



BY  
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# One man's race to bring the forgotten music of the Holocaust to life

"It is an emergency – the survivors are 96, 97, 100 years old"



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When Aviva Bar-On was nine, her family was sent to Terezin in Czechoslovakia, a former Habsburg era fort and barracks that the Nazi occupiers used as a transit camp. In spite of propaganda depicting Terezin as a "spa town", sleeping quarters were cramped, food rations were scarce and diarrhoea was rife. Of the 140,000 Jews who entered the camp, 33,000 perished within its walls, and a further 90,000 were "sent east" to almost certain death.

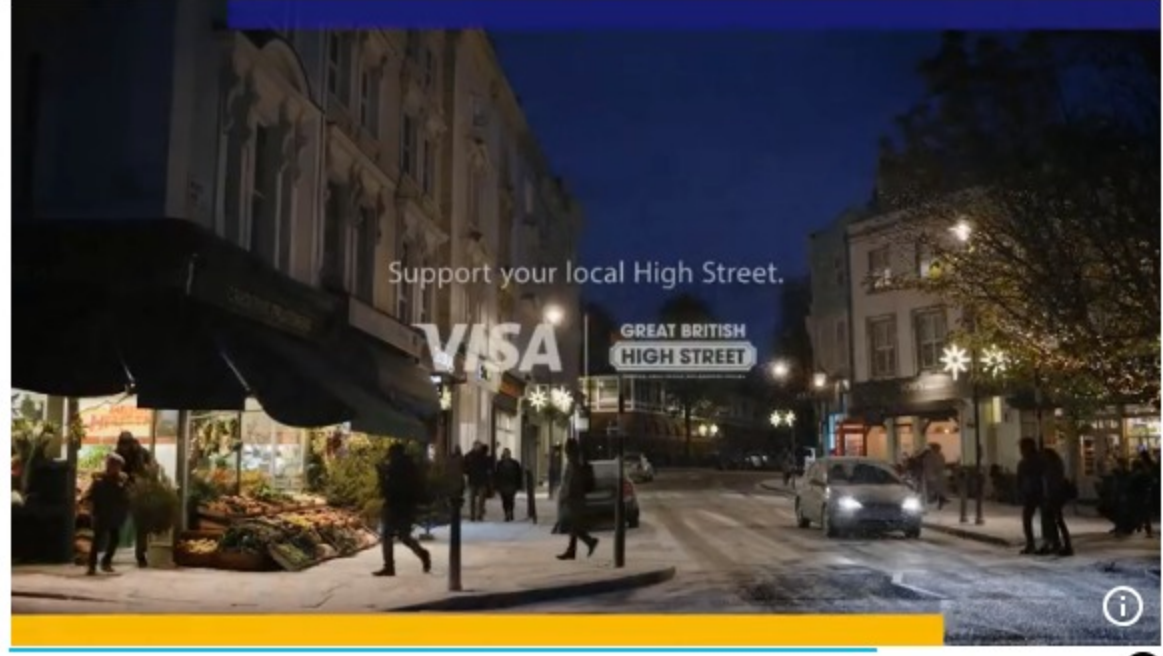
In Terezin, Aviva was alone. Her parents, forced into labour, disappeared for 12 hours a day. She soon became sick, which led to a life-changing encounter. A nurse, Ilse Weber, owned a mandolin and tried to keep up her patients' morale by singing humorous songs (lyrics included a joke about "shoving a plug in it" to stop the ubiquitous diarrhoea). Aviva adored them so much that she would revisit the tunes even after she recovered.

"She was a wonderful lady," says Aviva, now 85, her red lipstick and unlined skin offering little hint of her traumatic life. "I think I am the only one in the world who remembers her songs."

In Terezin, Aviva mixed with operatic musicians, including Hans Krása, a composer who wrote the opera *Brundibár* for the children of the camp. "I know the opera from the beginning to the end," she says softly. I met Aviva backstage on 15 April at Jerusalem's International Convention Center, shortly before she took to the stage to sing at Notes of Hope, a concert at which the music written by concentration camp prisoners was played, in some cases for the first time.

Sponsored by the Jewish National Fund, a British charity, the event is the result of decades of obsessive musical detective work by one man, Francesco Lotoro. A mop-haired musician who conducts with his hands as he speaks, Lotoro knows time is short. "It is an emergency," he tells me. "These people are 96, 97, 100 years old."

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Lotoro first learned of the music of prisoners in 1988, and has been collecting it ever since. The 8,000 musical scores he has uncovered over the ensuing years are written on everything from postcards to lavatory paper, or learned by heart, as in the case of Aviva. More than 10,000 items, Lotoro believes, are still waiting to be deciphered. "The Imperial War Museum is full, full, full, full of music," he says. "I went there – it was a mess. The music's there but nobody can listen to it."

Each manuscript he obtains represents a tragic story. Max Ehrlich was a German Jewish film director, humourist and cabaret musician. Like many of his peers, he moved to the Netherlands to escape persecution, but after the Nazis invaded in 1940, he was sent to Westerbork, a concentration camp in the north of the country. He died in Auschwitz. "My father used to say to me growing up, that the one failure he felt he had was he hadn't succeeded in bringing his older brother into the US," says Alan Ehrlich, Max's nephew, a mild-mannered New Yorker, now living in Geneva. Born in 1945, he never met his uncle.

In 1998, however, thanks to the internet, Alan discovered that Max Ehrlich might have left something behind – a personal file from Westerbork. Alan flew immediately to the Netherlands and identified the handwriting as his uncle's. The file had languished for decades in an attic, after being entrusted to the son of a Westerbork inmate. "One time my uncle apparently gave a tin to him and said 'we don't have much time anymore. I want this to be saved'," says Alan. The file contained the lyrics of songs Ehrlich had written in Terezin. It took further investigation to find Louis de Wijze, a survivor who still remembered the tunes.

The stories behind the concert may be deeply personal, but the performance was intended by the organisers to broadcast a message to the world. "Anti-Semitism in England is a major cause for concern," says Samuel Hayek, the chairman of the Jewish National Fund. Holocaust survivors have for many years drawn on their experiences to raise awareness of prejudice. But, Hayek notes, the number of survivors is dwindling.

At the concert itself, it becomes clear that the message is also about Israel. After the great and the good stream into the cavernous Jerusalem concert hall, various speakers remind them that "there is nothing more moving than hearing the music played in Jerusalem, the capital of the state of Israel" – a statement that remains controversial to much of the world. For those who prefer to treat anti-Semitism and the politics of Israel-Palestine as distinct, separate issues, such rhetoric about Jerusalem is uncomfortable. But to others, it is simply realism.

"I am not sure Jews and Israelis can really do much about reversing trends of anti-Semitism anywhere," one participant, the son of Holocaust survivors, tells me.

The music itself, though, is jazzy and upbeat – something of a surprise, until one remembers it was written by men and women steeped in the cabaret of Weimar Germany, and trying desperately to escape the darkest days of their lives. There are songs about lost loves and jokes about the harrowing conditions. "Tango in Auschwitz", an adaptation of a popular tune, was written by 12-year-old Irka Janowski. "Before the war we sang, we danced the tango and foxtrot," sings a woman in a flapper dress while, behind her, black and white images of the deadliest Nazi concentration camp loom. Janowski died there.

The catchy "Zitra" (Tomorrow) by Josef Roubicek, is wistfully upbeat, the syncopated piano chords more reminiscent of an indie film than a death camp (Roubicek did have his tomorrow, surviving the Holocaust and living until 1978).

And then Aviva takes the stage, her frailness disguised by her black glittery top and calm demeanour. Francesco Lotoro is waiting at the piano. The speakers have stepped down; the audience is quiet. She opens her mouth and out comes a supple, clear voice, still stretching to the same notes she learned as a child, in a concentration camp in what was then Czechoslovakia, from the nurse Ilse Weber.