



## MAKING OUR WAY - A McMahon/Cheyne Podcast

Träumerei (Season 1; Episode 15) - 2/21/24

**Host:**

**Jim Cheyne**

[music - piano - "Träumerei"]

JIM: "Träumerei," or "Dreaming" by Robert Schumann, "Scenes from Childhood."

[music]

Anita is riding on a train. She is alone. Her family has moved apart in recent years. Four years ago, her oldest sister had gone off to England. Anita is not sure if she will visit her. Her middle sister is off somewhere else, as are her parents. She comes from a fine family, well-established, her father a highly regarded lawyer, her mother an accomplished violinist. Home for Anita was culture, literature, education, and always music.

Anita is the youngest, 18, and the December chill creeping into the railway car puts an edge on her aloneness. [music fades] Now the train slows as it approaches her destination. Now it stops. Directions are given. Everyone begins to move. Anita finds herself among a group in a room where she is stripped. Her hair is shaved off. She is tattooed. It is now December, 1943. Anita is now a prisoner in Auschwitz.

Upon arrival at Auschwitz, prisoners faced selection for one or another fate: selection for forced labor, selection for extermination, selection for one of Dr. Josef Mengele's medical experiments - a certain and much less merciful sentence of death.

Mundane daily activities in the camp, like shaving and tattooing, were performed by other prisoners. The one attending to Anita asked her many questions. "Where are you from? What's the news from the outside? How is the war going? What did you do before your arrest?"

Of all she could have said, she chose, "I played the cello."

"Fantastic," said the attendant. "Then you will be saved."

She excused herself, then returned, bringing with her Alma Rosé. Alma Rosé was Gustav Mahler's niece. More to the point, she was the conductor of the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz, which needed a cellist.

[music - cello - Bach Cello Suite #1, G Major - Sarabande\*]

Despite its name, it was less an orchestra and more a collection of whatever instruments the prisoners happened to play - violins, guitars, flutes, mandolins, accordions. There was, however, no bass instrument, but now - a cello. Against this place of death, Anita had a measure of protection.

Alma Rosé was very strict with her musicians, which some resented, but her perfectionism yielded a standard that kept the orchestra going, kept it useful, and kept its members - most of them - alive. None of her musicians died during her tenure, but then, in 1944, Alma died, apparently from food poisoning. After her death, only two members of the orchestra did not survive the war.

The band would rise early to play for the workers as they departed for the day, and then would play again as the workers returned. It has been reported that some prisoners felt having music in Auschwitz was offensive, but that others found it wonderful to close their eyes for a few minutes and dream themselves out of that horror. The band also played for the camp officers and guards for any occasion they required.

Playing an instrument, particularly the cello, did give Anita some privilege, some protection. That status, however, could be revoked at any instant for arbitrary or insane reasons. Prisoners were often paraded, naked, past officers who made capricious, callous, and deadly selections. "Right" meant life. "Left" meant the gas chambers. When Anita's turn came, an advisor said to the officer, "Cellist," said the officer, "Right."

One day, Dr. Josef Mengele entered the barracks, but he was not looking for subjects for his experiments. He was wanting to hear Schumann's "Träumerei."

Psalms 137 begins this way.

"By the rivers of Babylon -  
there we sat down, and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.

For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'

How could we sing the Lord's song  
in a foreign land?"

And so there, in that barracks, Anita was selected to play.

[music - solo cello - Schumann - "Träumerei"]

By chance, Anita discovered that her sister, Renate, was also at the camp. Together, they survived Auschwitz until the Russian army's advance prompted Germany to relocate prisoners to camps deeper within Germany's territory in an effort to hide their atrocities from the outside world. Jews were separated out and sent to Bergen-Belsen.

It is said that Auschwitz killed people with efficiency, ingenuity, sophistication. In Bergen-Belsen, however, no special apparatus was needed. People simply died - disease, hunger, feebleness. Bergen-Belsen is where Anne Frank died. There was no orchestra there. Anita's protecting cello was gone.

[music - piano - Chopin - Prelude Opus 28, No.4 - E minor\*]

The Russian army liberated Auschwitz on January 27th, 1945. January 27th is now Holocaust Memorial Day. The British army liberated Bergen-Belsen on April 15th, 1945, completely unprepared for what they found. The scene was too horrid to articulate here. The army vacated and then torched Bergen-Belsen because of the infestations and typhus. Former prisoners became displaced persons with no home to which they could return.

Eventually, though, Anita and Renate did rejoin their sister in England. Anita co-founded the English Chamber Orchestra in 1948. Marianne, the eldest, died in Israel in 1952. Renate lived to be 96 and died in France in 2021. It is now February, 2024. Today, at 98, Anita Lasker-Wallfish lives in the United Kingdom, the last surviving member of the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz, from child to prisoner to displaced person to survivor to witness.

She says she can retell what happened there as a witness, but she cannot convey the full horror she experienced there. She would say, "Just as no one can imagine Auschwitz before Auschwitz, no one can really retell Auschwitz after Auschwitz."

"This is the big mystery," she says. "How is it possible totally normal and so-called educated men can sink to such a level? ...When people ask me, how do I feel about it? I don't feel anything about it, other than think about how obscene such a situation is."

Anita continued to play the cello after the war. She married Peter Wallfish, a concert pianist and teacher. They had a daughter, Maya Lasker-Wallfisch, who is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, author, and educator, specialising in transgenerational trauma. And they had a son, Raphael Wallfish, a cellist who married Elizabeth Hunt Wallfish, a Baroque violinist. Raphael and Elizabeth have three children. Benjamin is a composer and producer of film scores. Simon is also a cellist. Joanna is a singer-songwriter. Once more, home is culture, literature, education, and always music.

"I'm often asked," Anita says, "how can you still play the cello afterwards? You can actually elevate yourself into a sphere where this dirt is not going to touch you. That is really the thing. It did not spoil Schumann or the Träumerei for me."

Träumerei. Dreaming.

Stephen Fry, in conversation with Anita, wanted to know one other detail of her encounter with Dr. Mengele and asked what he later called a question of monumental stupidity.

He asked, "Did he thank you?"

She replied, "Did he thank me? Oh, you poor man, you still don't really understand. Do you thank your telephone after you have used it? Do you thank your music system? Do you thank your dishwasher? We were not people. We were Untermenschen - subhuman. You don't thank an animal or a machine."

[music begins - cello & piano - Schumann - "Träumerei"]

Of music, Anita says, "Music can't be destroyed, you know. The Germans have destroyed so much, but music is indestructible."

Of her liberation, Anita says, "We were liberated. It was unbelievable to be liberated. I mean, you couldn't believe it. You thought you were dreaming."

[music continues - cello & piano - Schumann - "Träumerei"]

\*Note: The following music is presented under Creative Commons license.

- Johann Sebastian Bach, Cello Suite #1, G Major, Sarabande; Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Colin Carr - cello. <here>
- Frederick Chopin, Preludes Opus 28, No.4, E minor; Paul Music, Paul Cantrell, piano. <here>