



DEFIANT REQUIEM

A FINAL STAND REMEMBERED

By Paula Carvajal

Have you ever found a treasure? Murry Sidlin did.

About 10 years ago, Sidlin, a lifelong composer, walked into a used bookstore. He picked up a nondescript book, paid for it and walked out. He knew he would enjoy a good story reading *Music in Terezín* by Joza Karas. What he didn't know is one short chapter amid the 205-page book would preoccupy his thoughts for the next decade.

"I didn't know very much about Terezín. I just thought what everybody else thought; that it was a myth that this [Czech concentration camp] was a showplace for the Nazis. That turned out to be not true," Sidlin says.

As he turned the pages, he unearthed the stories of the unwilling Jewish inhabitants of the Nazi concentration camp between the years of 1941 and 1944. The stories of hunger, torture, illness and death echoed the stories of concentration camps across

Europe. What differed about this camp was the artistic community that survived in the half square mile behind the camp walls. Among the Jewish painters, musicians and writers was a 29-year-old piano teacher.

"There was one short chapter on this hero, Rafael Schächter," says Sidlin of this treasured chapter. "He put together a volunteer chorus of 150 fellow prisoners and taught them [Giuseppe] Verdi's *Requiem Mass*. I thought this was not only odd, but virtually impossible. First of all, what were they doing singing a work so steeped in Catholic liturgy at a concentration camp? Second, he only had one copy of the score. He had to teach everybody by rote. These people were putting in slave labor hours and then coming to rehearsal to learn note-by-note, word-by-word. That is an incredibly daunting task and an overwhelming concept."

This chapter led Schächter and Sidlin on a decade-long journey ending in the production of the acclaimed film *Defiant Requiem* written and directed by Peabody and Emmy Award winner Doug Shultz. "It took a while to find the prisoners that sang in the camp so many years ago," Sidlin says. "While this was happening, I decided we had to go back to Terezín and sing the *Verdi Requiem* under conditions of great freedom and pay great homage to the courageous people of Terezín."

As Sidlin labored to put together his choir and musicians, it occurred to him it would be a "useful" idea to film the concert. He didn't know what the footage would be good for in the future, but he did it anyway with the help of Peter Schnall, Emmy-winning producer and cinematographer, and founder of Partisan Pictures. After filming the concert in May 2006, Schnall and Sidlin continued to discuss the

stories of the prisoners, mainly the story of Schächter. They were intrigued by what motivated them to pursue music under those cruel conditions. "What we discovered was an untold story of major heroism," Sidlin says. With that they contacted Shultz.

"I was surprised I had never heard this story before," Shultz says. "It seems this is the reaction many people have. Why don't more people know about this? I saw the concert footage, and it was incredibly moving on its own. Then when you read the story ... it is a daunting story to recount because there are so many parts. We only have one opportunity to tell it and to tell it right."

Survival, redemption, liberation and music. This is the story of the surviving prisoners of Terezín and the memory of their "lifeboat," Schächter. As you

meet them one by one throughout the film, you see how they and "Rafi," as Schächter was known, shook their fists at the Nazis learning the *Verdi Requiem* in its original Latin, performing it for each other and, on one occasion, performing it for the Nazis during a United Nations visit to the camp (a farce set up by the Nazis to show the world the prisoners were not being mistreated). "[The Jewish prisoners] reconfigured the meaning of the *Requiem*," Sidlin says. "They never changed the text, they just redefined it. If you're Catholic, it means one thing. But when they sang it, they were speaking to the Nazis."

Verdi's original lyrics "Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna in die illa tremenda / quando coeli movendi sunt et terra / dum veneris judicare saeculum per ignem" translates directly to "Deliver me, O

Lord, from eternal death on that awful day / when the heavens and the earth shall be moved / when you will come to judge the world by fire." Redefining the meaning in their circumstance to indicate the Nazis would one day be judged is enormously important as it gave the prisoners the feeling they were fighting back. "It was something which made us strong," says survivor Felix Kolmer in *Defiant Requiem*. "It had given us a resistance against our fate." Zdenka Fantlova, another survivor featured, had the same sentiment. "Doing a performance was not entertainment," she says in the film. "It was a fight for life."

The film parallels Schächter's concert and Sidlin's concert. While both conductors lead both choirs through the same lyrics, the same crescendos and the same musical arrangements the music is very different. Marianka May, another survivor featured in the film, says, "Rafi said, 'We will sing this in memory and gratitude to Verdi, and you can have in your heart gratitude to anybody you loved and lost — a relative, a friend. And whatever you feel when you have the sad part. Just make sure it is becoming one of you.'" In Sidlin's modern-day concert, the meaning of Verdi's *Requiem* is once again changed.

Sidlin's choir sang the *Requiem* with a very different intention. "There were two objectives with my whole project," he says. "First, Schächter deserves to be remembered as a hero. Second, whenever anyone hears Verdi's *Requiem* in the future, and whenever I perform it, I want the audience to remember that these were people that almost nightly came into a dark, cold, damp cellar after working slave labor hours because they wanted to hear the *Verdi Requiem*. It was inspiring and uplifting for them. I want people to think of the sacrifice of those prisoners and how incredible it was that they found whatever element of strength to do what they did. Daily they were confronted with an agonizing reality. They walked over their friends' and families' bodies. As a result, they sang desperately. I ask my choir to go deeper into the music, deeper into the meaning. I don't want them to just phone it in for the performance. I want them to perform for those people we are honoring. Every breath they took was a phenomenal human effort. I say to my choir, 'Be aware and pay homage to those performers by putting forth every ounce of artistic and human strength and every heartfelt intention you have in their direction.'"

I ask Sidlin how he feels now that the film is done, after 10 years of living with this story. Sidlin is relieved. "It was a tremendous responsibility sharing the story of the prisoners of Terezín, of giving them a voice." He is also grateful. He is "grateful and grateful and grateful." "This is more than a story of what they did, this is a model of how we should be. We should respond to the worst of mankind with the best of mankind."

Perhaps Sidlin will find another treasure buried in a used bookstore someday soon. Hopefully next time it won't be 10 years before we get to share it with him.

"HE ONLY HAD ONE COPY OF THE SCORE. HE HAD TO TEACH EVERYBODY BY ROTE. THESE PEOPLE WERE PUTTING IN SLAVE LABOR HOURS AND THEN COMING TO REHEARSAL TO LEARN NOTE-BY-NOTE, WORD-BY-WORD. THAT IS AN INCREDIBLY DAUNTING TASK AND AN OVERWHELMING CONCEPT."

