

Childhood, interrupted

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שש שנים עברו על יולק

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ישראל, ניר, מחנכתי, במסגרת של סטודנט ניר. "אני לא יכולה לזכור אתו"

The plot of the opera "Lost Childhood" (libretto: Mary Azrael; music: Janice Hamer) begins when the hero, Julek, is still enjoying an idyllic childhood. The year is 1939, the setting, a living room of a well-to-do Jewish family in Poland. Julek, 9, and his sister, Lala, 15, are dancing the tango to music from the radio.

The idyll is disturbed when their father enters the room and turns to another station: a BBC broadcast from England, with foreboding signs of the impending war.

From the childhood home in Poland we jump forward several decades to the 1990s, to an elegant bar in a Manhattan hotel. Yehuda Nir, a New York psychiatrist born in 1930 (formerly the child Julek) and his colleague, a German psychiatrist named Manfred, are attending a science conference. Manfred was born after the war, in 1946, to a family that identified with the Nazis. In reality, Manfred is Gottfried Wagner, the great-grandson of the anti-Semitic composer. Wagner is Yehuda Nir's friend.

In the play, Manfred urges Yehuda to talk about his childhood. Yehuda hesitates. "Why get into that now?" Afterwards he says: "After the war, I imagined myself as a hero who would come and tell his relatives in Palestine how he survived, how he managed to fool the Germans. But nobody asked us, nobody wanted to hear. So we kept everything to ourselves. After all, we were already used to hiding things."

Here the opera switches back to his childhood once again, to the house in Poland. Due to the limitations of the operatic medium, which requires skipping over historical stages, the year is now 1941, and the danger of death is palpable. The parents explain to their children that during their flight they may be forced to separate for a while, but in the end they would meet in the Promised Land. "Remember," says the father, "5 Jabotinsky Street. That's where my sister Pola lives. Tel Aviv, Palestine."

The opera emphasizes this part, which to Israeli ears stresses the sharp contrast between the lives of the residents of Tel Aviv, which were relatively peaceful even during those years, and what was happening to their relatives in Eastern Europe.

Incidentally, in his memoirs of the same title, published in 1989, Nir makes no reference at all to his life and that of his family in the postwar years. Even in the epilogue to the book, which he wrote years later, he refrains from explaining what happened during the meeting with the aunt and uncle from Jabotinsky Street. This week in Tel Aviv Nir told me: "My relatives' fear of the harsh information, their unwillingness to listen to what had happened to us, was traumatic for me."

As mentioned, the libretto of the opera is based on the memoirs. Psychiatrist Nir grew up in beautiful Lvov, and enjoyed a happy and safe childhood until the age of 9. And for the following six years, his life was a sequence of nightmarish experiences: the threat of death, being orphaned, flight and hiding.

In the book, Nir uses practical and concrete language to describe the days of the Soviet occupation of Lvov (the two years following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), the Polish Catholic identity that he, his mother and his sister assumed, the Germans' entry, the bloodthirsty Ukrainians, his father's murder, the flight to Krakow and then to Warsaw. In the end he describes his participation in the courageous but unsuccessful Polish revolt in Warsaw, which ended with an attempt to escape via the sewers.

After the war, Nir immigrated to Israel with his mother and sister, served in the Israel Defense Forces during the War of Independence, returned to Europe to study medicine, completed his psychiatric studies in the United States and has been living in New York for over 40 years. During the Yom Kippur War he did military service in Israel. His mother worked as a teller in the PKO Bank Polski in Tel Aviv and has since died. His sister, Lala Levron, is still living in Tel Aviv.

The book is dedicated to Ludwig Selig, Lala's lover during their days of hiding in Poland and the person who in effect saved the family. Nir's memoirs are fascinating; they were written in English and have already been translated into several languages, including Polish. A Hebrew version of "The Lost Childhood" is now being published by Makor Tikshoret.

Naturally, the librettist chose to dramatize the book's most critical moments: At the beginning, still in Lvov, the child Julek turns into a merchant, learns to bargain, sells his father's elegant Borsalino hat to Polish villagers in exchange for seven eggs.

Another scene describes the acquisition of his new identity: Julek, his mother and his sister practice the Christian prayer that speaks of granting forgiveness to those who have harmed you. The prayer is contrasted with the motto of the book, which is a quotation from the play "Malone Dies" by Samuel Beckett: "Let me say before I go any further that I forgive nobody. I wish them all an atrocious life and then the fires and ice of hell."

In another part of the story the child Julek, feeling lonely, asks for divine mercy: "God, if you help me, I swear that I'll believe in you. Forgive me for not praying to you in the past." An unforgettable scene describes an event in the home of the family where Julek is living under a false identity. The landlady orders him to bathe together with her son. Julek knows that his identity will be revealed and acts out of desperation: As though by mistake he breaks the lamp, enters the water in the dark, emerges immediately and gets dressed.

A few years later, still disguised as a Catholic, Julek works for a German Nazi dentist in occupied Warsaw. Another dental assistant, also a Jew in disguise, begins to whistle a Yiddish song. Julek responds by whistling the same tune. The well-known melody of "Oiften Pripitchik" is integrated into the original music of the opera.

A previous version of the opera was performed in New York several years ago without being staged. At the time, almost half the passages were spoken rather than sung. The version being performed now has been drastically altered: Only about 10 percent of the opera is spoken. But how does one stage an opera whose libretto is in no need of musical reinforcement?

Director Ned Canty replies to that in one sentence: "The only way to do that is to be as simple and direct as possible."

The participants in the production of "Lost Childhood" (the opera is performed with piano accompaniment), include Israeli singers Moran Abuloff (as the child Julek), Guy Mannheim (Yehuda) and Ido Ben-Gal (Ludwig). Guest singers from abroad will play Julek's parents and his sister, as well as the German Manfred who listens to Yehuda's story. The conductor is Steven Osgood and the costumes were designed by Arel Dar.

Today at 5:30 P.M., there will be a preliminary event at the Janis Levine music center in Jaffa, in which Dr. Gottfried Wagner will discuss the Holocaust, memory and art with composer Janice Hamer. Yehuda Nir will attend this event as well.

Haggai Hitron
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