

# Auschwitz survivor and fighter against fascism Esther Bejarano has died

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Hundreds of thousands are mourning the death of Jewish Auschwitz survivor Esther Bejarano, who died on Saturday night at the age of 96. She was deported to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp in 1943 at the age of 18 and only survived the Nazis' machinery of murder because she was accepted into the Auschwitz girls' orchestra as an accordion player.

The courageous contemporary witness with small alert eyes and a haunting voice had made it her life's work to break the silence about the crimes of the Nazis and to fight against the return of fascism and war.

Right until her death, whenever she warned of the growing shift to the right and appeared at schools and educated young people about the horrors of the Nazi regime or sang anti-fascist songs at concerts with the rap band "Microphone Mafia," she always had one goal in mind: Never again!

"The past and the present. You have to see them together. Students understand that and they always ask me: What can we do? What should we do? I tell them: Above all, one must not be silent, and one must stand up against these right-wing parties," Bejarano emphasised in 2018 in an interview with Sven Wurm, spokesperson for the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE). She expressed her horror at the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the renewed show of strength of German imperialism.

Born Esther Loewy in 1924, she grew up with three siblings in a liberal Jewish family in Saarland. Her father, a cantor in a synagogue and a veteran of the First World War, and her mother, a teacher, awakened in Bejarano a love of music at an early age. She learned the piano and sang at performances organised by the Jewish Cultural Association.

At the age of ten, she experienced how the persecution of Jews intensified year by year after the reintegration of the Saar region into the German Reich (empire) in 1935

and the introduction of the Nuremberg Race Laws. Her two oldest siblings were able to leave Germany in 1937, but the rest of the family tried in vain to emigrate.

While her father was transferred to Breslau, Bejarano went first to Berlin, then to Brandenburg, where she had to undertake forced labour in a Fleurop flower shop from June 1941. As she first learned after the war, her parents were deported in the same year and shot by the Nazis in a forest in Kaunas, Lithuania. Her sister was murdered in Auschwitz in December 1942—half a year before Esther was also sent to the death camp.

There, she managed to get into the so-called girls' orchestra of Auschwitz. "That was my luck," Bejarano recalled. "I had to undertake very hard work beforehand; carrying stones. I was already exhausted. Physically, I was in a very bad way. And then I heard that they were looking for women who could play an instrument."

She was not accepted as a piano player, but she quickly taught herself the accordion. Bejarano played for six months in the girls' orchestra, which in June 1943 was put together and conducted by the Polish music teacher and prisoner Zofia Czajkowska, on the orders of the SS. Later, the Austrian violinist Alma Rosé, a niece of the composer Gustav Mahler, took over the leadership of the orchestra. She died in the camp in 1944.

The female musicians from all over Europe were forced to play as the labour columns marched in and out and to give private concerts for SS officers. According to Bejarano, the orchestra also played at the death ramp, where the newly arrived underwent "selection" and elderly people, children and pregnant women were sent to the gas chamber. "They thought, where there's music, it can't be that bad. That was the Nazis' tactic," Bejarano said in a video interview with broadcaster ARD.

When so-called "half-breeds" were segregated in the camp at the end of 1943, Bejarano seized her chance and referred to her "Aryan" grandmother. She was then

transferred from Auschwitz to the Ravensbrück concentration camp in Brandenburg, where she had to undertake forced labour for Siemens.

With the advance of the Allies in spring 1945, the Nazis dissolved the concentration camps near the front and forced the prisoners, among them Bejarano, into the interior on long death marches under the brutal control of the SS. “All those who fell down, who couldn’t get up very quickly, they just shot them,” she recounted. Only after the officers had received orders to stop shooting did she and some of her fellow prisoners dare to escape.

In moving words, she describes in her memoirs how she experienced the liberation and the invasion of the Red Army in May 1945 in Lübz, Mecklenburg:

The American and Russian soldiers greeted, embraced and kissed each other. Everyone was happy that the war was finally over. A Russian soldier brought a huge picture of Adolf Hitler and placed it in the middle of the market square. Another Russian soldier shouted, “Music, who will make music?” I took the accordion and went to the marketplace. Everyone stood around the picture. An American and a Russian soldier set it on fire together. Adolf Hitler’s picture was ablaze. The soldiers and the people from the concentration camp danced around the picture. And I played the accordion. I will never forget that picture. That was my liberation from Hitler’s fascism, and I always say, “It wasn’t just my liberation, it was my second birth.”

First, she spent a few weeks in the “Displaced Persons Camp” in the former Bergen-Belsen concentration camp near Hanover, then in Geringshof near Fulda, a place of preparation for Jewish emigrants. In August 1945, she finally left for Palestine via Marseille. There, she studied singing, became an opera singer and chorister, married the lorry driver Nissim Bejarano and started a family. But after 15 years she turned her back on Israel, repelled by the Israeli government’s war policy and oppression of the Palestinians.

In conversation with the IYSSE, Bejarano defended herself against contemporary attempts by politicians and the media to equate criticism of Israel and Zionism with anti-Semitism. She denounced Israel’s inhumane policies and declared, “I am against it. So why am I an anti-Semite

if I speak against the policies in Israel? That’s absurd.”

Bejarano lived with her husband and two children in Hamburg from 1960, where she opened a laundry and then a boutique. For a long time after the war, she kept silent about her experiences under National Socialism (Nazism). But when she was directly confronted with aggressive neo-Nazis of the German National Party (NPD), who were being protected by the police, she decided to become active herself.

Since then, Bejarano has tirelessly warned against radical right-wing forces gaining influence again. In recent years, she spoke out with a strong voice against the growing shift to the right and the development of war. She was active in the International Auschwitz Committee and as honorary chair of the Association of those Persecuted by the Nazis—League of Anti-Fascists (VVN-BdA). In 2019, in an angry open letter to Finance Minister Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party, SPD), she protested against the fact that the anti-fascist association VVN-BdA had been stripped of its non-profit status.

Most recently, Bejarano demanded that Liberation Day on May 8 be recognised as a public holiday. She repeatedly pointed out that there was never a “zero hour” in the Federal Republic of Germany and that many of the old Nazis were able to continue to operate unhindered in post-war West Germany.

In her last public speech on May 3, 2021, she declared, “This continuity and the aggressive anti-communism are also causes for the racist and anti-Semitic incidents in the security agencies that are now becoming known almost daily. It is shameful that neo-fascist networks can still exist in these structures today.”

But as Bejarano emphasised in conversation with Sven Wurm, “We have nothing to expect from the government, so the people themselves have to do something about it.” She pinned all her hopes on the youth. Again and again, Bejarano appealed to the young people, whose turn it is now, to prevent a relapse into barbarism and to stand up for a progressive future. With her inexhaustible verve, determination, and joie de vivre, Esther Bejarano is and will remain an inspiration in the struggles to come.



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