

Frigyesi, Judit Nirán
Writing on Water. The Sounds
of Jewish Prayer

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When we enter Prague's Old-New Synagogue on a Saturday morning, for example, a special, heterophonic soundscape opens up to our ears. We will be surprised even more, if we have already heard sound recordings of *hazzanim* – virtuoso synagogue singers. However, the records of their vocal art would represent only a fraction, a condensed glimpse of a multi-layered musical culture as a lived experience, the tip of an iceberg facing the outside world, the main part of which is audible as a whole only in a live setting, inside the synagogue. The musical performance of the ritual, which lasts over three hours on a Saturday morning, for example, is always a little different in sound, unrepeatable. Although seemingly bound by ritual rules and the traditional Jewish musical system, variability and improvisation play a significant role in it. To some extent, it is also shaped by chance, but its conditions are precisely defined. Ethnomusicologist Judit Nirán Frigyesi, who has been studying the liturgical music of East Ashkenazi Jews for more than four decades, even compares it to an “avant-garde” noise-music or aleatoric music (2002, 143–44). But how is it possible to write meaningfully about such music practice (or about any, for that matter)? In her last book, *Writing on Water. The Sounds of Jewish Prayer* (for an earlier Hungarian version of the book, see Nirán 2014), Nirán Frigyesi shows us how this

can be achieved. For instance, already in the first chapter, we can find the first of the countless examples of such writing:

Budapest, 1976. I take my place of sacred isolation, the only woman and the only non-believer in the empty women's section of a secret Jewish prayer house. Soon, prayer will descend on me through the arabesque of white lace. And so I will remain: close to them, flying with the gestures of their souls, while tied to the earth by the loneliness of my alien existence. It begins slowly, almost unnoticeably. Speaking dissolves into a melodious noise and, like flecks of shimmer from the end of the world congeal in beams, the scattered words melt into chanting. I observe them as though this were a film. The morning prayer is like a flight of birds. Little muted cries fly off their lips and whirl about in all directions, and the sing song fragments braid themselves into solid vibration. I listen to the sounds as if they were music and as if music were a peregrination, a fairytale, a caressing hand, glitter and gleam of a trickling stream – ancient, transparent and legendary. Suddenly, a chill runs down my spine. It is as if a door, behind which a memory previously unknown and unrecognized lay hidden, had been flung open, their prayer and me – I, here, among them [...] I needed a few days to come to my senses. Even with a calm mind, I had to admit that I had never heard a sound more mysterious – and yet casual – than the sound of that prayer house (12–15).

Judit Nirán Frigyesi – a musicologist, ethnomusicologist, writer, associate professor at Bar Ilan and Tel Aviv Universities, whose research focuses on 19th and 20th century music and literature, the music of Béla Bartók, ritual musics outside of the European tradition, and especially the prayer chant of Ashkenazi Jews, is known

as one of the icons of Jewish music studies. Her recent book brings us back to the very beginnings of her music-ethnography research in 1970s Hungary, grounded in stories about the forming moments of her academic journey. However, ethnomusicology is only one of the facets of her life imbued with creativity, while flitting between Tel Aviv, Budapest and New York. Frigyesi's artistic works include short stories, poems, photographs and photomontages, film and multi-media. This book, which, for her, is ultimately "an attempt to grasp the meaning of sound in prayer" (v), is a product of her diverse creative expressions. Although the text is full of "thick descriptions" of music practices and original interpretations of the elusive soundscapes of the secret and semi-secret traditional Budapest Jewish *shuls* (prayer rooms), the outcome is a multi-faceted reflexive narrative – a very poetic and contemplative ethnographic memoir.

As anthropologist Paul Stoller argues (2007, 182), memoirs are something that many anthropologists may want to pursue at some point on their path, because as a genre, they can extend substantially the readership for ethnographic literature. Nevertheless, Stoller also remarks that memoir is generally a slippery slope, as the text might become "a tedious exercise in solipsism" (ibid.) On the contrary, Nirán Frigyesi's story is undoubtedly original and captivating. She endeavours to make sense of the knowledge of the sounding prayer embodied by her field consultants – mostly male Orthodox Jews, all of them holocaust survivors, who have been trying to become invisible in the niches of the communist-era Hungary. The book in this sense reveals a social world, hidden or publicly unspoken

of, where sound, orality, and melodic flexibility are of crucial cultural value as religious ideals (see also Frigyesi 2001). The author describes her initial exploration and eventual immersion in this world characterised by silent sounds, indirect references and clues.

Yet what had initially started as an "innocent" research on the prayer chant's melodic structure, soon revealed the darker layers of the social reality of the Jewish minority in communist-era Hungary. The political regime's official antipathy toward religion, especially the Jewish one, becomes palpable through the fragments of recorded interviews, when the informants whispered that their places might have been bugged. On rare occasions, the author even brought her tape recorder to the prayer rooms to record full services. However, her endeavor quickly turned out to be not only ethically challenging, but even personally dangerous: it was well known that in some of the Jewish community centers, "there was no lack of undercover police" (43), and she was surrounded by people (friends and members of synagogues) who were directly threatened by the police. The author also describes a complicated situation in the book, when her elder informant encouraged her to record his interview during the Shabbat (therefore omitting a religious prohibition) in one of the community buildings, but then, he hid the switched-off recorder in a closet before the members had arrived for an afternoon communal meal. That evening, she has been secretly threatened by another member of the community, accusing her of being a spy (59). Another time, she was given "recommendations" to emigrate (193–4). She eventually left the

country in 1980, together with her research partner, who had meanwhile become her husband. The act of emigration not only cut her off from her family, friends, teachers, and informants, but it also forcefully impacted the much more subtle, deeply personal processes running underneath – coping with trauma and negotiating her own identity. From a personal perspective, the author describes the suffering of the children of the holocaust survivors, being haunted by the tragedy from the family's past, which has been generally buried in a heavy silence, and pierced with occasional indirect comments about “those who did not come back”.

Throughout the book, it becomes obvious that the field research that Niran Frigyesi was consigned to as a young student at the Budapest Academy of Music by Benjamin Rajeczky (more or less coincidentally because of a grant from an ethnomusicologist from behind the “iron curtain”, Alexander Ringer, and with an initial comparative research problem which turned out to be non-functional) eventually changed her life. At first, this represented only an interesting research topic for her, which no one in Hungary had dealt with so far. As she has not talked about her Jewishness at the Academy, she kept wondering why was it just she and the only other Jewish colleague at the musicology department who were given this research task by the institute. How could they have known? Nevertheless, the task triggered her reflections on her ambiguity towards her own “tribe”:

It was easy to call them “religious” (while I am secular) and “uneducated people from some backward village” (while I am

an intellectual from the capital)... I tried to focus on my task and make myself believe that it was a purely scholarly undertaking: the ethnographer collects strange melodies and customs. But wearing the costume of the ethnographer among men who could have been my grandfathers, I began to feel ridiculous. It was not only the silent beauty of their religion – sounds of a life of withdrawal – that shook me, but the sudden intimacy with thoughts and attitudes so different from mine (33).

As she attended the services, recorded the singing of old men and memories of the pre-war Jewish world, which in their eyes had been lost forever, she was not only probing the issue of “participation” in her participant-observation method of research, but also gradually finding through them her own way to Jewishness, including its religious dimension:

It is not true that witnessing the life of others makes you more experienced. When you peek through the keyhole, catching a glance that betrays a faith you do not share, all that remains is confusion of the heart. Placing your body next to theirs does not mean that you are with them. You have to open the wounds and slip inside through the torn surface of your life. You must gulp down your sorrows and your nights, until your eyes open to see them (xxv).

And it seems that this is also why, when she emigrated from Hungary by train to Paris, she carried in her suitcase, instead of personal belongings, the cassette tapes with the singing of men she would never meet again.

What can be of special interest to the Czech public regarding this story is the fact that among those cassette tapes, there

were also her unique field recordings from the Old-New Synagogue in Prague and the recorded musical memories of its cantor, Viktor Feuerlicht (1919, Mukachevo – 2003, Prague), of his occasional deputy, Miki Roth (1908, Mukachevo – 2000, Prague), and of a few others, which she made during her two short field trips in the late 1970s. As there is a dearth of sound recordings of cantors from the Czech lands, the field recordings by Judit Nirán Frigyesi (which are currently published on the website of the National Library of Israel) belong to a very few published exceptions (for more, see Seidlová and Knapp 2008). As the book also contains ethnographic details from her field trips to Prague and fragments of the transcribed interviews with local cantors, the book presents a treasure for the researchers of Jewish music from this area, because it includes the very first published ethnomusicological first-hand accounts of Jewish religious music practices during communism in Czechoslovakia, especially from the harsh 1970s.

Although it is important to emphasise the great ethnographic value of Judit Nirán Frigyesi's book, the reader should be advised not to expect "only" a music-ethnography with an autobiographic value. At times, the book turns into a series of prose poems, deliberately leaving out the academic disciplinary constraints or genre expectations, such as in the case of the poem "It's a Tape," written "in the memory of those who did not come back": "ashen trails on magnetic tape / scars on the face of remembrance / a systematized, complete and collected / opus magnum..." (56).

On the one hand, this form of representation directly connects to the trauma mentioned above, which is known to bring

specific vulnerabilities in the lives of survivors and their descendants (see Shmotkin et al. 2011). On the other, it reflects the "crisis of representation" and related experimental ways of writing which circulate in anthropology since the late 1980s. As Nirán Frigyesi explains in the preface:

Many of us suffer from the demand of scholarship to clarify what is not possible to clarify and to systematize what is not possible to systematize. I collapsed under the weight of this demand. I began to feel that by sticking to the rules of scholarly writing, I betrayed the people who entrusted me with their music, culture, thoughts and philosophy. My scholarly writing failed to transmit what was most important to the practitioners of these rituals: the poetics in the sound of prayer (vi).

Giving voice to the actors, self-reflexive writing, and the blurring of genres in ethnographic writing are some of the solutions advocated by many anthropologists as the cures addressing the crisis of representation. Nirán Frigyesi's book fully embraces this idea, as it also incorporates poetic imagination and poetic prose blending in poems about her field experiences. What I appreciate the most are not only the beautiful verbal descriptions of seemingly "ugly" voices (see Frigyesi 2007) and "messy" music practices, therefore conveying in a unique way that what really matters to Frigyesi's informants – the poetics of the Eastern-Ashkenazi prayer chant, but also the passages which convey the *poetics of researching* such music, or of ethnomusicological research in general. That a research practice, which ultimately is about personal relationships with people who at some point may cease to be

“informants” while becoming part of the researcher’s life, can even enter researcher’s dreams with vivid and vibrant sounds.

The fascinating textual mosaic of the book is thoughtfully intertwined with the author’s enigmatic black-and-white photographs. While focusing on the imponderabilia of everyday (Jewish) life among the decaying buildings of 1970s Budapest, the images metaphorically communicate the meanings in Niran Frigyesi’s work, highlighting its gentle, intimate and somewhat mystical feeling. As such, the book is a sort of a play of different types of unrivaled verbal and visual representations. I have to admit that for me, personally, it represents the single most important title on Jewish music I have ever read, and a reminder of why I actually practice ethnomusicology in the first place.

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Maria Sonevytsky ***Wild Music: Sound and*** ***Sovereignty in Ukraine***

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Maria Sonevytsky’s book *Wild Music: Sound and Sovereignty in Ukraine* is a distinguished achievement of contemporary ethnomusicological scholarship. It deals ethnographically with various Ukrainian “ethno-music” (*etno-muzyka*) phenomena that can be considered *borderline*, not only in their geographic and cultural designation (Hutsul and Crimean Tatar), but also in their conceptual and political characterization. Namely, Sonevytsky is predominantly interested in analysing the ambiguous terrain that exists in the space between concepts and orientations such as nationalism/anti-nationalism, exoticization/empowerment, femininity/feminism, apolitical/political, rural/urban, pro-Russian/pro-European, and