

Celebrating 113 Years of Service to the Jewish Community

‘Defiant Requiem’ comes to Boston

By Alexandra Lapkin

Advocate Staff

Of all the various ways the Jews defied the Nazis during the Holocaust, the singing of Verdi’s Requiem by Terezin prisoners is perhaps one of the most creative and remarkable.

Confined in the Theresienstadt concentration camp – an old fortress in the military town of Terezin in modern-day Czech Republic – were some of the brightest artists and intellectuals of central Europe. Separated from their families, forced into slave labor, and with the threat of deportation to extermination camps looming over them, these artists, musicians, writers, and philosophers at Terezin kept up the spirits and dignity of their fellow prisoners with daily lectures, plays, operas, and even cabaret performances.

It was in that creative atmosphere that Rafael Schachter, a composer, pianist and conductor from Prague, undertook one of the most challenging and riskiest endeavors at Terezin – to conduct a 150-person chorus in the performance of Giuseppe Verdi’s Requiem Mass.

Edgar Krasa, a Newton resident, was one of the members



Archival footage projected as part of “Defiant Requiem: Verdi at Terezin,” in June 2013 at St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague. A recreation of the 1943-44 performances will occur at Symphony Hall on January 27.

of Schachter’s choir and sang bass in all 16 of the performances between October 1943 and June 1944. “Schachter arrived one week after we did. He saw we were locked in those barracks, the gates were closed; we couldn’t go out, only on work details, guarded by an armed guard. So he said, ‘In these conditions, a negative mentality may sink in and with negative mentality, you cannot retain hope,’” Krasa recalled.

He was Schachter’s roommate at Terezin, in an attic apartment they managed to secure as some of the earliest arrivals to the camp. Krasa became close friends with the conductor, who perished after his deportation to Auschwitz in 1944.

Krasa was also put on a trans-

port to Auschwitz and after several months, to Gleiwitz labor camp. When the camp was evacuated in January of 1945, Krasa was put on a forced march, from which he escaped three days later. With a bullet lodged in his ribs, Krasa hid in a ditch, and the following day was liberated by Soviet troops. Shortly after the war, Krasa met Hana Fuchs, also a survivor of Terezin. They settled in Prague, but when the communists took power, the Krasas escaped to Israel and after a decade, immigrated to the United States. Their first-born son, Rafael, was named after Schachter.

The three generations of Krasas: Edgar, his sons, Rafael and Daniel, and grandson Alexander will perform Verdi’s Requiem at Boston Symphony

Hall on Jan. 27 at 8 p.m. “Defiant Requiem: Verdi at Terezin” is a multimedia concert-drama, that combines live performance with video testimonials and narration. The concert is presented by The Defiant Requiem Foundation, founded in 2008 by conductor and educator Murry Sidlin.

“I think the determination of Schachter and his prisoner choir to sing the Verdi Requiem in a concentration camp where they were all imprisoned for being Jewish, was not only fulfilling for them, but a really great courageous act,” Sidlin said. The story of the Requiem at Terezin first caught his attention when he came across the book titled “Music at Terezin” by Joza Karas and read a section on Schachter and his choir. Sidlin’s research led him to meet Krasa, who shared his story and connected him to other surviving members of Schachter’s chorus.

At first, Schachter “encouraged the prisoners to join him after the day’s work in the basement and start with studying Czech songs, later Czech and German operas,” Krasa recalled. But after a series of massive deportations, Schachter decided to undertake a more courageous work.

How a Catholic funeral mass lifted spirits during the Holocaust

With only one smuggled copy of the Requiem, the members of the chorus memorized the music and Latin lyrics by rote.

When the Council of Jewish Elders, a governing group composed of rabbis and other prominent leaders of the Jewish community at Terezin found out about Schachter's intent to perform the Requiem, which is a Catholic funeral mass, they were shocked. Afraid that the Nazis would deport or even kill Schachter and his choir, and put an end to all nighttime artistic events, the elders urged Schachter to abandon this idea.



Edgar Krasa and family. Photo/Michael J. Lutch

That evening, the conductor came to his choir and let the singers know that he plans to go ahead with rehearsals, but will

understand if anyone wants to quit.

"And they all stayed," Sidlin noted.

The council of elders was mistaken in thinking that Schachter's choice of the Requiem was an apology for being Jewish. Rather, he inspired the singers with the music's message – a day of wrath awaits those who sin. "Schachter told the singers: 'What we cannot tell the Nazis, we can sing to them,'" Krasa said.

The last time the choir performed, it was before senior Nazis, including Adolf Eichmann, and an International Red Cross delegation.

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