

the *Milos* near Haifa and transferred many of its Jewish passengers to the ocean liner *Patria*, to be deported to a prison island. Then the Hagannah, a Jewish underground group, sank the *Patria* in an attempt to disable it and prevent the deportation. His mother drowned. My father felt personally responsible for her death, although he bore no actual blame. He could barely speak as he told me how his mother had jumped overboard in an attempt to swim to the “Promised Land.”

At last, my father’s terrible burden of secrecy was lifted. He was able to see the past in new ways, reexamining his own trauma and his motivations for keeping silent. The process of filling in the gaps continued until his death in 2006. In 1999 he contributed to the development of my play, *In the Puppeteer’s Wake*, that unfolds his and his mother’s interlocking stories of escape by sea. As the years passed, the reasons for the deception continued to evolve, ranging from a desire to protect my sister and me from the possibility of enduring any such experiences in the future (which probably comes closest to his actual motivation) to an idealistic, possibly naive, idea that if I could not be identified as a Jew I might be able to exert influence in saving Jews if this became necessary in America one day.

Did you speak with your mother about her past as well?

Yes. She and I continue to speak about her disillusionment with Austria, her country of origin; the cruelties, injustices, and terrors endured during the Nazi period; her inability to pursue her desired career as an actress; the Nazis’ confiscation of her father’s store, converting it to their district headquarters even while her family lived in rooms above; the humiliating acts she and others were forced to perform in the streets to public ridicule; the scattering and eventual destruction of her family; and her father’s death while attempting to reach Shanghai.

How did you come to create An Evening with Madame F, a musical theater piece on the Holocaust?

In the late 1980s, I started to move away from my career as a concert pianist. I was attracted by the “total performance”

trend in contemporary music and hoped to integrate speaking, singing, movement, dramatic acting, and ultimately playwriting and composition with my solo performance as pianist and singer. In looking for appropriate dramatic material, I thought of creating a piece in which somebody was actually forced to sing and play at the same time. Then I remembered seeing a segment on *60 Minutes* with Auschwitz survivor Fania Fenelon, author of the bestseller *Playing for Time*, who described how she, without any advance notice or time for practice, was forced to come out of the barrack to perform the aria “*Un bel di*” from *Madame Butterfly* for the chief of camp, Maria Mandel, while accompanying herself on piano. That was her audition! I thought, my God, that’s the nightmare that every performer has: you haven’t had a chance to practice, you don’t even know the piece but you have to perform it, and if it doesn’t go well you’re “dead.” The experience of performance under such extreme circumstances fascinated me, and I thought I could depict it in a unique way, *through* the performance mode itself, bringing to it both musical and theatrical skills, along with my Jewish sensibilities.

What was the most difficult aspect of creating Madame F?

Among other concerns, I felt I was betraying my parents’ wishes by “going there.” My father would say to me repeatedly: “This is not *your* story.” He wanted me to steer clear of identification with the “victim,” with immigrant struggles and unhappy memories, and to stay positive. I did not “go there” lightly; it took me nearly twenty years after the revelation to embark on *Madame F*, to feel mature enough—and connected to the Holocaust on a sufficiently deep level—to approach this material.

Madame F raises ethical questions.

Yes. The Madame F character is confronted by an imaginary audience member asking how she feels about having played music for “the amusement of murdering butchers” to gain the privileges that kept her alive. She concedes, “I played and sang and arranged scores, even beat on the drum for the Nazi

killers. Every day I live with this truth.” She feels little if any guilt over having survived by using her art under those conditions; rather, my character is uneasy with herself because she is profiting from a bestselling memoir. But she cannot accept the alternative of remaining silent. At the end, when she relives her rescue at the Bergen-Belsen camp, she spontaneously begins to sing, and her singing builds in power as she realizes, as did many emaciated camp inmates, that she still has a voice. Their utterance of *something*—whether they sang, stated their name, recited a prayer, or merely cried out—is a self-defining existential act: “I express, therefore I am.” It is an embodiment, in the deepest sense, of what it means to be human. So ultimately it needs no justification. I believe it also answers the questions of complicity and profiting raised in the play.

You’ve said that belief in music and art ended for people such as Fenelon.

I cannot speak for her or any other individual who endured that experience. I am fairly sure that faith in musical culture did cease for many in Auschwitz, although it could be rekindled afterward. Some would like us to think that artists and musicians in the camps somehow emerged from the horror revitalized, triumphing in the end; but I think such a notion of “redemption through art” is an awful cliché, sentimentalizing art and potentially trivializing the experience.

There’s one moment in the show when Madame F is singing “*Ani Ma’amin*,” a Jewish affirmation of faith sung by some concentration camp inmates. She is trying to hold onto one note for dear life while her hands are moving mechanically and grotesquely in counterpoint to her voice, playing an increasingly jarring rendition of a piano piece by Schumann...until the dissonant piano music finally overwhelms her voice. This for me is the most important moment in the piece because it is saying that escape through faith—in beautiful music—is no longer sustainable for this woman at this point in her concentration camp experience. Music, which had represented rescue from the barrack, escape through beauty, a form of religion even, is no longer possible in the universe of