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22 November 2023 / Evening of 10 Kislev 5784

Dear Nur, Michael, Martina, Matthias and the wonderful Lebensmelodien team,

I mentioned after the concert that I was still processing what I had experienced at the beautiful concert you put on. As promised, I have been recording voice notes in my phone every time a thought comes to mind. Here are some of these thoughts.

Firstly, I thought the way you chose to include me and Josima's family was just perfect. When my great-grandfather's music was played at the concert in New York in 2011, the organiser made an announcement before the concert and introduced my cousins and me. My cousin Dalia gave a great speech about how her younger sister Shira had interviewed their grandmother for an assignment for school and that that's how they discovered that my great-grandfather's music had been sitting there for 70 years.

But I loved it more the way you did it. After you played my great-grandfather's pieces, I was so moved by and so grateful for how beautifully you all played and sang my great-grandfather's music that I gave you a standing ovation, and you (Nur) came over, gave me a hug, and had me stand on the stage and be recognised by the crowd. Nothing needed to be said to the audience, and anything that would have been said at that moment would have detracted from the moment. It was just perfect. The sounds of silence, broken only by the sounds of applause, were very powerful.

As I told you (Nur) at dinner, I'm not normally an emotional guy. I barely ever cry, and I didn't cry when I attended the concert in New York. I was thinking about what was different this time. Perhaps part of it is that, as you know, my father passed away less than two years ago, and he, of course, was my connection to my great-grandfather. I have such fond memories of singing my great-grandfather's Shalom Alechem and Mizmor L'David with my father and grandmother (whose 25th yahrtzeit was two days ago). In addition, I paid attention to the stories about the composers of the pieces you played before you played my great-grandfather's music, and those were sad, as well. So these factors obviously made the evening more emotional.

But I also think it was because I was very touched by the fact that 40 German children were now coming onto the stage to sing my great-grandfather's music. When you brought me in to meet the students before the concert and told them I was the great-grandson of Shmuel Blasz, the way the students looked at me and said, "Ohhh wowwww," with such kindness in their faces and voices.... I cannot describe how touching it was, and is, that I, my family, and my great-grandfather's music meant so much to a large group of teenagers in the year 2023. They have homework, exams, music classes, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc etc, yet they spent time preparing and practising my great-grandfather's music. So once the kids started coming up to the stage and Gunter Schoß began telling my great-grandfather's story, all the emotion came out.

In addition, the concert in New York was mostly Jewish people. In this case, part of the reason it was so emotional was that a massive, beautiful church full of people who were not Jewish had

chosen to line up outside and come and hear the music of my great-grandfather and of other Holocaust victims and to support me and Josima's relatives and the Jewish people in general in these difficult times and to perpetuate the memory of Holocaust victims – on the anniversary of Kristallnacht. And to have a kind German person (Martina) sitting next to me be the one to comfort me while I was crying and to supply me tissues.... I can't remember another time when I felt so supported and seen and comforted and safe among a group of people.

This feeling of safety and support only continued after the concert. When the concert was over, I wanted to thank each and every person who attended, but obviously that wasn't possible. So I turned to the people who were sitting behind me and thanked them. But one of them, a lady perhaps in her 50s, started crying. I said, 'Are you OK?' She cried even more and said, 'I'm just so sorry about what we did to your family.'

I was touched and didn't know what to say, but I said, 'But *you* didn't do anything!' She said, 'I know, but *we* did.' I gave her a hug and tried to help her understand how much it meant to me that she and 1,200 other Germans had come that evening. I explained to her that we were taught that it's one thing if the descendants carry on the evil ways of their ancestors, but if they don't, if they choose a different path, then they are to be *more* admired than if they hadn't come from such ancestors.

It reminded me of the passage in the Talmud that discusses the apparent contradiction in which one verse in the Torah seems to say Hashem punishes the children for the sins of their fathers (Exodus 20:5) but another verse in the Torah says children of sinners shall not be put to death because of the sins of their fathers (Deuteronomy 24:16).' And the Talmud (in Brachot 7a) suggests that the verse in Exodus is talking about where the children carry on the deeds of their sinful fathers, while the verse in Deuteronomy is where the children do not carry on the sins of their fathers. If the children choose a different path, they are not held responsible for what their parents did! (And even where they do carry on the sins of the fathers, the Talmud says that Ezekiel cancelled what it says in Exodus 20:5).

This story with the lady sitting behind me, as well as all the love and support I felt from all the people who attended the concert, brought back a fond memory from my youth. My father and I were watching a program on TV celebrating Israeli Independence Day. My father, who had to be hid as a 2.5-year old in Budapest when the Nazis came to Hungary in June 1944, smiled and cheered when Arnold Schwarzenegger came to the podium.

My father had never watched the Terminator movies as far as I knew, so I had no idea why he was cheering Arnold Schwarzenegger through the television screen. My father quickly explained that Schwarzenegger had been very pro-Israel and had been very supportive of Jewish causes. I then learned that Schwarzenegger's father was a Nazi officer, and that because of that, my father, and I, admired Schwarzenegger *more*, because he could have followed his father's ways but instead had chosen the opposite path.

And so, in the same way, I can just imagine my father cheering all of you who organised and performed at the concert, the lady sitting behind me, those wonderful German teenagers who sang so beautifully, and all the kind people who attended the concert. That's what I tried to do when I stood on stage and applauded everyone in attendance. I just hope the lady sitting behind me and anyone else who harbours feelings of guilt for what their ancestors did (or didn't do) will someday feel the appreciation I and Josima's half-sister and nephew have and that my father would have had.

Before the concert, I was sitting next to a woman who said she works for Felix Klein, in the government's office tasked with combating antisemitism. Firstly, just the fact that Germany has a

government office dedicated specifically to preventing antisemitism – can you imagine how much that means to Jewish people like me, to learn that such an office exists, particularly at a time when antisemitism is constantly on the rise worldwide? And then to witness the genuine concern in her face and in her voice as she told me about the recent rise in antisemitism in Germany – while it made me sad to hear how bad the problem is, it also gave me such comfort knowing that someone cares so much about my and my people's safety.

One of my Jewish friends in the US asked me the following evening whether the high I experienced at the concert would carry over for a while. But I informed him that unfortunately I was brought back down to Earth the following day, when I went straight from the airport to a class I'm taking on 'Evil, Retribution and Forgiveness'.

My classmates and the professor were proposing that perhaps Adolf Eichmann didn't deserve the death penalty, because they believed he was no worse than other SS commanders, and that perhaps Israel put him to death only to make an example of him. Then a couple of the students went on to note the unlawful nature of Mossad's 'extrajudicial' killings of perpetrators living outside of Israel. It seemed the professor was expecting me to join in the dispassionate, academic discussion about the people who murdered my relatives.

When the class was (thankfully) over, one of the students insisted he show us a new bag he had just bought. The bag had an actual Judenstern prominently displayed on it, with some sort of message above it promoting anti-fascism. How did the professor respond? He said it was an interesting choice to put a Jewish star on a bag, since the star is used in the Israeli flag and may be seen as a political statement.

It's a very small class, and the professor and most if not all of the students knew that I was the child of a Holocaust survivor and that many of my relatives were murdered. We had just taken a trip to the Holocaust museum in Mechelen the week before, and I told the others my family's story. So they knew. But it didn't matter.

I knew that if they were discussing slavery and I were of African descent, they would have understandably been at least a bit uncomfortable, and they would have made sure I was OK with discussing the topic. They also would have been unlikely to argue that one of the worst perpetrators of the slave trade had received too harsh of a punishment. One of my classmates is from an Iraqi family, and I would feel very uncomfortable talking about Saddam Hussein or ISIS in his presence, let alone to argue that Saddam didn't deserve his punishment. But for some reason my classmates don't have the same sensitivity towards me, even though some of them had just been through a tour of a Holocaust museum a week earlier.

And that was, of course, before I had a chance to catch up on the news in Israel and to be reminded that most of the people around me don't care about Israeli lives, or they think that the rape, torture and beheadings Israelis endured on October 7th was '*understandable*' given the 'context'.

I hope you now understand why I appreciate you, your work and your kindness so much and why I hope there will be more thoughtful people like you in the world. You're a light in the darkness, and I hope your light spreads, widely and swiftly.

With warmest wishes and abundant gratitude,

Etan (יְתָן)

P.S. Thanks for accepting this letter in English. I'm sorry I don't know German (yet).