

Music's Path Across the Generations

Martin Goldsmith Traces His Family History

By Adam Sacks

A mighty ash tree grows from the floor in the middle of a house forming a canopy over the roof. A golden sword emerges from its trunk. Martin Goldsmith, the former director of classical music programming for National Public Radio and for ten years the host of its show, "Performance Today," uses this image of the tree in his book, "The Inextinguishable Symphony: A True Story of Music and Love in Nazi Germany," that it required tremendous effort not to take notice of the tree.

Although Goldsmith's childhood seemed to be a perfectly normal one in which family members played and talked, Goldsmith grew up without grandparents and with a missing uncle. He recalls donning an emotional costume when at home, camouflaging his real personality. The tree, whose roots were at the base of all of familial life, represented the fate of the German Jews in the 1930s that his parents—who had escaped—silently carried with them.

Only after Goldsmith's mother's death in 1984, was this tree first openly acknowledged. In 1992, Goldsmith met up with his father in his father's hometown of Oldenburg where the father began to speak of his childhood memories to his son. And in 1994, Goldsmith's father agreed to tour the new Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington with his son. There followed an interview with Goldsmith's father on NPR's Morning Edition, which represented a further break in the silence around Goldsmith's family history.

Finally, when in 1997, Goldsmith had to provide a short bio to the host of a film series in Baltimore, the idea for a book on Goldsmith's family came to life. Goldsmith, who is currently director of classical programming at XM Satellite Radio in Washington, D.C., was briskly explaining his musical roots: that his parents had played in an all-Jewish orchestra in Germany, that his father had fled Germany for Sweden, but that he had returned to Germany to be with his future wife, and that they had escaped just in time in 1941. The professor directing the Baltimore Film series responded, "That's some story. You oughta write a book." Goldsmith was inspired and the idea for "The Inextinguishable Symphony" was born.

Goldsmith began his journey back across the generations four thousand miles from home, on November 9th, that infamous date in German history, at the grave of his great-grandparents in Sachsenhausen, in Lower Saxony. They are, as he writes, "the only memorials to our families that exist anywhere in the world." Alex Goldschmidt, Goldsmith's paternal grandfather

and the youngest son of a family of horse-traders, didn't follow his father in the family business and, instead, left for the big city and went to Oldenburg. There he married and opened a shop for ladies' garments. The couple had a son, named Günther, whom the mother introduced to the world of German culture and music.

Goldsmith's maternal grandfather, Julian Gumpert, came from West Prussia. He was a violinist, and, after winning the top prize at the music conservatory in Dresden, he married and moved to Düsseldorf where he opened a conservatory which focused on string instru-



The author Martin Goldsmith.

ments. He soon had a daughter, Rosemarie, who would prove to be a musical prodigy. At the age of seven she began playing the viola.

Music would prove to be a refuge, both literally and figuratively, for both Rosemarie Gumpert and Günther Goldschmidt as they came of age in a time of increasing political and social turmoil.

In the summer of 1933, after Jewish artists and musicians had been expelled from all German organizations, the Kulturbund Deutscher Juden was founded as an emergency project designed to employ Jewish artists. It rapidly grew into an organization of artists bound together in a time of crisis, "sustained by life-giving principles," as cofounder Martin Buber once said. Although the hopes on which this organization were founded were, of course, ultimately shattered, the project initially received state sanction from Nazi officials who wanted to use the organization for propaganda purposes.

Rosemarie secured a place as a violinist in the Kulturbund's Frankfurt orchestra in 1935. In the meantime, Günther, who had been expelled from his conservatory was preparing for emigration to Sweden when, at the last minute, he was called on to fill in for a sick flutist at the same Frankfurt orchestra. It was while rehearsing Tchaikovsky that Rosemarie and Günther met. When Günther finally left for Sweden a few months later the two continued to correspond. When the same flutist then fled to Palestine, Günther returned to Frankfurt to

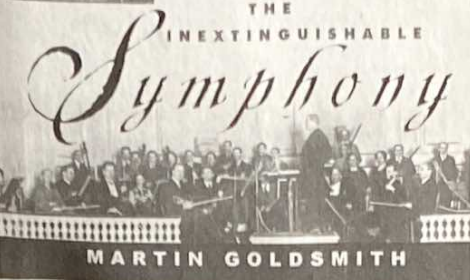
take his place and be by Rosemarie's side.

In 1938, the Frankfurt orchestra folded and the two moved to Berlin. On Kristallnacht, Günther escaped by fleeing via train imminent arrest by police in Düsseldorf. Out the window of the train he could see the burning synagogues. Günther and Rosemarie were married shortly thereafter and returned to Berlin to play with the only remaining Jewish Kulturbund. Thanks to a recital at the U.S. Embassy, the two were able to receive immigration visas to the U.S. in February of 1941. Money for their passage was raised through a fundraising dinner held by a friend who was a teacher living in the Chinatown. Soon they were on the deck of a Portuguese ship looking at the Statue of Liberty as they sailed into New York's harbor.

Günther and Rosemarie Goldschmidt became George and Rosemary Goldsmith and took an apartment on New York City's Upper West Side. In 1947, they became U.S. citizens. When Rosemary got a job with the St. Louis Symphony they moved to St. Louis, and then, when she got a spot with the Cleveland Orchestra, they moved to Cleveland and George entered retail sales.

After his release from Sachsenhausen, following his Kristallnacht arrest, Alex, Günther's father, applied with the Cuban consulate for a visa. Rosemary's father, Julian, meanwhile, applied for a visa at the Ecuadorian consulate. Julian succeeded in leaving Germany shortly thereafter, along with a younger émigré couple he had befriended. They left via plane. Within days of Julian's arrival in Quito, however, he died of a heart attack.

Alex booked passage with his younger son on the infamous St. Louis and obtained the necessary passports and visas. When the ship was ultimately sent back to Europe and the passengers distributed, Alex and his son landed in France and, after the outbreak of the war, were



A tribute to the music that brought Goldsmith's parents together during dark times.

placed in a camp for "enemy aliens." Their letters describe deteriorating conditions. Alex's letters to his son George became increasingly pleading and painful, urging him to do everything possible to save them. "It will be on your conscience," he wrote.

Goldsmith's two grandmothers and an aunt had been left behind in Berlin. They were deported east and murdered. In August 1943, Alex and George's younger brother, Helmut, were deported to Auschwitz via Drancy, outside of Paris. When George learned of the fate of his father and brother after the war, he abandoned his flute. Though his father always insisted otherwise, Martin sees this decision as connected to the fate of his family.

This past fall Martin Goldsmith visited Berlin. In a moving presentation, he addressed a group of Kulturbund veterans at the new Jewish Museum, remarking that the museum was less than a mile from his parents' last address and the site of the last Kulturbund theater on the Kommandantenstraße. Though Goldsmith's father has returned to Germany for visits, he has yet to venture to Berlin. Goldsmith describes himself as his father's "emissary." His love of music and culture is part of his family inheritance, "so much of which is German," he adds.

This past spring the New York Philharmonic performed the "The Inextinguishable Symphony," a symphony by the Danish composer Carl Nielsen, that was also the last piece rehearsed by the Kulturbund for the 1941-42 season that was

never to be—and that, of course, gives Goldsmith's book its name. Nielsen wrote of his symphony's message: "if the whole world were devastated by fire, flood and volcanoes, and all things were destroyed and dead, then nature would still begin to breed new life again."

Goldsmith's book has led to a documentary film that will be aired on PBS, as well as a companion music CD and companion "Symphony Tour." For Goldsmith, the film and the book are "torch songs" to the relatives he never knew and yet whose absence has been so present in his life. But the story is also a song of passion, a tribute to the music that brought his parents together during dark times. It also sheds light on a still largely unknown chapter of the Nazi era.

After his extensive work traversing the generations, Goldsmith no longer experiences his father as cut-off and isolated. The emotional distance between the two men has narrowed. Today, he can appreciate his father in heroic terms, as someone who overcame the horrors to establish a rich new life in the United States. Goldsmith says that he realized that music is something that can save your life and is something worth risking your life for, this was the golden sword in the tree, a rich treasure of understanding and hope.

If you would like to be involved in the documentary film project, please contact its producer, Gail Prenskey, at gprensky@sprintmail.com and visit the project web site at www.jwmprodus.com/TISProject.

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