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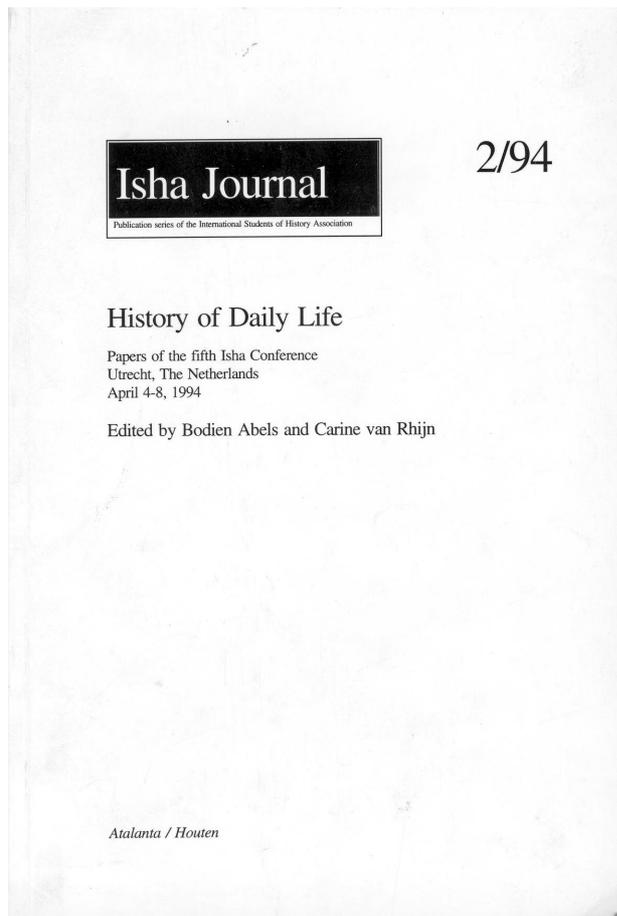
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## JAZZ YOUTH SUBCULTURES IN NAZI-EUROPE

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### ‘JAZZ CULTURE’ AND ‘JAZZ YOUTH SUBCULTURES’

‘Jazz culture’, of course, includes the music, its styles, the musicians’ biographies and the culture of its elitist aficionados who attended their hot clubs, wrote and read polished critiques in their newsletters, like *Melody Maker* or *Down Beat*, and who were divided in hostile factions, always fighting for the pureness of the musical style. But what interests here, is the way proletarian, middle- and upper-class youths took possession of this music, and the fashion and attitudes linked to it.

In Europe especially after World War I, Jazz was the music heard by the elite, demonstrating their modernity and their wealth. But Jazz also became the only modern and urban popular music that was attractive to youths; in the 1930s and 40s, the first youthful fashion spread from the US-culture industry emerged around the swing. Some historians even say that jazz is the most important contribution of the USA to world culture, even more important than Rock’n’Roll<sup>1</sup>.

At that time, social scientists valued this phenomenon very differently: Whereas Theodore W. Adorno absolutely despised jazz and even welcomed the nazi radio ban of jazz, Herbert Marcuse was of the opinion that the jazz-related hedonism could immunize people against fascism<sup>2</sup>.

Anyway, between 1937 and 1940, in the Nazi-ruled or occupied countries of Europe<sup>3</sup>, quite many youths began to create their own style, picking up its elements from jazz culture. They did so, among others, in Hamburg, Frankfurt, Vienna, Paris, Prague and also in the occupied Netherlands and in Denmark.

These groups of youngsters can be regarded as youth subcultures<sup>4</sup> or – as I propose – as ‘jazz youth subcultures’.

The subcultures had different names: In Hamburg<sup>5</sup> the jazz-dedicated youths, who were first observed in the winter of 1937/1938, called themselves ‘Swing-Boys’, ‘Hot-Boys’, ‘Easy-’ or ‘Lotter-Boys’. Some groups created the names ‘Jumbobande’ or ‘Alster-Piraten-Club’. The Gestapo and the representatives of the Nazi

regime called them ‘Swing Jugend’ (‘Swing Youth’), a term they themselves never used. There was also a term being exclusively used for proletarian youths, ‘Swing-Heinis’. It was a contemptuous term, but some of the youths began to use it themselves.

In Vienna <sup>6</sup> the first definitive evidence of this subculture is going back to the summer of 1939; there they were called ‘Schlurfs’, which means people who are going very slowly and who are lazy, but which also means ‘souteneur’ in underworld jargon.

The Paris ‘zazous’ <sup>7</sup> are known since autumn 1940, that means after the German occupation. About the same time, perhaps even earlier, the ‘potápki’ <sup>8</sup> – which means ‘divers’ (singular ‘potápéc’) – emerged in Prague.

I will use the term ‘Swings’ to name the members of all of these subcultures.

## STYLES

The styles of the subcultures differed according to local characteristics and particularly to class distinctions. In general, they all had rather long hair; and they all were very keen on wearing proper clothes, as shown in Hollywood films – ‘Broadway Melody’ and ‘Born to Dance’ for example – but also in anti-jazz propaganda films produced by National Socialist filmmakers. Swings could also learn how to dress from the ‘Wochenschau’-news: They liked the way English politicians as e.g. Anthony Eden or Arthur Neville Chamberlain dressed. Swings were especially fond of black umbrellas that were taken along even when the sun was shining and that were never opened.

Middle- and upper-class Hamburg Swings wore felt or Bowler-hats, trench coats, tailor-made suits, long jackets and wide trousers. Their shoes had crêpe soles, around their necks they bound coloured ties with a very small button; they also had white silk scarfs and on the lapel often pins were stuck on, showing the Union Jack or the US-flag. The Hamburg female Swings had also hats, wore blouses, short skirts or suits and trousers. The proletarian ‘Swing-Heinis’ usually could not afford the money to buy tailor-made suits and therefore bought cheaper or second-hand clothes. Sometimes they even stole clothes from the richer ones.

Nearly nothing is known about middle- or upper-class Swings in Vienna, although it is certain that some of them existed. But much more is reported in the sources about the working class ‘Schlurfs’. Like the ‘Swing-Heinis’ they usually lacked the money to buy expensive clothes and therefore they also had to compromise on their style. Only when they earned enough, for example by black-marketeering, they could buy their shirts, hats or shoes in special shops. If not, they had to be satisfied with the old and larger jackets of their fathers, instead of the desired double-row long jackets with shoulder pads. Apart from that, they wore shirts or coloured pullovers and coats with the belts always left open.

Like the Hamburg Swings they had wide trousers and white scarfs; their shoes

had thick soles. Unlike them, but also unlike the 'zazous' and 'potápki', 'Schlurfs' seem to have distasted umbrellas; perhaps this element of style was too middle class in their eyes. 'Schlurfs' pointedly smoked cigarettes; the latter and their long hair was all that remained from their style when they went to work. The girls wore coloured dresses, kneelong skirts and upswept hair.

The social origin of the Paris 'zazous' and the Prague 'potápki' were the upper- and the middle classes. As far as I know, there are no reports on proletarian members belonging to these subcultures. In contrast to Hamburg Swings and Viennese 'Schlurfs', the members of both of these subcultures did not wear wide trousers, but narrow drainpipe trousers. Apart from that, 'zazous' and 'potápki' looked quite like the others: long jackets, coloured ties, umbrellas and shoes with thick soles.

Female zazous wore wide pullovers and short, pleated skirts; they smoked 'Lucky Strike' and their hair reached the shoulders. The girl friends of the 'potápki', who were called 'Kristinka', had short skirts, silk stockings and high-heeled shoes.

As the Swings' 'images', their movements varied between demonstrative slackness and exaggerated elegance. Usually, they were walking very slowly with their hands in the pockets and the upper part of the body bent forward. When Swings danced, their movements became very 'hot' and fast.

Jazz subcultures also created and spoke a special jargon. Of course, they used English terms like 'hot', 'damned' or 'hip'. Sometimes Hamburg Swings and 'zazous' even spoke only English. But they also created words or expressions in their own languages: The 'zazous' greeted themselves with 'Ça swing'; one of the favorite verbs of the Hamburg Swings was 'lottern'.

'Schlurfs' sometimes gave themselves English nick names and also used certain words of Viennese dialect to name parts of their hair.

## PLACES AND STARS

All these subcultures celebrated their style by proudly going through the streets of their cities; 'potápki' for example, sauntered with their girlfriends round Wenzels square, ready for dancing. Hamburg Swings crossed streets in single file.

Swings, whose apartments were big enough, could arrange parties. 'Zazous', for example, gave 'surprise' or also 'curfew parties' that lasted all night long; Hamburg Swings organized twice or three times semi-public parties, where 500 youths danced fanatically to the music of a live band; the atmosphere of these parties is reconstructed quite well in Ralph Giordano's novel 'Die Bertinis'<sup>9</sup> and also in Thomas Carter's film 'Swing Kids'. The last of these parties was broken up by the Gestapo in March 1940.

Proletarian Swings had to improvise: As their apartments were small and they usually could not afford the money to go to expensive bars or dance halls, they gathered at

street corners or in parks. ‘Schlurfs’ went to merry-go-rounds, where the owners sometimes played the swing records they had brought along; Hamburg ‘Swing-Heinis’ celebrated their parties in air-raid shelters or even in churches they had to guard during nightly air-raids.

Getting jazz records was difficult, especially during the war, but it was not impossible. Swings also heard live music. Italian or Dutch orchestras, which were touring, usually played tamed swing versions, but sometimes Swings persuaded them to play real, ‘hot’ jazz. There were also local musicians playing swing-like music. The Hamburg Swings liked Nat Gonella and Teddy Stauffer; the ‘potápki’ heard Karel Vlach or R.A. Dvorsky; ‘zazous’ were fans of Irène de Trebert, Alix Combelle, Charles Trenet and, of course, of Johnny Hess, who was their ‘King of Swing’. When Hans Neroth, a Viennese local hero, played the song ‘Schwarzer Panther’, a version of the ‘Tiger Rag’, about 3000 ‘Schlurfs’ screamed and smashed the chairs.

#### FEMALE SWINGS: DOUBLE OUTSIDERS

Jazz subcultures – as jazz culture in general – usually were male dominated and chauvinist<sup>10</sup>; as a rule, female members were accepted only as girl-friends and often regarded as sexual objects. Hamburg Swings called them e.g. ‘jazz-cats’ or ‘club-women’, ‘Schlurfs’ used the term ‘Schlurf-cats’. The latter sometimes were even defamed as prostitutes.

The situation in Leipzig seems to have been slightly different: Although the ‘Swing-Girls’ were ‘brought’ to the meetings, they seem to have been regarded as equal by the male Swings<sup>11</sup>.

In any case, the Swing-girls were stigmatized twice: Once, because they belonged to these jazz subcultures and secondly, because they were female. They were outsiders even in the subcultures.

Of course, this shall not exclude the possibility that some girls stood up against this male world and managed to live their own life there. Dealing with their history by writing exclusively a ‘victim history’ would perpetuate the male perspective. An additional perspective is needed that focusses on how female Swings practiced their own style and managed to conquer room to manoeuvre under the repressive circumstances.

#### SWINGS AS OUTSIDERS

By demonstrating their style and their hedonist ideology, Swings rejected symbolically main parts of fascist ideology. The cultural clash between the Swings’ clothes and the uniform of the Hitler Youth with its short trousers and brown shirts could not have been bigger.

Sometimes the conflict between these two cultures escalated to real fights: the

Hitler Youth tried to drive the subcultures out of the streets, and that meant they were taking action especially against proletarian Swings. In Vienna, fights between members of the Hitler Youth and 'Schlurfs' took place rather often; there were also struggles with special patrols of the Hitler Youth that were controlling the observance of youth laws. On one occasion about 50 'Schlurfs' came together and attacked a home of the Hitler Youth. 'Zazous' were struggling with the fascist youth organization 'Jeunesses Populaires Françaises'.

Although they were ready to defend themselves by force, Swings in general were antimilitarists. 'Schlurfs', for example, knew how to avoid being called up to the German 'Wehrmacht' by swallowing chalk or eating sardines that had been exposed to the sun for some hours; of course, this does not mean that there were many who actually realized this.

In one case, 'zazous' were giving a signal of remarkable symbolic resistance: When in June 1942 Jews in the occupied part of France had to wear the Star of David, some 'zazous' stitched it on their jackets and added the word 'Swing' on it.

Of course, the National Socialist authorities used several sanctions to punish Swings: Sometimes their hair was cut by force, they were sentenced to weekend detentions or prematurely called up to the army. Some of the 'zazous' had to do forced labour (S.T.O. = Service du Travail Obligatoire) in Germany; some of the Hamburg Swings were even assigned to special youth concentration camps.

Although there were several Swings who had connections to resistance movements, their attitudes and their actions should not be regarded as resistance in general. It would be exaggerated to expect youths, who are 15 years old, to have a firm political opinion; they just preferred their style and their consumer ideology to the dominating values supported by National Socialism. By doing so, they challenged the Nazi regime and therefore were persecuted. The existence of these jazz subcultures also proves how much deviation was possible; they limited the efficiency of National Socialist rule.

On the other side, Viennese 'Schlurfs' knew very well that the authorities granted them outlets for their discontent, for example by allowing them to hear swing-like music in concerts.

Jazz youth subcultures usually were also outsiders in the jazz community; the adult jazz experts did not like them because, in their eyes, the subcultures were too glaring, too loud. The purists accused the Swings of being more interested in dancing than in music – which was right quite often – and therefore despised them. The subtle jazz audience also feared that the provocative actions of the Swings could endanger the limited possibility granted by the Nazi authorities to listen to jazz.

In Austria 'Schlurfs' stayed outsiders even after the liberation from fascism. In the new democratic newspapers they were regarded as 'weed' endangering the 'Austrian tree of life', as 'weed' that should be 'extirpated radically'<sup>12</sup>. It also

seems that authorities resumed the practice to criminalize them. It is not amazing that ‘Schlurfs’ continued to show their indifference towards the state’s representatives; they did not take part in the reconstruction work after the war.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Jazz youth subcultures did not exist only in the nazi ruled countries or in England and the USA, but also in the Soviet Union: There ‘stiliagi’ (style hunters)<sup>13</sup> danced to Charlie Parker’s and Dizzie Gillespie’s be-bop in the Fifties though they continued to listen to Glenn Miller. Their style first emerged in 1940 and spread in the late Stalin period, between 1949 and 1953. At that time, it became quite common among the children of the nomenclature; it was an upper-class phenomenon<sup>14</sup>. ‘Stiliagi’ wore zoot suits – long jackets with shoulder pads, black or striped shirts, narrow trousers, white ties – and had long hair. These ‘Tarzantsy’ – as they were also called, because they liked the Tarzan films with Johnny Weissmuller – profited from the Khrushchev period. Nevertheless, they had to expect repression: hair cuts, being sent to the countryside and sentences for being ‘parasites’.

It remains an essential task to emphasize the importance of these jazz youth subcultures who lived consumer ideology long before the so-called ‘Halbstarke’, teddy-boys or blousons noirs danced to Bill Haley’s ‘Rock around the clock’ in the Fifties. By paying more attention to decoding the meanings of their elements of style and by a comparative approach, we should be able to (re)construct their subversive potential and to study the contradictory and exciting dialectics of culture industry and subcultures.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> FISCHER: *Probleme*. p.118; POHL: ‘*Schräge Vögel*’. p.242; WAGNLEITNER: *Coca-Colonisation*. p.235.

<sup>2</sup> KATER: *Forbidden Fruit?* p.14.; KEMPER: *Rock*.p.891 f., EICHSTEDT: *Chaos*. p.116.

<sup>3</sup> On the ambivalent attitude of National Socialists towards jazz see KATER: *Drummers*; LANGE: ‘*Artfremde Kunst*’; LANGE: *Jazz*; POLSTER (ed.): *Swing Heil*; SCHÄFER: *Bekenntnisse*.

- <sup>4</sup> Subcultures are defined by their very concentrated style and by their values and attitudes that are opposed to those of the dominant culture(s). See AICHINGER: *Avantgarde*. p.234; BRAKE: *Soziologie*. p.15 ff.; WICKE: *Rockmusik*. p.115
- <sup>5</sup> Essential published sources for the Swings are PEUKERT: *Edelweißpiraten*. pp.160-229 and KLÖNNE (ed.): *Jugendkriminalität. Literature*: POHL: *'Volksempfinden'*; HORN: *Resistance*; MUTH: *Jugendopposition*; KLÖNNE: *Jugend*; POLSTER (ed.): *Swing Heil*.
- <sup>6</sup> See GERBEL/MEJSTRIK: *Vorwegnahme*; GERBEL/MEJSTRIK/SIEDER: *'Schlurfs'*; GERBEL: *Lebenswelten*; TANTNER: *'Schlurfs'*.
- <sup>7</sup> See LOISEAU: *Zazous*; POHL: *'Schräge Vögel'*; JOST: *Jazz*; ZWERIN: *Tristesse*.
- <sup>8</sup> My only source for the 'potápki' is an oral history interview. See TANTNER: *'Schlurfs'*. pp.88 f.
- <sup>9</sup> GIORDANO: *Bertinis*. p.255 f.; There are quite a lot of German authors who write about Swings in their works: BIENEK: *Zeit*. p.173; KEMPOWSKI: *Tadellöser*; see also the memories of Walter Jens, Siegfried Lenz and Peter Wapnewski in REICH-RANICKI (ed.): *Schulzeit*. *Ib.* and in an interview in POLSTER (ed.): *Swing Heil*. pp.153-156 the Austrian writer Ernst Jandl on *'Schlurfs'*. In the opus of Boris Vian many allusions to 'zazous' can be found.
- <sup>10</sup> KATER: *Drummers*. p.84.
- <sup>11</sup> *ib.* p.150.
- <sup>12</sup> HEINZ, Karl Hans: *Der Schlurf*. In: *Neues Österreich*. 1.8.1945. p.1.
- <sup>13</sup> See STARR: *Red & Hot*.
- <sup>14</sup> Proletarian youths, who were also called 'stiliagi', expressed their protest by hearing Rock'n'Roll.

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