

NEWSPAPER "RZECZPOSPOLITA" Warsaw, March 14, 2009

Journeying off with his violin

by Leo Kantor

After the Polish communists' anti-Semitic, anti-intellectual, and anti-democratic campaign during the so-called March Events of 1968, approximately 20,000 Jews left Poland.. More than 3,000 of them found a new home in Sweden.

Mankind created the violin in its search for perfection. No other instrument, both literally and figuratively, lies so close to the heart of its player. They clutch it to themselves like a little child; the violin pays attention to their souls' innermost recess and utters the most personal of tones. Virtuosos can procure tones and vibrations which epitomize their own sensibility. It is one of a kind – like the papillary lines on the fingers which caress the strings of this astounding instrument. In its form it is like a beautiful woman and so fragile that it demands a careful dexterity.

Its music can be happy and exhilarated, like that of the Romani and Jews who once traveled around among small cities and villages and spread joy among the people, and not just fear born of prejudice. It has been said sometimes that a person who has never experienced pain cannot fully experience the joy of music. And best of all, the violin expresses sorrow and grief, and then that peculiar – maudlin – laughter.

Like no other instrument the violin has also saved human lives during the gloomiest times of brutal contempt which have sometimes befallen mankind. One could always take it under one's arm and travel to some other, safer place. A grand piano would have been too large. God, destiny, and human beings have been more merciful towards violinists than towards others. Violinists are associated with honesty and goodness. Even Adolf Hilter, the world's greatest genocidal murderer, had in his record collection – which was brought out of Germany and recently re-discovered in Russia – works by Tchaikovsky performed by Bronisław Huberman, the famous Polish virtuoso with a Jewish background. In 1936 Huberman invited Arturo Toscanini to the opening of the Palestine Symphony Orchestra (now the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra) which he founded and where refugees fleeing persecution by Hitler played.

Forty years later Polish communists drove away their violinists so that they would find another place to live and play. Along with thousands of others they went to the train station Dworzec Gdański in Warsaw, and along with them went the souls of those who for centuries had played along Polish roads and ways, in courtyards, and in concert halls.

Leonid Olo Spiro

"Come on, sweetheart, we'll move you to the other room; Leszek has come to talk with you," says Lucyna to her husband Leonid Olo Spiro.

Lucyna, Polish, several years younger than her husband, is taking care of him as if her were a child. One year after Olo had left Poland, Lucyna succeeded in fleeing to him via a trip booked with the travel agency Orbis. When she stepped off the train in Vienna, he was waiting at the station with a ready Swedish visa.

She went of her own free will to the rabbi of the congregation in Stockholm and converted to Judaism, even if this can sometimes be harder than winning a violin competition. For two years she took classes in Jewish religion and culture, without any guarantees that the rabbi would deem her knowledge sufficient. For Judaism is not a proselytizing religion. It is elitist. Lucyna visited the synagogue in Stockholm more often than her husband did.

We are conversing in their home in southern Stockholm in the fall of 2006. Olo is 90 years old and lying in bed, small and drawn up like a violin shell. He has been bed-ridden for one year, brittle as a horse-hair bowstring. But conversing is something he wants to do at the table, with tea and cakes. We carry him to the wheelchair, and he rolls himself to the table in the living-room.

Always elegant, he wore a coat to dinner, even in Stockholm, and we ate on white tablecloths. Olo's friends say that for his entire life he has been a tactful person. He never wanted to be any trouble. Even at the bus stop he let others by him, inviting them with a friendly gesture and a smile to get on before him.

The Spiro family came to Poland from Spain in the 17th century. His forefathers' graves can be found in Opatów, Kraków och Przemyśl. His great-grandfather, Natan Nata Spiro, was a well-known Talmudist in Opatów, a fact affirmed by the *Encyklopedia Judaica*. His family is documented from the year 1630 on.. Before the Second World War Olo lived with his parents at 24A Żurawia Street in Warsaw. Their stone house is still there today. He was the apple of his mother's eye, and she moved him to a school located on the same side of the street, so that he would not have to cross it and – God forbid – get hit by a cab. His father was exceptionally intelligent and a technically-gifted administrator of twelve rental houses owned by wealthy Jews. Right before the war, he himself acquired two villas in Józefów outside of Warsaw. The family spent their vacations in one of them, while the other was rented out to summer guests. During the war, before they were compulsorily transferred to the Ghetto, a Polish policeman demanded to be given the keys to one of the houses and moved in with his family. After this, his son-in-law and daughter lived there, and to this day the policeman's family still live in the house. The family home in Warsaw was well-to-do; there was a grand piano there and a large collection of Polish books. Olo was studying chemistry, but his father – a foresighted man – convinced him to play the violin. “Who knows what might happen in this life.” His father bought him a violin, and Olo completed his chemistry studies and thereafter the Academy of Music of Warsaw, where he also played his diploma concert with the symphony orchestra in 1935. Władek Szpilman used to come to dinner; he was studying at the same Academy. His family was a little poorer, and Olo's mother always invited him to come eat.

When the Germans reached Warsaw in 1939, Olo's father recommended that he travel to Białystok near the Russian border to try to settle there. The family would follow along afterwards. Unfortunately they never made it ... They first ended up in the Ghetto and then perished during the Holocaust. They died in Birkenau. Olo was saved by his violin. First he played at a restaurant in Białystok. When the Russians entered the city, he was arrested because he refused to assume Russian citizenship and was sent to cut down forests in the Komi Republic in the Soviet Union. The journey's final means of transportation was a raft on the river. From that the Soviet Security Service threw people off at barracks in the woods. When Olo opened his case and saw that his violin was covered with water he broke down and sobbed on his bunk. The heavy labor chopping down trees in minus forty degree weather, and in summer in the incredible heat, among mosquitoes and with starvation rations, claimed many people's lives. When Olo was free from work he played for the other prisoners on the violin which he had dried by the iron stove. After three years of work in the woods he was then moved with the permission of the Security Service to the theater in Syktyvkar. In the year 1946 Olo was back in Warsaw which now lay in ruins. The family's apartment on Żurawia Street was occupied. One of the houses in Józefów was occupied by the policeman's eldest son.

That same year Olo played at the opening concert when the philharmonic opened in Warsaw. He quickly became an esteemed musician and member of society. When Aram Chatjaturjan put on the ballet Spartacus at the Grand Theater in Warsaw and became dissatisfied with the orchestra, he pointed to Olo and screamed at the violinists: “Can't you all play like that man?” He was thus elevated to the rank of a hero in the eyes of his colleagues. They all loved him, and he got along with all of them; he was always pleasant, obliging, and considerate.

In March of 1968 the personnel manager called to his office and explained to him that there were no complaints as far as the music went, but that there were objections among the administrative personnel regarding his reprehensible relations with women, in particular with a woman in the cloakroom – a considerable disciplinary problem for the theater. There was also an informer who claimed that Spiro had insulted the theater manager Libera publicly. Olo swore that he idolized women and respected them, and that he had never insulted the manager, that he had in fact never in his life insulted anyone. In a way one could say that he owed the personnel manager a debt of gratitude since she made his decision to leave Poland – something he had never wanted – easier. But did not know how he could stay when the situation was so unbearable for Jews, particularly after all the attacks in the newspaper, on television, and on the radio.

The Customs Department's hangars were located at that time near Umschlagplatz. Everybody knew that they would not allow Olo to leave with a violin from the period before the war, but who could leave such a child and head out on their own, without any right to return?

"My dear Leszek, not everyone was an anti-Semite at that time. I went to the Violin Makers' Association at Krakowskie Przedmieście in Warsaw and said that I could not leave without my violin. They gave me a certificate which stated that the violin was made after the war by some violin maker in Kalisz, and they didn't even charge me for it," Olo recounts. "We know what is happening, Mr. Spiro; you are not the first. Violinists are coming here from all over Poland."

At the violin restorer's shop they also handled the matter with kindness. The restorer, whose name Olo cannot remember, put the right certificates in order and apologized for everything that was happening in Poland. The violin makers in Warsaw and the people at the restorers' shops lowered the appraisal values of violins and made it possible for Jewish violinists to take their violins with them. During this period they would even enter a little piece of soap in a special register for the Customs Department. "We have the Custom's register with the entry for the soap here, along with the letter Olo's father sent from the Ghetto in Warsaw to the Soviet Union, and a working map of Siberia," says Lucyna. The Polish powers that be gave Leonid Olo Spiro five days to leave Poland. There was not much which got packed up. Lucyna stayed behind to take care of the rest. They had not gotten married yet; they were wed in Stockholm. Olo only managed to squeeze in a carefully-wrapped telephone directory from Warsaw before the war.

"Lucyna, show Leszek our telephone book," Olo requests. From a drawer Lucyna carefully takes out a pre-war directory of telephones in Warsaw and carries it with the same reverence as if it were the Torah she was carrying. She removes the plastic dust jacket and with his skinny, trembling hand Olo points out streets, telephone numbers for the rescue services on the opposite side – there were even Jewish ones, various shops, in particular for violin makers, bookstores and cafés, and the telephone number to his apartment on Żurawia Street where he grew up.

Now he smiles. He touches the pages tenderly. It is obvious that this affords him some happiness. For awhile his face is livened up again by a smile. He becomes a child once more, though he is 90 years old, and Warsaw is his entire innocent, warm, and joyful world which fits into this telephone directory from the late thirties.

After he left Poland he only saw his city once more, in 1979. At that time the Warsaw Opera was invited to a guest performance in Stockholm, within the scope of friendship without borders. At the same time the Royal Opera of Stockholm was to perform in Warsaw with its more than two hundred-person ensemble consisting of ballet dancers and musicians. Olo Spiro could not get a visa. The entire Swedish ensemble protested and the leadership decided that the orchestra would refuse to go. Then the Polish ambassador phoned and apologized; there had been a mistake as it seemed that there was another Leonid Spiro in Sweden, and the whole thing had nothing to do with the violinist from the Chamber Orchestra but rather with

the other one.

At the airport in Warsaw half of the ensemble went through the passport control. Behind Olo stood the orchestra's director. In the event Olo should be stopped, half of the ensemble would refuse to go through the customs check, and everyone would take the next flight back to Stockholm. Olo was allowed to pass, though he was very nervous.

"I gazed at the city with pain," said Olo. "Especially as a number of companions with whom I would have liked to have been together there were in Stockholm." No one knows who informed the German weekly publication "Stern" of the incident. In the end of the magazine's article it was written that the Polish Jew whom they did not want to allow into Poland had the same white and red carnations on his music-stand as the rest of the orchestra.

Olo died in May of 2007.

His comrades from the orchestra came to his funeral, in spite of the fact that he had retired twenty years earlier. They played Mozart. Olo never got to see Warsaw again. After his death I asked Lucyna if he had missed Poland. "Yes, very much. For a long time he had a thorn in his heart, and then, when he wanted for us to go, he was too sick. He asked everyone who could to travel to Poland and take a picture of Żurawia Street". The telephone directory was sent to friends in Stockholm. There are a few photos and posters bearing the name Leonid Olo Spiro from his first concert at the National Philharmonic in Warsaw. It turned out that the violin which saved his life was not so valuable, so there is no buyer for it. The violin is slightly damaged – it split when the Customs Department stamped it. Lucyna has it now in her home. The letter which Olo's father Arnold wrote in the Warsaw Ghetto in May of 1945 and sent to Siberia has been preserved for forty years. The mother and father never got to see their beloved son again; they died in the gas chamber at Birkenau.

The violin donated by Leo Kantor will be presented to the Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland to then be forwarded to the planned Museum of the History of the Polish Jews in Warsaw during the opening ceremony of the "International Documentary Film Festival – Humanity in the World" on April 2, 2009. The wife of the Polish president, Mrs. Maria Kaczynski will accept the gift.