ondergang, die nu al begonnen is in de vele kleine dingen van het dagelijkse leven, heb ik regelrecht in de ogen gezien en de mogelijkheid daarvan heeft een plaats in mijn levensgevoel gekregen, zonder dat mijn levensgevoel daardoor in kracht verminderd is. [...] Het klinkt bijna paradoxaal: door de dood buiten zijn leven te sluiten, leeft men niet een volledig leven en door de dood binnen zijn leven op te nemen, verruimt en verrijkt men zijn leven.

[...] Things come and go in a deeper rhythm, and people must be taught to listen; it is the most important thing we have to learn in this life.

I am not challenging You, oh God; my life is one great dialogue with You. I may never become the great artist I would really like to be, but I am already secure in You, God. Sometimes I wish to write down few words of wisdom, and some short and fascinating stories, but I always end up straight to the same and single word: “God.” And that word contains everything, and I do not need to say anything else. And all my creative powers are translated into inner dialogues with You. The beat of my heart has grown deeper, more active, and yet more peaceful, and it is as if I were all the time storing up inner riches.<sup>66</sup>

Our task now is to look more specifically at the role of music in Etty Hillesum’s burgeoning spirituality.

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<sup>66</sup> Bilingual, 1049|1050; [...] alles gaat volgens één eigen dieperliggend rythme en men moest mensen leren dit rythme te beluisteren het is het gewichtigste, wat een mens te leren heeft, in dit leven.

Ik vecht niet met jou, mijn God, mijn leven is een grote samenspraak met jou. Misschien zal ik nooit een groot kunstenaar worden, wat ik toch eigenlijk wil, maar ik ben al te zeer geborgen in jou, mijn God. Ik zou soms wel kleine wijsheden willen etsen en vibrerende verhaaltjes, maar ik kom altijd weer direct terecht bij een en hetzelfde woord: God, en dat omvat alles en dan hoef ik al het andere niet meer te zeggen. en al mijn scheppingskracht zet zich om in innerlijke samenspraken met jou, de golfslag van mijn hart is breder geworden hier en bewogener en rustiger tegelijkertijd en het is mij of m’n innerlijke rijkdom steeds groter wordt.



## Chapter 3. Music & Spirituality

In this chapter, I first briefly survey some writing on music and spirituality—then I attempt a look at the role of music in Hillesum’s spiritual life. I will describe, in summary, my understanding of the role music plays in the burgeoning spirituality of Etty Hillesum.

### Music in Community Spirituality

Music has a way of gathering people together, creating community among us, or keeping communities unified. “Music seems to have a spiritual dimension which goes beyond mere sensible pleasure, and which somehow reflects a deeper reality. Anthropology makes it clear that primitive religion is inseparable from music and dance; and even for the most modern of cultures, music retains a mystical fascination...”<sup>67</sup> I will explore the positive influence music can have on the spiritual aspect of human beings.

Kathleen Harmon writes eloquently on this topic in her book, *The Mystery We Celebrate, The Song We Sing: A Theology of Liturgical Music*. For those of us who have the power of speech, we use our “voice to stake our territorial claim over our environment and over the others who people it.”<sup>68</sup> She states later in her work how basic music is to the human person.

Music...unites us because of its very lack of semantic reference [...] Even when tied to words in song, music maintains the upper hand in gaining attention simply because taking it in involves less cognitive effort than does understanding speech. [...] this means that music can focus our attention more quickly than mere speech can. Through music we become present more easily to that speechless realm within

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<sup>67</sup> Viladesau, Richard. “Music as an approach to God: a Theology of Aesthetic Experience.” *The Catholic World* (January/February 1989): 4-9; microfiche, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Harmon, Kathleen. *The Mystery We Celebrate, the Song We Sing: A Theology of Liturgical Music*. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press. 2008.) 37.

one another where the struggle with semantic overload is at rest and the peacefulness of our simple presence can communicate.<sup>69</sup>

Infants, long before they have the power of speech, respond to music and rhythm—even *in utero*. A baby is not born with a sense of individuation from the world surrounding it. Singing is one of the first vocalizations a baby makes to communicate with others. When I stand side-by-side with others in a choir and sing with them, I have joined a “collectivity of shared orientation and identity.”<sup>70</sup> Music is as life-long in our memory as the sense of smell. Long after the initial experience with something musical has passed, music can conjure up long-distant memories in people as they age, just as an aroma can bring memories of an event or person.

Just as music is part of an individual’s memory, our communal living has music as memory as well. Most world religions incorporate music into their rituals: chanting, rhythm, dancing, singing, humming, or instruments. These forms can identify specific sects, but can also unify them. “Within Hasidic tradition song and dance are valued as supra-linguistic forms of resistance to oppression and its companions, fear and internalized inferiority.”<sup>71</sup> The *nigunim*, or spiritual melodies, are vocalizations within the Hasidic traditions from Eastern Europe. Some contain fixed texts, others are free of words altogether. “Joy and its expression through song and dance have been important values of the Hasidic movement since its beginnings in the second half of the eighteenth century. [...] Hasidic spiritual leaders since that time devoted increasing attention to music and dance in their writings.”<sup>72</sup> Some Hasidim claim they can tell the different sects simply by the way the *nigunim* are sung.

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<sup>69</sup> Harmon, 46.

<sup>70</sup> Harmon, 39.

<sup>71</sup> Cartner, 131.

<sup>72</sup> Mazor, Yaakov. “Hasidism:Music.” October 15, 2010. Accessed August 31, 2017. <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Hasidism/Music>.

In African and African-American culture the use of music and rhythm is very rich. During the era of lawful slavery in the United States, the slaves used drums to create community on the plantations and also to communicate with slaves on other plantations nearby.<sup>73</sup> In America in the 1950s and 1960s, the *Civil Rights Movement* sang “We Shall Overcome” as marches and rallies were held across the deep south. In the *Black Lives Matter* movement in the United States in 2016-17, the chant “No Justice! No Peace!” has rung out from the protesters as they march and rally in civil defiance.

In the following citation of Karl Paulnack, himself a pianist, instructor, and director of the music division at Boston Conservatory, notice the connection he makes between the arts and the survival of humanity. Through this eloquent, semester-opening speech in 2014, Paulnack spoke of the importance and impact of music on culture and society as he welcomed the parents of the incoming freshman class:

Given what we have since learned about life in the Nazi camps, why would anyone in his right mind waste time and energy writing or playing music? There was barely enough energy on a good day to find food and water, to avoid a beating, to stay warm, to escape torture—why would anyone bother with music? And yet—even from the concentration camps, we have poetry, we have music, we have visual art; [...] many, many people created art. Why? Well, in a place where people are only focused on survival, on the bare necessities, the obvious conclusion is that art must be, somehow, essential for life. The camps were without money, without hope, without commerce, without recreation, without basic respect, but they were not

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<sup>73</sup> This is a simple summary of what Dr. Hayes writes about in her book: Hayes, Diana L. *Forged in the Fiery Furnace: African American Spirituality*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books. 2012.)

without art. Art is part of survival; art is part of the human spirit, an unquenchable expression of who we are. Art is one of the ways in which we say, ‘I am alive, and my life has meaning.’

In September of 2001 I (Paulnack) was a resident of Manhattan. [...] The first organized activity that I saw in New York, on the very evening of September 11th, was singing. People sang. People sang around fire houses, people sang “We Shall Overcome.” Lots of people sang America the Beautiful. The first organized public event that I remember was the Brahms Requiem, later that week, at Lincoln Center, with the New York Philharmonic. The first organized public expression of grief, our first communal response to that historic event, was a concert. That was the beginning of a sense that life might go on. The US Military secured the airspace, but recovery was led by the arts, and by music in particular, that very night. [...] Remember the Greeks: music is the study of invisible relationships between internal objects. [...] You’re here to become a sort of therapist for the human soul, a spiritual version of a chiropractor, physical therapist, someone who works with our insides to see if they (can) get things to line up, to see if we can come into harmony with ourselves and be healthy and happy and well.<sup>74</sup>

Allow me to add emphasis to Paulnack’s speech: “*art must be, somehow, essential for life*” and “*recovery was led by the arts, and by music in particular.*” Art brings a healing quality to life. Art therapy heals so many individuals in forms of psychological and spiritual therapy. Social healing obviously can happen, too, through the arts.

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<sup>74</sup> Paulnack, Karl. “Boston Conservatory Music Division.” September 2014. Accessed Feb 2016. [https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/boisi/pdf/s091/Welcome\\_address\\_to\\_freshman\\_at\\_Boston\\_Conservatory.pdf](https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/boisi/pdf/s091/Welcome_address_to_freshman_at_Boston_Conservatory.pdf).

In Etty Hillesum's final journal entry in October 1942, she speaks to the same healing power of the arts as delivered through the human person:

*Early next morning [Tuesday, 13 October 1942].*

I always return to Rilke. It is strange to think that someone so frail, who did most of his writing within protective castle walls, would perhaps have been broken by the circumstances in which we now live. Is that not further testimony that life is finely balanced? Evidence that, in peaceful times and under favorable circumstances, sensitive artists may search for the purest and most fitting expression of their deepest insights so that, during more turbulent and debilitating times, others can turn to them for support and a ready response to their bewildered questions? A response they are unable to formulate for themselves, since all their energies are taken up in looking after the bare necessities? [...] We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds.<sup>75</sup>

### The Melody in Etty Hillesum's Burgeoning Spirituality

Now, to come to this thesis' central point: what can be said about music in Etty Hillesum's burgeoning spirituality? How did the undercurrent of Etty Hillesum's spirituality steady her through the remaining course of her life following Julius Spier's death? Her journals and letters are stunningly written passages about dreadful events and actions. Her internal life is as much a topic in her journals as her external life at Camp Westerbork is in her letters. Her writing improved,

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<sup>75</sup> Bilingual, 885|886; de volgende ochtend vroeg [Dinsdag 13 October 1942]: Altijd weer kom ik met Rilke aandragen. Het is zo wonderlijk, hij was een broze man en schreef veel van z'n werk binnen de muren van gastvrije kastelen en misschien zou hij kapot gegaan zijn in omstandigheden, als waarin wij nu moeten leven. Maar getuigt het niet van een goede economie, dat in rustige tijden en gunstige omstandigheden sensitieve kunstenaars voor hun diepste inzichten ongestoord de schoonste en passendste vorm kunnen zoeken, waaraan mensen, die in bewogenere en krachtroevendere tijden leven zich kunnen oprichten en waarin ze een gereed onderdak kunnen vinden voor verwarringen en vragen, die zich nog niet tot eigen vorm en oplossing laten brengen omdat de dagelijkse energieën voor de dagelijkse noden opgeëist worden? ... Men zou een pleister op vele wonden willen zijn.



through practice and determination. The same can be said for her spiritual growth. Hillesum's determination to find her inner melody and retain it as a constant part of her life is apparent in her journals.

Etty Hillesum's conversations with her God illustrate to us, her readers, her confidence in the powerful, abiding Presence in her life following the death of Spier. Her spirituality was her connection with/to others and, as stated in Chapter 2, to "bring people back to their own resources." She honors her heritage in her own way. "*Friday morning, 18 Sept. [1942]:* Your lessons are hard, oh God, let me be your good and patient pupil. [...] I feel that I am one of many heirs to a great spiritual heritage. I shall be its faithful guardian. I shall share it as best I can."<sup>76</sup> Hillesum's desire to help people through that difficult time is her way of expressing her spiritual life with others—and intends to give them the strength they need in those difficult times.

And yet, she is full of love—love for others, love for her God, love for all—even though life is very hard. On 20 September 1942, just a few days after the death of Spier, she prays,

How can I thank You, oh God, for all the good You keep showering upon me. For all the friendship, for the many fruitful thoughts, for that great all-embracing love I feel within me and that I am able to apply at every step. Sometimes I almost believe that it is too much, and then I cannot tell how I shall ever do justice to it. But it is just as if, thanks to that great love, everything one does bears fruit. Perhaps I shall yet be able to put it into words.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Bilingual, 833|834; Vrijdagmorgen. 18 Sept. [1942]: Uw lessen zijn moeilijk, God, laat mij Uw goede en geduldige Leerling zijn. ... Ik voel me een van de vele erfgenamen van een grote geestelijke erfenis. Ik zal daarvan de trouwe behoedster zijn. Ik zal er van uitdelen, zoveel als ik bij machte zal zijn.

<sup>77</sup> Bilingual, 835|836; 20 Sept. [1942] Zondagmorgen 10 uur: Hoe moet ik je danken, mijn God, voor al het goede dat je me doet toevloeien, ononderbroken. Voor alle vriendschap, voor de vele vruchtbare gedachten, voor dat grote gevoel van liefde, dat er in me is en die ik op iedere stap kan omzetten, voor alles. Soms geloof ik haast, dat het te veel is, dan weet ik niet, hoe ik dat alles ooit goed moet maken. Maar het is net of door die grote liefde alles wat je doet vruchtbaar wordt, misschien zal ik het nog eens kunnen uitdrukken.

Still striving to be an author, hoping to be able to write down all she has been through, she is grateful for the opportunity to have lived the life she has lived and hopes that it will bear fruit someday.

To this end Flinders reminds us about Hillesum's journey, "When Etty first began writing the diary, she describes her desire for 'a tune': a thread, or medium, a calling that would make sense of her existence. By the end she has found it, and what she has found is so quiet it is almost intangible by ordinary standards."<sup>78</sup> What Hillesum has discovered within herself—her soul space (Coetsier), from the preparation and test stages of her development (Brenner)—is the steady undercurrent of spirituality in her life which flows to others without prejudice. In the letter from Westerbork written on 29 November 1942 to Han Wegerif and others, she confesses, "[...] I should so much like to help provide some spiritual nourishment; I'll see what chance there is of that."<sup>79</sup> The desperate conditions of the Camp do not deflate her completely. She knows she has the internal resources to bring a sense of 'being human' to the lives of those being dehumanized within the barbed-wire confines of the Camp.

In the article, *Etty Hillesum and Sophie Scholl: Sisters in Fate*, Marta Perrini writes very clearly about the spiritual strength of these two non-violent resisters to Nazism.

Several passages by Hillesum and especially by Scholl<sup>80</sup> focus on music and its ability to free the heart from prejudices, transform its chaos into order, melt its

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<sup>78</sup> Flinders, *Enduring Lives*, 66.

<sup>79</sup> Bilingual, 931|932; 21. Aan Han Wegerif en anderen. Westerbork, zondag 29 november 1942: [...] ik zou graag op dit gebied van geestelijk voedsel aan get werk willen gaan, eens kijken of het lukt.

<sup>80</sup> Perrini, 192; Sophie Scholl was a member of the non-violent resistance movement in Germany called White Rose. She was arrested, interrogated, and put through a show trial, and then put to death by guillotine on 22 Feb 1943 in Munich.

rigidity and thus prepare it for the ‘spirit’s action in the soul.’<sup>81</sup> The primary importance of music, like literature, was not, for them, its dimensions of formal beauty and aesthetic pleasure, but its valuable support of spiritual activity. [...]”<sup>82</sup>

Scholl’s and Hillesum’s diaries are replete with comments on their own creations and the creations of others. Perrini continues, “especially Hillesum’s, who saw diary writing as an exercise in style. Her need to ‘find a new tone to go with this new attitude to life’<sup>83</sup> was deeply connected to her artistic and personal experiences, both internal and external.”<sup>84</sup> For Hillesum, the commentary frequently returns to the words of Rilke, her spiritual friend, her *anam cara*.<sup>85</sup>

Father Richard Viladesau, whose expertise is theological aesthetics, returns us to Paulnack’s speech with what is essential for surviving times of fear, horror, or personal darkness, “the fact that God is the ‘horizon’ of every experience of beauty explains why even the tragic emotions can be experienced in art as ‘beautiful,’ and why there is at the heart of every deep aesthetic experience—and perhaps particularly in music—an intense feeling of striving toward something beyond the moment itself.”<sup>86</sup> Beauty is essential for living toward something and not surrendering one’s humanity to the current dark moment. The most transcendental aesthetic is music because human beings have an innate connection to this art form.

In summary, I intend to show how music and the arts can heal a pained world. Music can be a solace in the world. For Etty Hillesum, music was a metaphor for the undercurrent of her spirituality. Her inner tune was expressed in her desire to help others who were facing life-or-death

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<sup>81</sup> Perrini, Marta. “Etty Hillesum and Sophie Scholl: Sisters in Fate.” In *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, January 2014*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik, Meins G.S. Coetsier, and Jurjen Wiersma. 192-204. (Leiden | Boston: Brill. 2017.) 195.

<sup>82</sup> Perrini, 195.

<sup>83</sup> Bilingual, 771|772; Vrijdagochtend [10 Juli 1942], later: Om de nieuwe toon te vinden, die bij het nieuwe levensgevoel past.

<sup>84</sup> Perrini, 196.

<sup>85</sup> Gaelic: *soul friend*.

<sup>86</sup> Viladesau, 8.

possibilities on a day-in and day-out basis. She wanted to bring humanity back to those for whom the dehumanization had taken hold under Nazi control. She recognized where her inner strength came from: Spier, Rilke, and God. She used their examples to fulfill what she hoped to do with her life: “let some music flow from me” to “provide some spiritual nourishment.”

*“We left the camp singing.”*

For Etty Hillesum and her family to board a transport train with a song on their lips is an amazing act, from a twenty-first century perspective. Surrounded by a cacophony of sound—screaming, howling, yelling, bargaining, crying, murmured praying—was singing an act of resistance? An act of acceptance? An act of defiance? An act of spiritual confidence?

The undercurrent of music in Hillesum’s burgeoning spirituality is not about external music. It is about getting in touch with her own inner spiritual melody—a melody she could sustain and which would sustain her. She found great hope, comfort, and safety in her God. Hillesum’s conversations with God were frequently written in her journals, sometimes spontaneously, other times trying to recall what had spilled out of her earlier. The inner tune or inner melody is one of the metaphors she uses to describe her spirituality, and the one I chose to chronicle in this paper.

I initially cited five phrases in the *Introduction* to this work. We have discovered that the flow between them is the continued strengthening of Hillesum’s spirituality in which she sought a continuing inner tune or melody. With each of those phrases, we can sense her getting stronger and becoming more committed to her internal space. Ultimately, she found in herself an unbreakable melody. Because of her strong melody within, she chose to provide spiritual nourishment to those with whom she came in contact. The unbreakable melody of Hillesum’s spirituality transcends the sensory and “semantic overload” described by Harmon earlier in this work. Hillesum is then able to be the “peacefulness of ... simple presence” in the lives of other

prisoners at Camp Westerbork.<sup>87</sup> This undercurrent of Hillesum's spirituality is as strong and moving as a Beethoven symphony.

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<sup>87</sup> See footnote 69.



## Conclusion

We may never know exactly what Etty Hillesum and her family were singing as they boarded and departed on the train that Tuesday in September 1943. Singing during deportation from Camp Westerbork was not as uncommon as I initially thought. The prisoners sang or intoned different types of songs—Holland Forever, Jewish prayers, nursery rhymes (by the children)—as they boarded the train taking them away to a place from which no one returned.

I found many other paths I wanted to follow along the theme of music in the camps. For instance, how is the use of music a form of resistance under oppression? In what ways did the Jewish people continue to use music to retain identity and form community in the various internment camps of the Third Reich? How were the revues and cabarets subversive to Nazi control? Perhaps these questions will be research for another project by another researcher who will approach the subject matter with a lens different than mine.

I carry the tune of Etty Hillesum with me wherever I go. I feel about her as she felt about Rilke. On 20 February 1942, she wrote in her journal: “You can never ‘get away’ from Rilke once you have read him properly. If you can’t carry him with you all your life, there is no point in reading him.”<sup>88</sup> If I may be so bold, I would write this another way in my own journal: “You can never ‘get away’ from Etty once you have read her properly. If you can’t carry her with you all your life, there is no point in reading her.” Hillesum is part of the harmony in my own inner tune, my *anam cara*, just as Rilke was hers.

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<sup>88</sup> Bilingual, 399/400; 20 Februari, '42. Vrijdagochtend, 10 uur: Van Rilke “kommt men niet terug”, als men hem werkelijk goed gelezen heeft. Wanneer men hem niet gedurende een heel leven met zich meedraagt, heeft het überhaupt geen zin hem te lezen.





# Appendix I

## Abridged list of search terms

Abridged list of search terms:<sup>89</sup>

<b>Term Search</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Term Search</b>	<b>Count</b>
Beethoven	25	Piano	38
Cello	3	Play (verb)	135
Chord(s)	2	Psalm/s	8
Dance/dancing/dances	23	Revue/s	21
God	453	Sang	15
Gramophone	5	Scale	1
Harmony/Harmonious	30	Sing/er/ing Sang Song	112
Inside me	120	Soul	171
Jew/s/ish	619	Soiree	9
Melody/Melodious/ly	9	Spirit/ual/ually/uality	95
Music/Musical/Musician	112	The strains	3
Perform/ed/ance/ing	48	Tune	14

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<sup>89</sup> All terms in this list were searched in a Microsoft Word document of *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943: Complete and Unabridged (E.T.)*. Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik. Translated by Arnold J. Pomerans. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002.

## Appendix II

### Mischa's Recital Programme

PIANO EVENING<sup>90</sup>

By Mischa Hillesum

12 October 1941

#### PROGRAMME

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. Organ fantasy and Fugue in G minor                             | Joh. Seb. Bach (1685-1750) adapted for piano by F.Liszt |
| 2. Sonata in D Major K. V. 576<br>Allegro<br>Adagio<br>Allegretto | W. A. Mozart (1756-1791)                                |
| 3. a. Berceuse Op. 57<br>b. Scherzo Op. 31                        | Fr. Chopin (1810-1849)                                  |
| 4. Rondo Capriccioso E Minor Op. 14                               | F. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809-1847)                    |

#### INTERVAL

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 5. a. Funérailles (From 'Harmonies Poétiques et religieuses')<br>b. Gnomen-Reigen-Concert-Etude | Franz Liszt (1811-1886)  |
| 6. a. Mélodie Op. 3<br>b. Prélude Op. 16<br>c. Etude Op. 42<br>d. Hopak                         | S. Rachmaninov (1873)<br>A. Scriábin (1872-1915)<br>M. Moussorgski (1871-1915) |
| 7. Preludes No. 1 and 2   | M. Hillesum (1920)   |
| 8. a. Reflets dans l'eau<br>b. Jardins sous la Pluie  | CL Debussy (1862-1918)   |

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<sup>90</sup> Bilingual, 226; This program has been preserved and is included in the English section of Hillesum's Day Book number three.



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