CHAPTER NINETEEN

I knew from my experiences at the Vatican that a concert in the presence of the Pope is astonishingly rare. There are precious few such events in a year, and those who take part in them, whether as participants or as members of the invited audience, consider themselves extraordinarily privileged. The Vatican is not a concert hall, I was often told. So such concerts were very special indeed, none more so than the Papal Concert to Commemorate the Shoah.

We had worked on this event for nearly three years and many of the details had been set, but I felt that there was one more important element missing from our plans.

Some months before our April 7 date, I asked Cardinal Cassidy whether it might be possible for the survivors themselves to be able to greet the Pontiff on the day of the concert. I thought, if there was a chance for these special people, who had suffered so much during the war, to come into personal contact with Pope John Paul II, then the message of our music that evening would be that much more powerful for them. His Holiness' compassion, his empathy, which I knew they would feel as I had, would greatly foster the historic outreach to the Jewish people that the Vatican intended this event to represent. The Papal audience would surely open their hearts to receive the hand of reconciliation that I knew John Paul so fervently wished to proffer.

Much to my astonishment, the answer came back in the affirmative. The Pope would receive the entire survivor delegation of more than 150 in an audience in the Apostolic Palace on the morning of the

Shoah concert. For the Pope to offer his precious time to this group, both at the concert and in a private audience, was extremely rare. It showed just how committed His Holiness was to making this historic day a thoroughgoing success.

At 11:00 A.M. sharp on April 7, we all filed into the Sala Clementina, the largest of the rooms set aside in the Apostolic Palace for receiving guests (and one I had entered for the very first time some six years before). All the survivors and their children and grandchildren entered a meeting they could not have imagined in their wildest dreams when they were surviving one single day at a time at Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor, or Dachau. They drank in the richness of the frescoes and the grandeur of the forty-foot-high ceiling, but they watched even more intently as the Pontiff entered and sat down in his throne before them.

Two of us were chosen to address His Holiness: Rabbi Rudin and myself. Rabbi Rudin spoke of the history of Catholic-Jewish relations under Pope John Paul that had brought us to this great occasion. Speaking in Polish, I thanked the Pope for the trust and faith he had in me to have supported this great initiative through the many obstacles that had stood in its path.

Then Pope John Paul II rose and spoke in English, the second language of so many of the survivors and their relatives present that day. This was the moment everyone had been waiting for. The Pope spoke eloquently about the need to keep the memory of the Shoah alive, not just for its own sake but to ward off the newly nascent manifestations of anti-Semitism, which he said were still alive in the world. He spoke of the "common patrimony," the unbreakable bond, between Christians and Jews. And he quoted the last verse of the very Psalm (133) we would perform in Bernstein's setting that evening: "How good and how pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity." There was silence when he finished. Everyone stood there, drinking in the Pope's perfectly chosen words, which had so clearly come from his heart. Then the applause began. Whether this was proper by protocol, no one knew or truly cared. To a person, we wanted to show our deep appreciation for this man and for all he was doing to make things

better between our two peoples. After some time the applause died down, and we all thought the audience had come to an end.

But then the Pope undertook something that none of us present would ever forget. Cardinal Cassidy gestured for those in attendance to line up, one by one, or by family group, and come forward toward the Pope. His Holiness wished for every single member of that audience, every survivor along with their spouses, their children, and grandchildren, to come to him. To be greeted by him. To be comforted in some degree by his presence.

And so we did, all 150 of us, each waiting our turn to greet the Pontiff. As we did so, in whatever language we wished, His Holiness listened intently and spoke to each of us in our own native language, whether German or Polish, Italian or French. But all the time, in whatever tongue, the Pontiff spoke the language of memory and of compassion. The look on all their faces was one of disbelief that they were being accorded this opportunity and profound gratefulness for the Pope's clearly demonstrated empathy. Some were too timid and merely accepted the Papal blessing. But many told His Holiness where they were from, what camps they had been in, how many of their relatives had died. Pope John Paul stood there and greeted survivor after survivor, sometimes looking them in the eye, sometimes looking down in profound sadness, often seeming to be close to tears. They approached, said their peace in brief, and left with the feeling that the Pope had personally heard their voice, that they mattered, and that he had embraced their ancient pain but also their hope for a better future for all mankind.

At one point, the Prefect of the Pontifical Household, whose job it is to keep the Pontiff on schedule, tried to urge the Pope to move things along. These exchanges had gone on for more than half an hour. But His Holiness insisted on hearing from each survivor who wished to be heard. Last of all, the Family Levine.

When my mother-in-law, Margit, approached the Pope, he reached out to her and greeted her as if their last conversation had been a few days ago, and not almost six years before. He spoke to her softly, with special attention, as she thanked him from the bottom of

her heart for having made this day possible. The Pope pointed to me and said, "Your son-in-law has made great contributions to this day. He has done so much. You should be very proud of him." Then he turned to my wife, Vera, thanked her for coming, and especially for bringing her mother and our children. He kissed first two-year-old Gabriel, dressed in a blue sweater knit for him by his Grandmother Margit especially for this occasion. Then he greeted our elder son David, who was almost too shy in the Pope's presence but who knew at the age of nine how important this day was for his family and for the memory of the murdered relatives whom he had heard about from his grandmother but whose descendants he would never know.

Finally, His Holiness warmly shook my hand, thanked me for bringing him the idea of the Shoah concert, and for helping to make this day a reality—a day His Holiness said he hoped would bring some measure of peace to those he had just met. He wished me luck for the very special performance he would attend that night. And then he was gone.

I believe that audience was as important for the Pope as it was for the survivors themselves. He had seemed eager to express his compassion and his sorrow for all that these men and women had suffered. He had seen what had happened to their fellow Jews in the terrible years of the war whose horrors he had also personally witnessed. He had lost close friends, both Polish and Jewish. He had seen unspeakable acts inflicted by man upon his fellow man, separated from this horror only by the fence of a quarry where he labored in his Nazi-occupied homeland. He seemed to carry with him always that terrible pain.

After the Pope was finally whisked away, we all walked out of the Sala Clementina with a powerful memory of a lifetime and the beginning of a newfound peace. And still, we were only halfway through this unforgettable, historic day.

Our dress rehearsal that morning went off without a hitch. The playing of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra was everything I could have hoped for. We worked intensively, carefully, making our music come alive with well-honed professional care.

When I finally walked onto the stage at the Sala Nervi that evening, the feeling was very different from that of the Papal Concert in 1988. The atmosphere in the Aula was solemn, and not at all celebratory, as it had been the time before. In front of the concert platform was a six-candle menorah: one for each of the six million Jews murdered in the Shoah. Instead of a single Papal throne, as in 1988, this time, in the middle of the hall, there was a Persian carpet, on which there were three equal thrones: the one on the left, I was told, was for President Oscar Luigi Scalforo of Italy, the one on the right, for Rav Toaff, and the one in the middle, no higher than the other two, for His Holiness.

In rows in front, and to the Pope's left, sat the survivors from the Roman Jewish community. They had chosen to wear identifying blue-and-purple-striped bandanas around their necks, with a gold seal across the back. Just in front of them sat the international survivors delegation, with Margit sitting in the first row looking around, seemingly in awe of the whole scene arrayed before her.

A red carpet ran from the Pope's throne to the front of the stage. We had been told that after the performance His Holiness might wish to come forward to greet all of us artists, to thank us for giving our talents for this sacred occasion. And if he did, he would come towards us on this carpet.

A sense of great anticipation ran through the crowd, and through the orchestra and the chorus as well. This would be no ordinary professional engagement. Something extraordinary, something historic was about to occur, and we were going to play our artistic part.

From the back of the hall we could hear the applause start and then grow louder and louder. The hour had arrived. It was 6 P.M. and the Pope, followed by the Chief Rabbi and the President of Italy, were making their way down the aisle to their seats in the center of the Auditorio. Instead of the warm smile that I had seen so often, His Holiness looked extremely serious, as if the weight of this Shoah commemoration were already on his mind, before we had even begun.

I looked just behind the Pope for the familiar face of Monsignor Dziwisz, but he was nowhere to be seen. I had been calling "upstairs"

frequently since my arrival in Rome to begin our rehearsals, only to be told, in Vaticanese, that "he did not respond." I was so disappointed that it appeared he would not be present for this event to which he had given so much.

After His Holiness and his esteemed guests had taken their places and before a note was played, a group of six survivors came forward, one by one, either alone or with a member of their family, to light one of the candles on the menorah in remembrance of their martyred relatives, and all the six million. One of these was Margit. She walked forward, her hands shaking as she brought her candle up to the level of the giant candelabra. I cannot imagine what she was thinking, but the intensity of her expression told me all I needed to know. She had lost more than forty members of her family in the Shoah. Her parents, her brother, all her aunts and uncles, and all their children, save one uncle, had been murdered by the Nazis. And now, here she was in the Vatican, saying a silent prayer in their memory. I watched and wondered where I would find the emotional strength to conduct the concert, so drained was I from the emotions of that moment and the unfolding scene.

When all six candles had been lit, I turned and looked at the Pope. I caught his eye for an instant. He looked back with a sad but grateful look rather than his usual smile of encouragement. But I felt his warmth and support nonetheless. It occurred to me that he too was experiencing the emotion of this moment in a very personal way, and feeling it very deeply. Memories of his Jewish friends lost in the war seemed to be deeply etched in his face as he waited for our musical rite of memory to begin.

I bowed to His Holiness and turned to face the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. There, in this group of musicians, many of whom had traveled professionally around the globe, were faces with lips pursed, heads down, in silent contemplation of what they were about to do. I looked first to Hugh Bean, one of the legendary concertmasters of the British orchestral scene, who had had a long and distinguished career with another of London's great ensembles, the Philharmonia Orchestra. Hugh's musicianship, like that of the rest of

this ensemble, was superb. He had been the concertmaster for the legendary German-Jewish conductor Otto Klemperer, who was himself a Holocaust survivor. Whether that was on his mind or not, his expression the entire evening was one of intense concentration. This evening's music-making would be so much richer for his invaluable artistic contribution. Now it was time to begin our part, to make the music that would be the language of historic remembrance and sacred reconciliation.

We started our concert with Bruch's Kol Nidre. Lynn Harrell, who I know had performed the piece many times before, played fervently, imbuing this special work with all the inner understanding that his teacher, Lev Aronson, had taught him about the pain of his horrific wartime experience.

The greatness of the Royal Philharmonic really showed in the performance of the Adagio from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. This last symphonic opus of Beethoven had always held a special place in my artist's soul. I had conducted this great symphony many times. But here in these hallowed halls, with this audience of survivors and the Pope, it moved me like never before. The RPO seemed inspired as well. This had to be the Beethoven's Ninth of our lifetime. The first violins sang their main theme and its quickened variations in one rich, seamless line; the woodwinds and violas played their hearts out in the song-filled contrasting middle section; and the brass and timpani made their shattering climax as telling as I have ever heard it performed. I like to imagine Beethoven, who was always a son of the Church, smiling down on us, proud of the distinguished part his music had played in our common spiritual journey that night.

We followed our Beethoven Nine with a performance of the Schubert 92nd Psalm, which had been such a vital part of the concert in Notre Dame in 1989. Its Hebrew text seemed a seamless piece of our evening of prayer in the Vatican.

Richard Dreyfuss recited the Kaddish, as part of the Bernstein Symphony No. Three, in a more dramatic way than is typical of synagogue practice, evincing sympathy from this particular Vatican audi-

ence, which included many Jews for whom this prayer was as familiar as their own names.

When it came time for the Bernstein Chichester Psalms, we had our first surprise. Live performance is always fallible.

We are only human after all.

At the beginning of the Second Movement of the Psalms, twelve-year-old Gregory Daniel Rodriguez, the boy soprano, was supposed to begin singing (in Hebrew) the famous words of the Twenty-third Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." His voice should have been heard right after the strumming of a single chord on the harp and the lightest hint of triangle and suspended cymbals. In rehearsal, things had gone exactly the way Bernstein would have wished. We had no reason to expect anything else. Gregory was a solo singer from the Metropolitan Opera, one of the most storied opera houses in the world. He had sung many times at the Met both in live performance and in their famous Saturday afternoon international broadcasts. He was as experienced a young pro as we could find, with a bell-like voice to match.

The rehearsal, however, had been in an empty Sala Nervi. There were no distractions from the musical task at hand. The evening of the concert was a wholly different thing. Instead of the empty chair that had been set out in the middle of the Aula during the rehearsal, His Holiness Pope John Paul II, Christ's Vicar on earth, now sat, not fifty feet away on his throne. Gregory was a devout Catholic, raised in a traditional home and educated in Catholic schools by nuns and priests all his life. To him, all through his school years, the Pontiff had been a beatific picture on the wall of every classroom in his parish schools. Revered, to be sure, but distant. And now he was there, in the flesh, sitting right in front of him.

Gregory opened his mouth at the appointed moment in Bernstein's ancient- sounding music, and not a note came out. Nothing, not a syllable. He stood, staring slack-jawed at the Pope seated on his throne, unable to take his eyes off the Papal presence. A musical bar went by, then two, an eternity of time on the concert platform. There

was not even an orchestral underpinning to distract from the ongoing minidrama, just that lone harp and faint percussion, sounding in imitation of their biblical ancestors. Gregory's silence was going out to millions upon millions of faithful listeners around the world.

I looked into his face, trying to draw his eyes away from the Pope to meet mine. I smiled my best, most comforting smile, and finally, his concentration returned. His beautiful voice came pouring forth and filled the huge Sala Nervi as we knew it would. Gregory still looked dazed, but he finished his performance with aplomb. He had been, in that instant, the innocent shepherd boy of the Psalmist, and not the seasoned professional he had tried so hard to be for us and for the world that night. Luckily, we had recorded the dress rehearsal and were thus able to save the recording for the subsequent delayed U.S. broadcast. His musical reputation was none the worse for wear.

The evening's music-making ended with the hushed a capella setting of the same 133rd Psalm quoted by the Pope that morning in the audience: "*Hine ma tov u manayim, shevet achim gam yachad*"—How good and how pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity. The Royal Philharmonic's muted solo trumpet finished magnificently what was a solemn night of Jewish prayer in the Vatican. A night when musical incantations captured the pain and the hope of humankind, in memory and in quiet confidence, that for this moment, at least, would give reality to the phrase "Never again."

As the applause for our performance faded away, His Holiness rose, solemn-faced but determined to give expression to our common thought. He began to speak in Italian:

"We are gathered tonight to commemorate the Holocaust of millions of Jews. The candles which were lit before us are there to symbolically demonstrate that this hall has no limits. It contains all the victims themselves: Mothers, Fathers, Sisters, Brothers, and Friends. In our memory, they are all here with you. They are all here with us."

After he finished, after all the tears were wiped away, the Pope came forward to greet us all. He received Richard Dreyfuss, Lynn Harrell, Gregory Rodriguez, Don Pablo Collino (the conductor of the Choir of Saint Peter's Basilica), and myself. He gave a special greeting

to Gregory Daniel Rodriguez, patting his young cheek, showing his artist's sympathy as a former performer himself.

Then he came with me on stage, and greeted all the front desk players of the Royal Philharmonic. Some seemed to avert their eyes, as if the meaning of the occasion was still on their minds, and the moment called for humility, above all else.

The Pope put his arm around me and whispered in my ear, in Polish, "*Dziekuje. Dziekuje bardzo*"—Thank you. Thank you very much. The word *bardzo* the Pope enunciated with strong emphasis, looking me in the eyes in a way by now familiar to me, but no less affecting after six years of feeling its underlying powerful emotion. His words were simple yet entirely sufficient. It was all that needed to be said. He walked down the stairs and out of the Aula, having touched us all, and we him, I do so profoundly believe.

Backstage, in my dressing room, I was able to welcome some of the most important figures who had made this event a reality, and who had been with me on the long journey to help it come to pass.

Cardinal Lustiger came and put both his arms on my shoulders, holding me at a slight distance. Tears were in his eyes. I cannot imagine what this day had meant for him. Here was his Church commemorating the martyrdom of his many relatives, most of all his mother, who had been taken from him so early by the horrible whirlwind. "Thank you, Gilbert," he said. "Thank you for this evening. Gilbert, you know, when you first came to me with this idea, I thought you were crazy. Yes, crazy. I really never thought this day would come. But now it has, and it has brought my family together, here with me in the Vatican. My Jewish cousin, Arno, has come here to Rome from Frankfurt. He came to the Vatican on this night to remember with me all the family we have lost. And now, Gilbert, we must go forward. This work is not yet done. Let this be the start and not the finish of bringing us all together. Shalom, Gilbert. Shalom."

Then Cardinal Cassidy came forward and bent down towards me as I sat down, recovering my strength. "Maestro," he said, "thank you. Without you, we would never have even begun this. We would never have started down this path." What a generous statement, I

thought, from someone whose responsibilities to keep Catholics and Jews on the road to reconciliation had made this Shoah concert a journey that was so personally difficult for him.

Finally, after everyone else had left my dressing room, I walked over to Margit, who was sitting quietly by the side, lost in thought. I bent down to her, gave her a big hug, and said simply, "I did this for you." She looked at me with a combination of thanks and deep sadness. She was near tears. She had been waiting so long for such a day, for the Vatican to take note of what she and her relatives had been through. This would not bring them back, but it might bring her some peace. That at least was my most fervent hope. It is what had inspired me and, I believe, the Pope to bring this concert into being.

The next day, I finally reached Monsignor Dziwisz by telephone. He congratulated me for a wonderful concert, apologized for not being present, and said that he had watched it on television from the Papal Apartments. It turns out that Monsignor Dziwisz and the Pope had been doing a bit of spring skiing in the Italian Alps the week before the Shoah concert. Monsignor Dziwisz had somehow managed to wrap himself around a tree. His face was black and blue, and his shoulder bumped pretty badly, but otherwise, he said, thank God, he was intact. The accident had prevented him from attending the concert in which he had played such a vital role.

In fact, Monsignor Dziwisz told me, the Pope wished to thank me in person. He informed me that I would be received in private audience by the Holy Father, the very next day. I had hoped that I would have such an opportunity. Not so much to receive His Holiness' appreciation but to offer instead my profound thanks for his having made this occasion historic by his presence, and for his having trusted me in a way that I am not sure I would have trusted myself, to bring this concert to fruition.

In anticipation—or in hope—of a post-event audience, I had gone the week before to an antiquarian bookshop in Rome's Jewish Ghetto, near the Via del Portico d'Ottavia, just behind the Great Synagogue. It was there that I thought I might find just the right gift of thanks for His Holiness. And sure enough, I did: a very rare fac-

simile of the ancient Sarajevo Haggadah. The Haggadah is the prayer book which we use on the occasion of our Passover Seder. Every Jewish household has many copies of the Haggadah, one for each participant in this special meal. Some Haggadahs are kept in families and used at Seders for years and years. At the second-night Seder we attend every year at the home of the Schiffmans, our close friends in Boston, the Haggadahs are inscribed with our Levine family names, signed year by year, going back to our very first Seder with them in 1984.

There are a myriad of modern editions of the Haggadah prayer book, from Maurice Sendak's beautifully illustrated volume to one with Elie Wiesel's wonderfully annotated, deeply poignant Holocaust commentary accompanying the text. Each Haggadah tells the story of our exodus from Egypt, led by God, and declaims the ancestral tale for each new generation of Jews. For Christians this book is equally important, because the Seder was also the Last Supper that Jesus shared with his disciples before his Crucifixion.

The Sarajevo Haggadah is perhaps the most famous example of this book. It is not just that it is the most wondrously illuminated manuscript in the Jewish liturgical canon, it is also a book with a rich and courageous history all its own. It is thought to have been produced in Barcelona in 1350, in the time of Moorish Spain, a period known for interreligious tolerance among Muslims, Christians, and Jews. After the Christian Conquest, in 1492, this special Haggadah is believed to have been smuggled out of Spain by Jews fleeing the Inquisition. It made its way over the centuries to Sarajevo, then under Ottoman rule and later becoming part of Yugoslavia. In 1941 it was hidden by the Muslim director of the museum in Sarajevo from the Nazi commandant of the conquered city. Finally, in 1992, it was left miraculously undisturbed as unrecognized debris on the floor of the same Sarajevo museum during the ransacking by marauding Serbian armies, who were laying siege to the city during the terrible Balkan civil wars. The Sarajevo Haggadah is thus the very symbol of the survival of the Jews and the Jewish faith, under one despotic ruler after another. And it has been protected along the way, often at great peril,

by the kindness and concern of guardians of the other Abrahamic faiths, Christian and Muslim alike.

Pope John Paul had been deeply moved by the plight of Sarajevo during the civil war. He had attempted to fly into Sarajevo to celebrate Mass and show his support for the besieged population of this multi-religious city, only to be threatened with the killing, not of himself, but of those who would come to worship with him. His compassion for all the suffering citizens of that ancient "Jerusalem of Europe" was clear for all to see. This was a gift that, I felt, would mean the most to His Holiness after our Concert to Commemorate the Shoah. "Never again," for Pope John Paul II, included the citizens of all faiths inhabiting and trying their best to survive in Sarajevo in 1994.

When I met the Pope in the Apostolic Palace, I gave him the Sarajevo Haggadah, now bound in the finest brown leather binding any Roman craftsman could create especially for His Holiness. John Paul held this ancient manuscript and asked me exactly what it was. He looked at me with gracious thanks for having thought to share this with him. In putting it in his hands, I said, "Your Holiness, this is the Sarajevo Haggadah. An ancient version of the book we use every year when we celebrate our Seder." With that brief explanation, a look of recognition came over His Holiness' face. Seder, Haggadah—these were words the Pope already knew.

"You have given me the greatest honor I could ever have as an artist and as a Jew," I said, pausing for a moment as I thought about what I had just said. The Pope looked at me with empathy. I went on.

"Your Holiness' presence made our concert a part of history. It will never be forgotten. No one can ever say that the Shoah never happened. No one can ever say again that the Church does not have the deepest, most profound compassion for the memory of the six million Jews who were murdered. This was your gift to the Jewish people and to the world. I thank you so much for giving me the honor of helping you to bring this to life."

His Holiness was silent. He looked me in the eyes and smiled warmly. Finally, he said, "Maestro, thank you again for all you have

done. That was indeed a most important event. Without you, I don't know how we could have accomplished it."

Then the Pope started looking through the pages of the Sarajevo Haggadah, stopping at this page and then that, drawn as so many others have been before him to the glowing, painted illustrations richly arrayed throughout the manuscript. Leafing through the book, he also asked about the text, and the way he did so told me that this was perhaps not the first Haggadah he had ever seen. The story of the exodus from Egypt is after all a part of Christianity's Bible as well. It's Old Testament. It is the story Jesus shared with his disciples at his Last Supper before his Crucifixion. This was His Holiness' sacred book as much as it was my own.

And in the homes of the Pope's Jewish friends, when he was growing up in Wadowice, there were surely many Haggadahs. Those friends and their families had all celebrated the Seder by taking turns, as all Jews do, reading and singing from their own Seder prayer books. These were friends whose tragic loss he must have experienced with great pain as they were swept up, one by one, in the insanity of the Shoah.

Even as he enjoyed these friendships with his Jewish neighbors, he was pursuing his Catholic education and then his calling to the priesthood. To the young Karol Wojtyla there would have been no contradiction in this. He could have warm friendships with Jews and become ever more devout in his Catholic faith. One thing did not preclude the other. It is said that his relations with his Jewish friends were as natural as those with his fellow Catholics. In any case, that is how I had felt he treated me since the day we had met in his Papal library in 1988. He saw me as a fellow human being to be judged by the content of my character, not by the religion I professed. He even seemed pleased that my Jewish faith burned in me ever more brightly.

Now holding the Haggadah, Pope John Paul thanked me once again. He was clearly moved by this gift, and for that I was grateful. But I suspect he was also reminded of the people of Sarajevo, for whom he had consistently shown such great concern in recent months.

There could not have been a more satisfying conclusion to this Papal Concert. This warm and personal audience, and His Holiness' generous thanks, were all that I could have wished for. The travails of the last three years had been, in the end, worthwhile. I was as content as I thought I could ever be. But then who could have expected a surprise like the one that was about to come my way.