

Songs written in Holocaust ghettos, concentration camps to be performed

By MYRNA PETLICKI
PIONEER PRESS | APR 19, 2022 AT 1:24 PM

During one of the darkest periods in history, composers continued to create music. The stories of fourteen composers and songs that they created in ghettos and concentration camps will be shared April 26 in “We Are Here: Songs of the Holocaust,” co-sponsored by a Skokie museum.

Ira Antelis, who conceived the idea for the concert, said that he was inspired to create this concert after writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel died in 2016. Antelis was concerned about who would share stories of the Holocaust. “He was the voice for all of us for so many years,” Antelis explained. “I started to read about Elie Wiesel and his love of music. It said somewhere that he had written the forward to a book of songs from the past.”

Antelis, who is a musician and composer, began researching and found several songbooks of composers who continued to create music while in ghettos and concentration camps. He planned a concert of some of that music. When it was postponed, Antelis did further research.

“I read this article about the 14 songbooks that came out right after the war,” he related. He tracked down the author of that article, Bret Werb, the musicologist at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and was able to access the 14 songbooks.

“I thought, let’s do a concert with one song from each songbook, talk about the publisher of the songbook, the writers of the song, and the meanings of the song,” he said. “That became the structure.”

Symphony conductor in ghetto

One of the composers was David Beyglman. “He was a very accomplished musician. He was born in Poland. His father was a musician,” Antelis said. “At some point, the family moved to Lodz which unfortunately became one of the ghettos.”

Beyglman began playing with the Lodz Orchestra, becoming the conductor and musical director when he was 25.

“He would arrange music for the Yiddish theater, conduct the symphony, and write original music,” Antelis said. He even toured Europe and South America.

When the war began, Beyglman was sent back to the ghetto, where music still thrived. He conducted music in a place in the ghetto known as the House of Culture.

His wife died in the ghetto and Beyglman was sent to Auschwitz. “He brought his violin, thinking he could play in the orchestra and survive,” Antelis said. “But he did not.”

As with the music of the other composers featured in the concert, some of the music survived because it was written down. Other compositions survived because of the oral tradition. Individuals would walk around singing these songs. “At one point, people transcribed them,” Antelis noted.

‘The story that breaks my heart’

Antelis also related what he called, “The story that always breaks my heart.” It’s not one of the pieces from the 14 songbooks. Ilse Weber was a Czechoslovakian from a Jewish-German family, who played several instruments when she was very young. She also wrote children’s books.

“She got married, had two kids and they moved to Prague where she worked in the radio station,” Antelis said. “She sent her older son on the Kindertransport out of the country.” He survived the war.

When her husband went to Auschwitz, she chose to join him, bringing her younger son with her. “Her husband survived but her and her younger son were sent to the gas

chamber,” Antelis said. Although she did not survive, a song that she would sing to the young children in the concentration camp did.

Antelis declared that the people highlighted in the concert “didn’t die in vain. Their voices have survived. Their music has survived. Here we are 75 years later and their voices will be heard.”

“I’ve done a lot of projects in my life,” Antelis concluded. “I think this is the most important one by far.”

Kelley Szany, vice president of Education and Exhibitions for the Illinois Holocaust Museum, said, “When we looked at the project that Ira presented to us what we found so remarkable was that out of the darkness and chaos of the Holocaust came this music that not only speaks to the anguish of what happened but also I think was an important message to us to also know that there were songs of hope and resistance and resilience. And that during this time, music was a way to respond to what was happening. That was an important message we felt to get across to the community as we commemorated the Holocaust.”

The Yom HaShoah Community-Wide Commemoration will be presented at 6:30 p.m. on April 26 in person at Temple Sholom, 3480 N. Lake Shore Dr., Chicago, and will also be available virtually. It is cosponsored by the Illinois Holocaust Museum in Skokie, Temple Sholom, Sheerit Hapleitah of Metropolitan Chicago, the Jewish United Fund/Federation of Chicago, and CJE SeniorLife Holocaust Community Services.

The concert was conceived by Antelis and produced by David Mendelson, Antelis, and Jeremy Perlin. Temple Sholom’s Senior Rabbi Shoshana Conover will host.

The event is free but reservations are required at

ilholocaustmuseum.org/events/we-are-here-songs-of-the-holocaust-a-community-wide-yom-hashoah-commemoration.