

A tale of two anthems

For the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

Eli Rubenstein

“From all the tragic experiences of the war and the Holocaust, there is one lesson to be learned: that is there is nothing more valuable than human life. Nobody, in any situation, has the right to take it away.

“To this day, the world had not drawn conclusions from this horrible crime, which was done in the very heart of Europe in the 20th century.

“The words ‘war never more’ still don’t mean much, but we have to remember and we have to repeat to ourselves that human life is holy. Perhaps the people will hear.

“After us our children will come here, and our children’s children, and they will keep repeating, ‘War never more,’ because human life is holy.”

Thus spoke Simcha “Kazik” Rotem, the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, on April 19, the 70th Anniversary of the uprising. His remarks were delivered in front of the imposing monument to the heroes of the uprising, opposite the Museum of the History of the Polish Jews, which was being officially opened on this auspicious anniversary.

Seventy years ago, near this very spot, a small band of Jewish fighters launched their doomed, month-long revolt against the might of the German army – 13,000 Jews were killed in the ghetto during the uprising, some 6,000 of that number were burned alive or died from other causes.

The evening before Rotem’s talk, the Israel Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Zubin Mehta at Warsaw’s national opera house, Opera Narodowa, performed a number of pieces, beginning with the Polish and Israeli national anthems, and followed, perhaps surprisingly, by three pieces by German composer Ludwig Van Beethoven.

As I heard the national anthems, my mind drifted back to those dark days of the ghetto, illuminated only by the acts of physical and spiritual resistance carried out by those who, to this day, stand as a singular model of courage and heroism.

I recalled that Jewish fighters hung Polish and Jewish flags on the rooftops of the buildings in Muranowska Square when the Nazis began their ferocious assault on the ghetto.

And then I recalled the words from Leib Langfuss, the rabbinical judge of the Polish town of Makow-Mazowiecki, who had been deported to Auschwitz in 1942 where he was forced into being a *Sonderkommando*. Miraculously he kept a written diary of his experiences, which came to an abrupt halt when he was executed in November 1944 for taking part in the rebellion that destroyed Crematorium No. 4 in Birkenau.

On one occasion, Langfuss describes

a group of Polish and Jewish prisoners being led to the slaughter. A Polish girl left the group and asked the *Sonderkommando* prisoners to tell her people that she and her comrades had died a hero’s death. The Poles sang their national anthem, while the Jews sang *Hatikvah*. “A terrible and cruel fate has ordained that the lyrical sounds of these different anthems mingle in this accursed corner of the globe,” Langfuss observed.

Now, almost three-quarters of a cen-



Simcha “Kazik” Rotem, the last surviving leader of the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (and a participant in the 1944 Polish Uprising) is escorted to the podium on April 19th, 2013 at the 70th Anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising ceremony, in front of the Rapoport Monument in Warsaw. He was awarded the Grand Cross of the Polonia Restituta by Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski. [Adam Guz Photo]

tury later, the same two anthems were being heard, but not as the last breaths of emaciated prisoners on the way to their demise, but played by a full symphony orchestra – from Israel no less! – joined by thousands of Poles and Jews of Polish origin, in a free and democratic Poland.

In a country where every Jew was once condemned to death, and every Pole’s life was at risk (in the words of Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, co-founder of Zegota, the council to aid Jews, and one of the Righteous Among Nations), where even giving a Jew a piece of bread might prove to be a death sentence for a Pole and his or her entire family, Jews and Poles had gath-

ered in the elegant space of the Polish opera house, celebrating their once glorious past, and pledging to work to build a better future.

Indeed, the lyrical sounds of their different anthems mingled together – no longer part of a “terrible and cruel fate,” but within a mutual pledge for harmony, brotherhood and respect for each other and all humanity.

And what did the orchestra choose to play? Beethoven. Surely, they could have

chosen something else. Chopin. Mendelsohn. Perhaps the evening’s organizers did this purposely. In many places under Nazi rule, Jews were prohibited from playing the music of German composers, lest they “contaminate” the great German masterpieces. In other instances, Jews were forced to play music when the inmates arrived in Auschwitz (or other camps), or during their executions.

But now Beethoven was being played freely in the same place where it was once prohibited, and not to deceive or drown out the death cries of prisoners, but to the delight of two peoples once accosted by the same brutal foe.

I found an even deeper lesson, however. After the demise of Nazi Germany, a natural response might have been to despise everything about Germany – its art, its literature and its music. Thus, by playing Beethoven on the anniversary of the uprising against his descendants, we are asserting that no nation is inherently good or evil, or necessarily better or worse than another, that what happened in Germany should not blind us to all the good that came before and might still be possible. We condemn Nazi Germany in the strongest possible terms, but in this same judgment, we utterly refute Hitler’s legacy by not sentencing all of Germany or all Germans – prior to and since the Holocaust – to eternal ostracism.

That evening in the Warsaw opera house, the works of Beethoven, and all

the music being heard, were not being used as an instrument of division, domination or humiliation. Nor were they being listened to only or primarily for their esthetic beauty and value. The music’s essential function that evening was the sacred memorialization of loss, and the bridging of national and cultural divides through the healing power of the arts. True art can soar above time, space and origin, touching those whose hearts sincerely yearn for transcendence and inspiration, the potential for which lies in every human being and society.

That evening and the next day, we saw remarkable expressions of Polish and Jewish unity. This does not erase the difficult moments in our history, the antisemitism that has afflicted relations between our people, in varying degrees, over the centuries and has not yet been entirely overcome in Poland or almost anywhere else in the world.

But the events in Warsaw were a cause for hope and optimism – that given the right conditions, and perhaps enough historical developments over time, Polish-Jewish relations may be entering its golden age.

In that atmosphere I was reminded of the words of the most famous Jewish victim of Nazi Germany, Anne Frank: “I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart.”

Who could not feel that way, at least for the moment, when surrounded by so many people of good will? And who could not feel some measure of comfort, given that Anne Frank herself predicted that such a time would come, when she wrote: “I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too. I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that this cruelty too shall end, and that peace and tranquillity will return once again.”

In the end, despite all the travails of the human experience, there is a core of human decency that inevitably will rise up against evil, time and time again, and throw off the shackles of injustice. It might take more than 12 years and a world war, as it did with Nazi Germany, or it might take more than seven decades, as it did with Soviet communism, but the human desire for freedom, justice and brotherhood will ultimately prevail.

That is what I felt standing in the former ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto, as our two peoples stood side by side, singing *Hatikvah* (*The Hope*) and *Jeszcze Polska nie zgin ła* (*Poland Is Not Yet Lost*), proclaiming in word and music, a path to a brighter future.

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