

Chicago Tribune

# A+E

Sunday



Terezin concentration camp inmates formed a choir to sing Verdi's Requiem, whose lyrics felt like an expression of protest against the Nazis. MAURICE ROSSEL PHOTO

# VERDI

## AS DEFIANCE

‘Nothing shall remain unavenged’:  
Requiem revival for Chicago audience tells story of Jews  
who performed it for Nazi captors at Terezin

By **HOWARD REICH**  
Chicago Tribune

Verdi’s Requiem never had been performed under circumstances like these.

On June 23, 1944, the sick and starving inmates of the Terezin ghetto/concentration camp in Czechoslovakia sang the massive work for Nazi officers and members of the International Red Cross.

As the performance unfolded, the choristers in Terezin — a “holding pen for Jews” to be shipped to death camps in the east, according to the United States Holocaust

Memorial Museum — knew full well the meaning of the Latin words they sang. Though conceived as a Catholic Mass for the dead, the work became a cry from the nearly dead, the singers bringing new meanings to the text:

“Deliver me ...,” “... whatever is hidden will be revealed ...,” “... nothing shall remain unavenged ...,” “... from the ashes, the guilty man to be judged ...,” “... how great

Turn to *Requiem*, Page 6

## Ivanka Trump for culture minister?



CHRIS JONES

The closest thing in the nascent administration of Donald J. Trump to a minister of culture is probably Ivanka Trump, who could be seen in a Broadway

theater seat Wednesday night, accompanying Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at a performance of “Come From Away,” an uplifting, if highly sentimental, musical celebrating small-town Canadian hospitality toward international airline passengers delayed there on Sept. 11, 2001. It’s the kind of show that makes you want to take a vacation in Newfoundland, and that’s why Tru-

deau was there. He saw the benefit for Canadian creative exports, Canadian tourism, Canadian international relations, Canadian influence at the United Nations and on and on. No fool, he. And did Ivanka Trump, an influential adviser to the president, her dad, intuit any of that from her seat? Did Trudeau whisper in her ear? If you care about the humanities, the arts and

public broadcasting, those might be among the more important questions of the week. If there is to be any retreat from the Trump administration’s stated budgetary desire to eliminate four crucial, grant-giving cultural agencies — the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Human-

Turn to *Humanities*, Page 2



RYAN REMIORZ/CANADIAN PRESS

Ivanka Trump, with U.N. ambassador Nikki Haley, left, chats with theater patrons before a Broadway show Wednesday.

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# VERDI AS DEFIANCE



STANISLAV ZBYNEK/CTK

A choir stands at the ready during the program “Defiant Requiem: Verdi at Terezin” in 2013 in Prague. The Chicago Philharmonic will perform it Thursday.

**Requiem**, from Page 1

will be the terror, when the Judge comes.”

This extraordinary moment in Holocaust history has been detailed in books and on screen, notably in the 2012 documentary film “Defiant Requiem,” which traced conductor Murry Sidlin’s journey to lead the Verdi Requiem in 2006 in Terezin (Theresienstadt in German). The place had not heard the Requiem since Terezin’s self-styled choristers — most of whom would be murdered — sang it for the last time, 68 years earlier.

On Thursday evening, Sidlin will bring the story and the music to Orchestra Hall at Symphony Center, directing soloists, the choir and the Chicago Philharmonic in the complete score, accompanied by historic film clips and recitations by actors Tovah Feldshuh and Peter Riegert. The venture, which began more than two decades ago, when Sidlin happened upon Joza Karas’ book “Music in Terezin,” now consumes most of his career, he says in an interview with the Tribune.

“I want everyone who ever hears the Verdi Requiem again to think of this, where it took place, how and why and what it mattered,” Sidlin says.

“And let the Verdi Requiem sing as something other, more deeply, more profoundly than the great composition that it is. It’s the great composition that served to inject blood and spirit and breath into people who were being deprived



ROY DANICS PHOTO

**“The words and music took us out of the misery, out of the drabness and the hunger and the fear in the camp.”**

— Vera Schiff, Terezin survivor

of life’s values and living.

“They fought with the Verdi Requiem. It was not only beauty, but power.”

Sidlin does not exaggerate. To those enslaved at Terezin, the Verdi Requiem was much more than just a musical masterpiece. It was a shard of hope amid nearly pervasive despair.

“The words and music took us out of the misery, out of the drabness and the hunger and the fear in the camp,” Vera Schiff, 90, says in an interview. She was in Terezin from 1942 until her liberation there, in May 1945, and heard the Requiem in several performances before the final, private concert for the Nazis and the International Red Cross.

“You hear the (music) that you once knew when you were a free person,” Schiff adds. “And this somehow brings you back to realize we were once human beings, like the others.”

That 16 performances of the Requiem — including the last one, for the Nazis — took place at Terezin must count as a miracle, albeit one devised by mortals.

Organizing these performances and much of the other music at Terezin was Rafael Schachter, who had been a rising young conductor-pianist in Prague before the war. In November 1941, he was shipped alongside hundreds of Czech Jews on “the first train into the unknown,” as the “Defiant Requiem” film puts it.

Like all the others, Schachter was allowed to bring with him to Terezin one suitcase to contain a lifetime’s possessions. Unlike most, he carried scores for Verdi’s Requiem and Smetana’s opera “The Bartered Bride,” a landmark of Czech musical literature (Schachter was born in Romania but had based his career in Prague).

Concerts, plays, lectures and other cultural endeavors quickly sprang up at this unlikelyst of places. In a strange and bitter irony, Jews who





STANISLAV ZBYNEK PHOTO 2013

## Verdi's Requiem "served to inject blood and spirit and breath into people who were being deprived of life's values and living."

— Murry Sidlin, conductor of the Requiem revival



DANIEL TERNA PHOTO 2015

## "We maintained a certain level of civilization. And I think this was our strength."

— Fred Terna, Terezin survivor, who attended three Requiem performances

had been banned from pursuing their artistic professions in Nazi-occupied cities across Europe reclaimed their art in Terezin, albeit amid dire conditions.

At first, "it was sub rosa," conductor Sidlin says. The Nazis "knew it, but they didn't do anything to stop it. It was in an attic or cellar" where rehearsals and performances took place.

Why did the Nazis allow Schachter and others to form musical ensembles, rehearse repertoire and perform popular Czech songs for each other?

"The Germans had a philosophy: In every concentration camp, and that includes the worst possible — Dachau, Auschwitz-Birkenau — everywhere there was an orchestra," says Schiff, the Terezin survivor.

"They believed in giving us false hope, that there is some kind of future for us. Because they did not want any disruptions. They want to instill hope that if you comply, if you go on these transports (unknowingly to death camps), then perhaps there is hope."

The Jews of Terezin did not know where the transports out of Terezin eventually would take them — mostly to their deaths in Auschwitz-Birkenau — at least not in the early years of their incarceration.

"All we lived with, from the start in Terezin, was the notion that in another two months the war will be over, they close this gap, and we go home," survivor Zdenka Fantlova says in the film.

"So in the meantime, of course, there was such a surge of energy for the arts. Which is quite normal. If people are robbed of freedom, they want to be creative. And they were."

This was not a matter of entertainment, however, but of life and death.

"It was for us — and now I'm an old man looking back at what happened — a mode of survival," Fred Terna, 93, says in an interview. He attended three Requiem performances while he was in Terezin, from March 1943 to the fall of 1944 (when he was sent to Auschwitz).

"That is, when the world that ruled us were criminals, liars, the scum of the earth, we maintained a certain level of civilization. And I think this was our strength. And that's what gave us power over ourselves, over our experiences."

But already poor conditions in Terezin deteriorated swiftly, with train loads of Jews from as far as Denmark and the Netherlands crammed into an old garrison town built for 6,000. By September 1942, nearly 60,000 struggled to live amid scant food, long workdays, terrible hygiene and the rampant spread of typhus and other diseases.

Having discovered a harmonium in the basement of one of the Terezin barracks, Schachter conceived the idea of performing the Requiem and went about building a chorus of 150 to bring the piece to life.

"He was very impressive," Terezin survivor Marianka Zadikow May, 93, recalls in an interview. She sang in all 16 performances of the Requiem.

"When he came into the room, the room changed. And he was not tall, dark and handsome. He was overweight, and he was stocky.



MICHAEL J. LUTCH PHOTO

## "They were talking to each other: The crazy Jews are singing their own Requiem, and they don't know it."

— Marianka Zadikow May, Terezin survivor, about the Nazis' ignorance over the meaning of the lyrics to Verdi's Requiem



CHICAGO TRIBUNE

With a beautiful, beautiful expression of his eyes — pitch-black.

"And a wonderful personality. There was a magnet going between us."

Still, Schachter faced a daunting challenge: teaching the Requiem, with its Latin text, to mostly nonprofessional singers, with only a single copy of the score and no paper or pencils — only a will to create.

"When he was teaching us note for note, he realized it wouldn't work that way, because he needed a large chorus," says May, meaning that Schachter couldn't instruct 150 people by rote.

So he divided the singers into smaller groups and taught them separately, May says. For weeks, almost every single night, the choral members rehearsed, Schachter making sure everyone understood what they were singing.

"He gave us the exact Latin words of the 'Dies Irae,' the invocation to the day of wrath, choir survivor May says.

"The Judge will be sitting in judgment," she adds, paraphrasing the text.

Schachter told the chorus: "We cannot say this to them, but we can sing it to them," May remembers.

Or as survivor Edgar Krasa, Schachter's roommate, put it in the film, "In his mind, he transformed it from the Mass for the dead into Mass for the dead Nazis. And he wanted to tell them about the day of wrath coming, and the Supreme Judge sitting in judgment, and no sinner will escape. And they couldn't tell them in German. So he thought, if he can sing it in Latin, he may get away with it."

In rehearsal, Schachter was "merciless," survivor Krasa says in the film (he died earlier this year). "You couldn't move, you couldn't bend your head, you couldn't do anything except have your eyes directed into his eyes."

And that was the least of the challenges. The Jewish Council of Elders, ordered by the Nazis to help manage the Terezin population, was vehemently opposed to Jews singing a Catholic Mass.

"The Jewish Council of Elders wanted it stopped," conductor Sidlin explains. "They sensed that there was already a heated tone and temperament among a lot of rabbis and a lot of very ultrareligious people in the camp in Terezin. A lot of people returned to being Jewish in a very strong way (in Terezin), for obvious reasons. The council could not improve life in the camp, but they wanted to make sure it didn't get worse.

"They told Schachter (that) if he continues with this, it will get worse. Nazis had a way of resolving all disputes."

Schachter took these objections to the choir, which was determined to press on, survivor May says.

Then, too, the metastasizing grief in Terezin weighed on the singers.

"My father died in Terezin," May recalls. "And I was very angry with God about it. And when you get angry with God, it doesn't matter, he doesn't answer anyhow, but he listens to prayers.

"When I met Rafi," May continues, invoking Schachter's nickname, "I excused myself and said: From now on I will not come anymore. I do not feel like singing anymore."

Schachter responded that he had known her father, and "your father would have loved for you to keep singing," May recalls him saying.

And so she did.

In September 1943, word began to circulate that a transport to the east was imminent, and choristers wanted to perform the Requiem before they might be sent away. Schachter opposed this, because the performance wasn't yet "to his standards," survivor Krasa says in the film.

But the impending doom led Schachter to reconsider, his 150 singers performing the Requiem after roughly six weeks of rehearsals.

By all accounts, the performance was stunning.

"It was tremendous, and I still don't understand it," Hana Krasa, Edgar Krasa's late wife, says in the film. "There was only a piano. But for me, it was like if the whole orchestra played. And it made us feel human."

The next morning, 5,000 Terezin inmates were sent by cattle car to Auschwitz, more than half of Schachter's chorus among them.

From then on, Schachter kept recruiting new singers, rebuilding his chorus, though at a fraction of its previous size.

When conductor Sidlin traveled to Jerusalem years ago to interview Terezin survivor and pianist Edith Steiner-Kraus about the nature of the performances, "She said, 'You would be proud of this choir in any urban setting, but the superficial nature of your question troubles me terribly,'" Sidlin recalls of the musician, who died in 2013 at age 100.

"When you ask me a question like how does the choir sound, you're asking about those musicianly things, aren't you? Rhythm, pitch and color and phrasing and singing together, as if any of that mattered."

"Here's the punch line," Sidlin continues. "She said, 'We were so deeply inside the music that we had returned to Verdi's desk.'"

"At that moment, when she said that to me, I realized: You know what? I know nothing.

"I like to think I get inside the music. These people — they returned to Verdi's desk."

In anticipation of a visit by the International Red Cross, the Nazis ordered that Terezin be scrubbed clean for official viewing. Nearly 8,000 people — "the elderly, the sick, anyone who doesn't look the part," according to the film — were sent to their deaths at Auschwitz. Fake storefronts were built to create the appearance of a pleasant little town.

And a performance of the Requiem was ordered.

Schachter "wanted to exclude himself, but it didn't work," chorister May remembers.

So Schachter addressed the choir, May says.

"I was in the room when he said it: 'If any one of you does not want to be in this particular performance, because I have no idea what's going to happen to us — these (Nazis) will be in the audience — what their reactions will be, or might be, I do not know. And I'll stop right here. Anyone feeling this one I don't want to participate in, I want to leave — here's the door, no question will be asked. We won't ask you why?'

"Nobody left."

How did the Nazi officers react?

They did not applaud, May says. A friend of hers overheard them speaking: "They were talking to each other: The crazy Jews are singing their own Requiem, and they don't know it," May says.

Survivor Terna observes: "I think that in their stupidity, they said: What little the Jews knew what they were singing. It's a requiem for the dead!"

"I'm quite sure the Nazis didn't have the faintest idea what they were permitting."

Actor-director and Terezin inmate Kurt Geron was forced to direct a Nazi propaganda film about the supposedly idyllic camp, and a clip of what Sidlin aptly calls this "sadistic lie" is shown during the "Defiant Requiem" concert.

In October 1944, Schachter and most of his choir were sent to the east, the conductor surviving Auschwitz and other camps but dying on a death march in 1945, not long before Czechoslovakia was liberated. He was 39.

During the four years of Terezin's existence, 140,000 were transferred there, 33,000 died inside its walls and nearly 90,000 were deported to "almost certain death," according to figures from the Holocaust museum.

Schachter, survivor May recalls, always nurtured a dream of what would happen after the war.

"Rafi said, 'The Requiem is the crown of all the things I'm doing with you here,'" May remembers.

"What we will do is this: No matter where we will be after the war, once in a year, we will meet in the Smetana Hall in Prague and sing the Requiem. Therefore, we won't have time to rehearse. We will be from all over the world, they will come. You have to learn it by heart. And it's very important, as you know, every one of our rehearsals is a rehearsal for after the war."

"So we were listening to him and hoping this would happen."

In a way, it is happening now via Sidlin's homage to the Verdi Requiem in Terezin, the stories of those who sang it echoing in its notes.

*"Defiant Requiem: Verdi at Terezin," performed by the Chicago Philharmonic and guests, starts at 7:30 p.m. Thursday in Orchestra Hall at Symphony Center, 220 S. Michigan Ave.; \$30-\$150; 312-294-3000 or [www.cso.org](http://www.cso.org).*

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