

## World news

# Music that gave solace to death camp inmates to be heard again

Songs composed in Nazi concentration camps to feature in concert marking the founding of Israel

By Raf Sanchez in Kiryat Ono

BEDRISKA WINKLEROVA was a frightened 10-year-old girl when she lay in a little bed in the two-room infirmary of the Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia.

The camp's malnourished inmates were wracked by jaundice and meningitis and Bedriska's mother feared her only daughter was falling seriously ill.

There were no real medical supplies in the infirmary and the inmates who ran it could offer little more than kind words and orders for rest. As Bedriska

lay among the sick, a slim woman walked to the centre of the room and began to strum a guitar. She sang a sad but funny song in Czech for the children, about being diagnosed with Theresienstadt syndrome, a fictional illness from the camp. The little girl was entranced. After she recovered she returned often to the infirmary to sit with the woman and learn her songs.

The woman, Ilse Weber, the Jewish Czech poet, died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, with her young son Tommy, in October 1944. But Bedriska never forgot her music, carrying it with her to Switzerland and to Soviet-occupied Czechoslovakia and eventually to Israel in 1949.

Today, Bedriska is an 85-year-old Israeli grandmother who goes by the Hebrew name Aviva Bar-On. Next month, Mrs Bar-On will sing Weber's sad but funny song on stage in Jerusalem at a concert of music composed in the concentration camps.

It will be the first time the song has been performed since Weber sang it to frightened children in the midst of the Holocaust. Only a handful of living people have ever heard its melody.

"I'm very moved when I think about Ilse. I think I'm the only person in the world that knows those songs," Mrs Bar-On told *The Sunday Telegraph*. "I say it is my duty to remember all those who are not here. I am their voice."

The Notes of Hope concert is being staged by JNF UK, Britain's oldest Jew-



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ish charity, to mark the 70th anniversary of Israel's founding. Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, will be in the audience.

The concert will be conducted by Francesco Lotoro, an Italian composer who has been on a 30-year-mission to recover music from the concentration camps and bring it back to life. *The Doctor's Song*, which Mrs Bar-On will perform, is one 8,000 works Mr Lotoro has tracked down.

In the case of *The Doctor's Song*, Mr Lotoro sat down with Mrs Bar-On and coaxed the music from her memory,

transcribing her singing into a formal composition. Other works have been found in forgotten archives and dusty attics. One five-act opera was written on hundreds of sheets of toilet paper. Rudolf Karel, its composer, died of hypothermia two months before the end of the war.

Amid the horror of the Nazi concentration camps, a vast amount of music was written, played and sang. "You cannot stop music and the Germans eventually realised this. You can force prisoners to do almost anything but cannot prohibit music," said Mr Lotoro.

*"I think I'm the only person in the world that knows these songs. I say it is my duty to remember all those who are not here. I am their voice"*

"There were seven orchestras in Auschwitz. There was gas and there was death but there was also music."

German officers sometimes ordered inmates to play Wagner or Mozart for them as they relaxed at the end of the day. Inmate orchestras in Birkenau were made to play on the train platform as new prisoners arrived at the extermination camp, as a way of keeping the new arrivals relaxed. Music was also a form of resistance. At the Mauthausen labour camp in Austria, prisoners were forced to watch in a public square as guards beat inmates to death if they were deemed to be working insufficiently hard. The assembled prisoners sang to try to drown out the brutality.

JNF UK has focused its charitable efforts on towns in the Negev desert, historically one of Israel's poorest areas. Which is how Mr Lotoro came to be in the small desert town of Yeruham, conducting a youth orchestra which will perform at the Jerusalem concert.

Much of the music is lively and cheerful and it is almost impossible to imagine it was written in the bowels of a Nazi death camp. The children seemed to especially enjoy the jaunty *Tatata*, whose composers, a pair of cabaret players named Willy Rosen and Max Ehrlich, were both murdered at Auschwitz.

"I think it was the composers' way to bring some light, to smile, to find some happiness in all the atrocities they went through," said Sasha Yatsguk, a 12-year-old violinist in the Yeruham orchestra.

"You shouldn't be surprised how much of the music is happy," said Mr Lotoro. "Imagine the brain of a musician: the musician is not going to sing about the camp - in the brain of the musician he wants to destroy the camp, he wants to exorcise the camp."

The April 15 concert is being held to mark 70 years since the founding of the Jewish state in 1948, but also falls on the day that the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp was liberated by the British 11th Armoured Division. Samuel Hayek, chairman of JNF UK, said he hoped the music would help focus attention on rising levels of anti-Semitic violence in the UK and across Europe.

Mrs Bar-On will doubtless be met with rapturous applause when she steps onstage in Jerusalem next month. But the journey of Holocaust survivors in Israel has been complicated. Some sabras - Jews born in pre-state Israel to a tough life of farming and fighting - were disdainful of their European cousins when they arrived after the war.

"They were looking down on us," said Mrs Bar-On. "They asked: why didn't you fight against the Nazis? They didn't understand the situation of the war." Like many survivors, Mrs Bar-On did not speak about the camps. "They didn't want to hear it."

That national attitude began to change in 1961 after Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi war criminal and one of the architects of the Holocaust, was kidnapped by Israeli agents in Argentina and put on trial in Jerusalem. The agonising testimony of survivors was broadcast live and Israeli sabras began to realise more fully the scale of what the Jews of Europe faced.

Mrs Bar-On only began speaking publicly about the camps five years ago, at the request of her children. "I felt released," she said. "I see it as my duty because at my age there are a very few people who can speak fluently and remember what happened."

Mr Lotoro said he hoped the concert, performed by an ageing survivor and young children of the Jewish state, would bring alive the resilience of the millions in the camps. "Music was a phenomenon that the Germans could not control. They occupied almost all of Europe but they were not able to stop music."

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#### WORLD BULLETIN

##### Israelis arrest two relatives of killer

Israeli forces have arrested a brother and an uncle of a Palestinian accused of killing two soldiers in a West Bank car ramming late on Friday, the army said.

The alleged driver of the vehicle was already in custody having been detained injured at the scene and taken to hospital.

The incident, in the north of the occupied West Bank, also wounded two soldiers, one of them seriously.

##### G4S targeted by Kabul bomber

An official with Afghanistan's Interior Ministry said a suicide car bomber targeting British security company G4S in the capital Kabul had killed two civilians and wounded three others.

Nasrat Rahimi, deputy spokesman, confirmed the attack yesterday, which was claimed by the Taliban. He said the suicide bomber had been driving towards G4S but "detonated himself before reaching the target".

##### Attempt to dispel Rohingya fears

A Burmese official in Rakhine state said yesterday that Rohingya refugees who return will not be held in newly built camps "forever".

Ye Htut was speaking in northern Rakhine, the site of a military crackdown last August that emptied the region of some 700,000 Rohingya Muslims.

Burma says it is ready to take back refugees, but so far not a single Rohingya has returned.

##### Bullet in letter to Greek minister

A threatening letter containing a bullet has been sent to the Greek foreign minister over his role in talks with Macedonia on a long-running name dispute, police said.

Nikos Kotzias has received other threatening letters. "The new envelope ... contained a bullet and a letter with references to his efforts on the Macedonian issue," a police official told Reuters yesterday.

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