CHAPTER TEN

Ever since Ibrahim ibn Jakub (a Jewish traveler, merchant, and diplomat from Tortosa in Spain) visited Kraków in 965, Jews have been a part of Kraków's rich history. It is almost impossible to believe in light of the Shoah, but Poland was such a haven for the Jewish refugees from Western European persecution during the Middle Ages and early Renaissance that many in the Jewish world at that time even called it Paradisus Iudaeorum, the Jewish Paradise.

Starting in the fourteenth century and continuing until the Holocaust, Kazimierz, an ancient city district bordered by the slow, meandering Wisla River, was the center of Jewish life in Kraków. Many synagogues were built there over many centuries. A Jewish market filled the quarter's central square. There were ritual bathhouses, called *mikvahs*, and so many yeshivas (Jewish schools) that Kraków became one of the greatest centers of Talmudic study in all of Central Europe. Kazimierz was a testament to a seemingly invincible, vibrant Jewish life, in Kraków and in Poland.

It is a twenty-minute walk from the Philharmonic Hall, past Wawel Castle, across a grand nineteenth-century boulevard called Dietla into Kazimierz, but it might as well be a world away. I walked there many times during the period of my music directorship in Kraków. I often found myself in the Renaissance-period Remuh, as it was still the only synagogue still functioning in the city.

But there was another synagogue, not far from the Remuh, but not actually still a part of Kazimierz. It was called the Postepowa or

Templ Synagogue, and it was located on the Ulica Miadowa. It had been built in the middle of the nineteenth century, at the time of a flowering of assimilated Jewry, that is, Polish-speaking Jews who didn't speak Yiddish or knew it only as a second language. The nineteenth-century Jews of the Templ viewed themselves as Poles who were Jewish. They considered themselves Polish patriots, just as much as their Catholic brothers and sisters. They were, they believed, a firm part of Polish society, unlike their coreligionists at the Remuh, who lived largely separated lives.

Walking through the Rynek Glowny, the central square of old Kraków, a member of the Templ would not have thought there was a difference between himself and his Polish Catholic counterpart. A shopkeeper was a shopkeeper. A professor at Kraków's great Jagiellonian University was a professor. A Jewish musician thought himself the same as his Catholic colleague, a dedicated artist who served a great Polish musical institution. Until Friday night, that is, when the Jews of the Templ celebrated the Sabbath together in the Ulica Miadowa. Then they joined their fellow Reform congregants on their day of rest and prayer. Until the Nazis came. The Nazis made no distinction between a Reform Jew and his brother who worshiped at the Remuh. All were condemned, no matter how observant they were.

The Templ was a place where I would have felt at home and my family would have felt at home. But it was now completely empty. The Reform Jewish community, as all the Jews of Poland, had either been killed during the Holocaust or had fled in the political purges of 1968, during which thousands of the survivors of the Holocaust were forcibly exiled from their native land. The Holocaust and the great exile left the Templ cold and desolate when I found it that first time.

I had wandered by it many times, but one day in 1990 my curiosity became too great. I peered in through one of its filthy stained-glass windows; I could see very little of the interior and decided to knock on the door. I knocked and knocked again. No answer. I was about to go on my way when a small man in dusty overalls came and unlocked the door. He was the beadle, hired by the community that now

worshiped solely in the Remuh to take care of this place. It is an exaggeration to say "take care." Mostly, he was there just to keep the doors locked and the leaves swept off the Postepowa's back steps and, I suppose, to keep intruders like myself safely on the outside. But the beadle heard my insistent knocks, looked out through the window beside the door, and decided to let me in.

What I found inside amazed me. The Templ Synagogue is a jewel. It was dusty, dirty, and cold, to be sure, but a hidden jewel nonetheless. Its ceilings are high, with wooden columns topped with flourishes, all in gold. The ceiling too was layered in gold, with gilt-edged chandeliers hanging down almost to my head. These lights would have illuminated the large congregational space, both the downstairs, reserved for men, and the upstairs gallery, where the women sat. In a word, it was grand; if, that is, you could see through the years of neglect.

Behind the *aron-ha-kodesh*, the Ark where the Torah scrolls would once have been kept, I found prayer books piled high in uneven stacks, a disgrace that testified as much to the haste with which the congregation must have fled as to the desultory care the beadle had been providing. The Postepowa was also uncommonly cold, even for that blustery March day. There was either no working furnace or, more likely, there was no coal purchased in those desperate economic times just after the fall of Communism, to stoke the furnace fires.

The walls and everything inside this sanctuary were chilled, and I shivered all the time I was there. I walked outside just to warm up. As I did, I looked up to the steeple at the front of the Templ. There was no Star of David perched atop its spire. The Nazis, who had used the Templ as a stable during the war, had pulled it down, depriving this ghost ship of even the smallest outward marking of its original sacred purpose.

I got it into my head that I was going to warm those walls. I was going to bring life to this place. And being a musician, the gift of life I knew best was music. I decided I would conduct a concert with my Polish orchestra in this place and let its walls resound once more with our living, breathing art.

In order for a concert to take place, however, a certain amount of refurbishing—I wouldn't dare call it renovation—had to take place. Just enough to make it hospitable, perhaps to the point where one could see what needed to be done to return the Templ to its former glory.

But all this would not be easy. First I had to get the permission of the Gemeinde, the Jewish Community Council in Kraków. That meant the Jakubowicz family. They were the arbiters of all that concerned the official Jewish life of Kraków. I approached Czeslaw, the elder of the two Jakubowicz brothers, with my idea of a concert in the Postepowa. His reaction was astonishment, and not a little bit of skepticism. Czeslaw could not remember in the entire history of Kraków's Jewish community a similar concert in a synagogue, especially one involving a symphony orchestra. Not before the war, and certainly not after. This would be a first, Czeslaw exclaimed.

"Concerts in churches—they happen every week here in Kraków. But in a synagogue? Never. Who will come? We are only two hundred here in the Jewish community, and among the very orthodox, they might not approve, so not even all of those will probably attend. And Poles, do you think they will come? You are from New York; you don't know Kraków very well yet. You'll be conducting for yourself. And, do you really think the Philharmonic itself will consent? Most of those musicians have never been inside a synagogue. What will they think? What a strange idea? And anyway, who will pay for this? The Templ is, as you have seen, in a terrible state. It is cold, and unheated. It's filthy inside. No one uses it. But, if you wish, please, by all means. Try your best. I will be there. More than that, I cannot promise."

With that tremendous encouragement (I was happy just to have his permission!) I went looking for assistance elsewhere. And it came from an unexpected source. The United Jewish Appeal was planning one of their frequent missions to Poland. They visit places of former European Jewish culture before going on to Israel. The UJA's goal was to give two hundred young Jews a sense of their heritage. They would be in Kraków in October and generously agreed to support this "Concert of Remembrance and Reconciliation" in the Postepowa

Synagogue with their presence and, importantly, with their subvention. Funds did come from them, and from the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, so that we could at least wipe away the soot from the windows and the grime from the floor and buy enough coal to begin to heat the furnace. Polish Guraly, the devoutly Catholic mountain people of the nearby Tatras were famous for their skill in constructing and repairing the steep-pitched roofs so common in southern Poland. These simple but open-hearted people donated their special expertise to repairing the roof of the synagogue so that it would not leak during our performance.

Ronald Lauder and I had had a previous encounter in another synagogue, three thousand miles away in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. We had both had the honor of meeting the great Lubavitcher Rebbe Rav Menachem Schneerson earlier that year, at Simchat Torah, the Rejoicing of the Torah, a celebration marking the conclusion of the annual cycle of Torah readings, and the beginning of reading the holy book anew. We had been introduced by a Chasidic Rabbi, Chaskel Besser, who was then working for the Lauder Foundation, concentrating on its work in Poland. The Simchat Torah service at 770 Eastern Parkway, the Lubavitch world headquarters, was a noisy, song-filled affair, with thousands of the Rebbe's followers singing and chanting, as the Rebbe himself clapped loudly in strict rhythm and sang along with them in his gravelly baritone voice.

At the end of the service, the Rebbe greeted a line of well-wishers, including Ronald Lauder, Rabbi Besser, and myself. When Rabbi Besser introduced me to the Rebbe, who had been married in Warsaw and fled Europe before the Holocaust, he told him I was the permanent conductor of the Kraków Philharmonic.

The Rebbe replied, "A Yid in Polin! A Yid in Polin! A Yid in Polin!"—A Jew in Poland!, which he kept repeating over and over.

With each repetition he expressed more and more disbelief, and he then gave me a dollar and a bottle of vodka, a huge honor befitting the fact that he had given me his *heckscher* or blessing.

Then the Rebbe added, "You should find Jews in Poland to share this vodka with you. That will be your mitzvah," your good deed.

Right afterward, in June, at the end of the 1989–90 season, I gathered as many Jews as I could in my suite at my hotel in Kraków, and we drank the Rebbe's blessed vodka, according to his command. And now, Ronald Lauder was helping me to share the blessing of the Rebbe even further, by supporting the cleaning of the Templ Synagogue in preparation for this special concert.

These practical matters attended to, I approached the Kraków Philharmonic and said, "I would like to do a concert in the Templ Synagogue. We've done concerts in churches, gone from church to church making our music in spiritual spaces all around the city. Now I'd like to bring a concert to a Jewish house of worship, the Postepowa on the Ulica Miadowa." The director's face was blank. I'm not sure how many of our orchestra he thought had even been to Kazimierz, let alone seen this particular synagogue. So it would be the first time for nearly everyone in the orchestra to perform in a synagogue.

In the end, he asked the orchestra, and they said yes, as I knew they would. We had Notre Dame behind us, and by now, in 1990, our mutual respect as musicians was great; my being Jewish seemed to play little if any role in our artistic relationship. It didn't hurt that by now, a full year and a half after beginning my work in Kraków, I spoke conversational Polish. The Templ Synagogue concert would be just another date on our busy calendar, or so they thought.

Then, I went back to Czeslaw Jakubowicz with the news that my discussions with the Philharmonic, the UJA, and the Lauder Foundation had been successful. Jakubowicz now brought the idea of the concert to the Gemeinde and received their official approval. Now the question arose, besides the two hundred Jews from the UJA and the few Jewish souls left in Kraków, who would attend this event? If you're going to do a concert in this city, it's largely going to be the Catholics who come, and first among them their Archbishop and my old acquaintance Franciszek Cardinal Macharski.

However, when I went to see Cardinal Macharski, he didn't seem to embrace the idea, for reasons I don't really understand to this day. I had had wonderful conversations with him that indicated his understanding of the Jewish heritage of his city. He was a committed

member of the Catholic-Jewish dialogue both in Poland and worldwide. But this concert didn't spark his interest, and he would not be attending. I was crestfallen. I couldn't imagine this historic concert going forward without a high-level presence on the part of the Church. I decided to consult a close friend about the best way to solve that problem.