

CHAPTER



ELEVEN

Monsignor Dziwisz seemed to know why I had come to see him in Rome. Sitting with him in his small office in the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican, I was about two minutes into my exposition about the upcoming concert in the Templ Synagogue, and the “problem,” when he stopped me short and went out through a door to his right. Minutes went by, five minutes, ten minutes—I am really not sure, although the Baroque clock to my left ticked and ticked and ticked incessantly—until I couldn’t think of anything but the time passing and just what had made Monsignor Dziwisz leave so hurriedly, without saying a word.

He came back as suddenly as he had left and said, “Come with me.” I followed him through a corridor in the Apostolic Palace across a narrow foyer and into a very small elevator. We traveled down to an inner courtyard of the Palace where a car was waiting for us. The driver took Monsignor Dziwisz and myself through covered tunnels past traffic lights, some manned by Swiss Guards, passageways I had never known existed inside the Vatican. We went out past the back of St. Peter’s Basilica, past the Vatican gas station, and out a gate to the opening of the Paul VI Hall, the Sala Nervi, which I knew very well from my concert there in 1988.

Monsignor Dziwisz and I exited the car. I followed him only as far as the foyer when he commanded me to wait for him right where I stood. He proceeded immediately to the far end of the foyer of the

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Aula and vanished. The large space was now totally empty. To my right was a staircase. A few moments passed.

Finally, I noticed a figure descending the staircase at a hurried pace. It was my old friend Cardinal Lustiger. He looked at me. I looked at him. He couldn't have been more bewildered. I had no idea why I had been brought at this particular time to this particular place. From the look on his face it was clear that I was the last person His Eminence could have imagined seeing at just that moment there in the Vatican.

"Maestro, what are you doing here?" he said. "Excuse me, but I have no time to see you; I am in the middle of the Bishops Synod. In fact, I am one of the Chairmen of the Synod. And just now, the Holy Father has called me urgently to meet with him."

Sure enough, just as he said that, both of us caught sight of Pope John Paul walking purposefully across the vast foyer in our direction, with Monsignor Dziwisz just behind him. His Holiness gestured with two fingers of one hand for some people across the foyer to come and meet him in the middle, where he had stopped. Cardinal Lustiger knew exactly whom he was pointing to, namely, Cardinal Lustiger. I, however, had no idea to whom that other Papal command was being directed. I looked around to see whether he was perhaps looking for someone else, someone I hadn't seen, perhaps standing just behind me. Finally, Monsignor Dziwisz pointed to me directly: "Maestro, you as well." Cardinal Lustiger and I walked to the middle of the foyer, which had instantly become a restricted Papal space.

I couldn't have stuck out more. There were no civilians here, only Bishops and Archbishops and Cardinals in their various robes circulating around us. His Holiness was dressed in simple white, the holiest of holy garbs. My blue blazer and gray slacks might have been an elegant outfit on normal occasions, but I certainly stood out in the midst of this huge sea of high-level ecclesiastical personages.

The Pope immediately started speaking to me in Polish, with Cardinal Lustiger standing on his other side. "I understand you are planning a concert in Kraków. It's going to be in Kazimierz, yes? Maestro, tell me about it, please."

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“Yes, Your Holiness, it will be called a ‘Concert of Remembrance and Reconciliation.’ It will be held in the Postepowa Synagogue. Not exactly in Kazimierz, but just outside.”

“I know this place,” the Pope said. “I remember that synagogue; is it open? I knew the people of that synagogue. They were professors at the Jagiellonian University, doctors and lawyers.”

“Yes,” I said, “that is the place. It will be opened now. We are doing a small amount of refurbishment to make it fit.”

Then His Holiness asked, “What would be on the program?”

“The Eroica Symphony of Beethoven, the Dvořák Cello Concerto,” I said, “and we’ll begin with Kol Nidre and all three national anthems: Polish, American, and Israeli as well. The program will accentuate the common European heritage of all who might attend. We expect that there would be members of the Kraków Jewish community there.” I paused, then continued, “And many Catholics as well, of course, and there will be a delegation of Jews flying in specially from America.”

Then I told the Pope that I had talked to Cardinal Macharski about it and that it did not appear that His Eminence would be able to come, but I hoped very much that someone from the Church might be in attendance. The Pope stopped me in midsentence and began to translate what had been said between us in Polish to Cardinal Lustiger, in French.

All this time, Cardinal Lustiger had a growing look of astonishment on his face. He had been standing there, listening to a conversation in Polish, a language he did not understand. His family came from Poland, it is true, but they had been Yiddish-speaking, so the Pope’s language with his Maestro was strange to him indeed.

By contrast, my French is certainly good enough to understand what was now being said between these two titans of the Church. The Pope said, “There is going to be this wonderful event in Kraków. It is going to be the first time there will be a concert in a synagogue, and there will be members of the Catholic community there and members of the Jewish community also, and I wish you to go to represent the hierarchy in Cardinal Macharski’s stead.”

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Cardinal Lustiger could not possibly have looked more surprised. He looked stupefied. He and the Pope went back and forth, talking about the date and other arrangements. Finally, the Pope said to me, "You'll keep Cardinal Lustiger apprised. This is a wonderful idea. Please let me know how it goes." And then he was gone. He walked out past both of us, with Monsignor Dziwisz trailing him, into a waiting car.

All during our conversation, members of the Catholic hierarchy, who had seen the Pope leave the Synod, began to leave for their lunch break. They had been walking out through the foyer of the Aula but not very close to His Holiness, Cardinal Lustiger, and myself. They had all kept their distance, watching the end of this conversation, some of them with slight smiles on their faces, bemused, as if they could not imagine what they were seeing. This unknown layperson, gesticulating madly in the face of the Holy Father. The Pope gesturing just as animatedly right back. They were just as surprised by all of this as Cardinal Lustiger had been.

After the Pope left, Cardinal Lustiger and I exited the Aula and went out into the Roman sunshine, making our way to Saint Peter's Square. We walked side by side in silence for the longest time.

Finally, he turned to me and said, "Are you a Galicianer?"

I couldn't believe my ears. This was the Cardinal-Archbishop of Paris asking me about a nomenclature—Litvak versus Galicianer, people of Lithuanian-Jewish descent versus South Polish–Austro-Hungarian Jews—words I had not heard since the Bronx, when my grandmother regularly made such distinctions among her friends. The Litvaks had the supposedly intellectual, cooler heads, while the Galicianers were the more earthy, warmhearted, and wily southerners, who somehow had the gift to do things that other people couldn't imagine. And now the Cardinal-Archbishop of Paris was asking me whether I was a Galicianer.

"No, Eminence," I said, "in fact my family comes from Warsaw, and I guess that would make us Litvaks. But in any case, what do you mean?"

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“Do you have any idea what took place in there? Did you know what was going to happen?” Cardinal Lustiger gently demanded.

“No, Eminence. I did not.”

“Well,” he answered, “I have never seen anything like that in my life. I had no idea you had become so close to the Holy Father. And it just seemed so odd that His Holiness was conversing with you, and then translating for my benefit. Please forgive me, but I am just so amazed by all of it. Your concert in Kraków clearly has gained the Holy Father’s blessing. For that, you should be very proud.”

Galicianers or no, Cardinal Lustiger and I parted ways a few paces farther on. As he left me, he turned and gave me a warm smile as if to say, “Don’t worry, Maestro, we are still good friends”; and then His Eminence walked on through the Bernini Columns, towards the Via della Conciliazione, still shaking his head.