CHAPTER ONE

If all roads lead to Rome, in this story my road began in Kraków, the place that eventually led me to Pope John Paul II.

In 1987, I was in the middle of a series of guest conducting engagements in San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Hamburg, among other cities. For one of these musical weeks, I was scheduled to go and conduct in Kraków. I had heard the Kraków Philharmonic in Symphony Hall in Boston on their 1986 American tour. And my grandparents on my father's side had come to America from Poland. Generations of Levines had lived their lives in Warsaw. I thought it might be interesting, both musically and from a family heritage point of view, so I went.

But I went with great trepidation. My wife, Vera, was born and raised in Bratislava, in what was then the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. The city she grew up in lay just sixty kilometers from Vienna, one of the great musical capitals of the world, but it was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence and an expanse of no-man's-land, which placed it a million miles away, well behind the Iron Curtain. Vera knew the hardships of the socialist East Bloc all too well. She knew what I could expect on my short weeklong sojourn in Communist Poland.

I also knew a bit about it. In 1986, I had spent a week conducting the famed Dresden Staatskapelle. At that time, living and performing in the Saxon capital, now located very deep in East Germany, one of the Soviet system's worst police-state outposts, I had loved the music-making. Who would not? The Staatskapelle is one of the marvels of

the musical world, with a unique tradition dating back to its founding in 1548 and a renowned way of making music. They were an ensemble that had survived the Thirty Years' War and both World Wars, and now they would outlive, they were sure, the Communist commissars. Their music would conquer all.

But my week in Dresden had tested me greatly. The Staatskapelle might have been able to steel itself institutionally, but I was alone against the Socialist system. The walls, and everything else, seemed to have ears. I was followed and harassed by the dreaded Stasi, the East German secret police, even though I was supposedly an honored guest of the German Democratic Republic. I was glad to leave with my body intact, but thankfully, my soul was artistically refreshed.

So I felt a tug in two directions when I went to Kraków. I was anxious about the Communist government and what came with it but at the same time curious and full of anticipation, both as an artist and from the point of view of my family's heritage.

My first journey to Kraków took place in February 1987, but even my stay in Socialist Dresden did not prepare me for my initial impressions in the Polish city. It was incredibly gray. A pall of industrial pollution pervaded everything, blowing in from the east, from belching furnaces of the "workers' paradise" town of Nova Huta, and from the west, from the heavy industries in Katowice. The buses had no antipollution devices and spewed a heavy foulness that trailed along after them for fifty yards or more. They seemed to be running on belching smoke. The nights were even worse than the days. Everyone, it seemed, used soft coal, or peat, for heating, which added soot to the day's accumulation of factory-generated filth. It was no wonder that everyone seemed to have a chronic upper respiratory infection.

Then there was the secret police, a central part of the totalitarian Communist system. Their aim was total control of everyone's life, even the lives of visitors from the West. The secret police kept a close eye on the local population, and a special eye on artistic guests like me. For them, control was everything. When I arrived at the Warsaw airport, I was transferred to an airport hotel. I knew I wasn't supposed to be staying overnight, so I thought that was a bit odd. I was, in fact,

per my itinerary, meant to have transferred to another flight on to Kraków. But all of a sudden, without a word of explanation, I was driven to downtown Warsaw and put alone on the next train to Kraków. I didn't speak a word of Polish, and in those days, few Poles would have wanted to be seen talking with a stranger so obviously from the West. In any case, I was not given a choice in any of this. I was an honored musical visitor to the People's Republic of Poland, but if this is what it meant to be their honored guest, I wondered if everyone would have been treated in such an arbitrary manner. The secret police and the Communist authorities made me know they were in charge right from the start.

Luckily, the train was a nonstop, Warsaw-to-Kraków express. I just sat in my seat and stared out at the Polish countryside, at the sleepy towns, the fallow farmland, and the small stands of trees. The surprising mix of old and new. On a stretch of country road, trucks jostled with heavily laden horse-drawn carts driven by men in pointed triangular hats. Old farmhouses and smaller villages passed by in a blur.

I arrived in Kraków, and through the mists I began to see a city like no other. Even through the polluted haze this place was a marvel. Left intact by the Nazis when they occupied it, Kraków was a city of beautiful architecture: baroque palazzi, moats, and barbicans, and real Renaissance graffiti—beautiful geometric designs painted permanently on the walls of some of the city's oldest edifices. Many of the buildings were crumbling from the chemicals that were eating them away, but they were resplendent with historical detail, nonetheless. It seemed far removed, at least on the outside, from the influences of the twentieth century. At night, when I walked around the city's main square, the Rynek Glowny, everything was very dark and mysterious, and extraordinarily atmospheric. The radiating cobblestoned streets of the city center were dimly lit, seemingly by gaslight. (They were in fact lit by electric lights, but with wattage so low, it felt like a time before the modern age.)

I had never been in a city with so many churches. I had the immediate sense that even in Communist Poland, the Church had unmistakable power. The activity of people hurrying to these churches

on the Sunday after I arrived made it very clear to me that 1987 Poland was as much a Catholic country as it was a Communist country, and maybe much more so.

In that first week, I began looking for my Jewish roots, for something to tell me that my people had once been there. My mother-in-law, Margit Raab Kalina, had had her entire family annihilated in the Holocaust. Her brother and many aunts, uncles, and cousins had been murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau, which is about a forty-five-minute drive from Kraków. I had made a promise to her that if I went to Kraków, which she had not visited since she had passed through its railway station on the way from one horrendous concentration camp to another, that I would go to Birkenau to say a prayer for all her murdered family. I would also try to look for the remnants of the culture that she and her family had represented in prewar Central Europe. She wasn't from Poland; she was from the neighboring region of Moravia in the Czech lands, but the culture was very similar. And her grandparents did indeed come from Rzeszow and Przemyśl in the heart of the province of Galicia, in Poland, of which Kraków is the ancient capital.

One morning I went for a walk from my cell-like room in the Soviet-era Krakovia Hotel to find Kazimierz, the Jewish section of Kraków that had been the home of the Jews for eight hundred years prior to 1939. I went walking, and the first thing I noticed were the synagogues, which are as plentiful in Kazimierz as churches are in the rest of Kraków. Within the space of ten square blocks, there were six or seven Jewish houses of worship. But now, after the Shoah, most no longer resonated with the sound of prayer. One was a museum, open even on the Jewish High Holy Days. Another was used by the city as a book repository. Only one, the exquisite Renaissance jewel called the Remuh, was still functioning as a synagogue, but only barely. I went there for Shabbat services and found a tiny group, made up exclusively of older people, trying to put together a minyan of ten men so that they could conduct their Sabbath service. There was no rabbi, no cantor. At that time, my family and I attended a Conservative synagogue on Long Island where there were four separate services on the

High Holidays, one bigger than the next. At the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services, the main sanctuary held fifteen hundred people. The overflow crowded into the downstairs ballroom, the synagogue's library, and vast tents set up on the Temple's grounds. I was used to vibrant Jewish life. All I found here in Kraków was the Remuh, a beautiful remnant of a near-extinct Jewish heritage.

When I walked through the Jewish Quarter, I saw mezuzahs on the doorframes, not removed but painted over with coat after coat of paint, so you couldn't see that iconic symbol that marks the doorpost of every Jewish home, but you could still see the outline of the small box where the tiny prayer scroll had once been stored.

Unlike the rest of the city, in Kazimierz there was a tremendous silence. People lived there, but ghosts inhabited it, too. And neither stirred. In Kazimierz, I also felt the powerful silence of voices that had been stilled. As I walked back to my hotel, I felt a terrible chill, a painful empty cold, devoid of all human warmth.

The next afternoon, I took a taxi to Auschwitz to honor my mother-in-law's request. I was immediately taken by my Polish taxi driver to Auschwitz 1, which is now a museum. It is the place where everyone goes to see the exhibits: grotesque heaps of eyeglasses that were ripped off noses, of hair that was shorn off heads, of suitcases piled one on top of another with the addresses in Czechoslovakia and Hungary and Romania and France and Belgium still visible. That was terrible.

The numbers in each pile were almost unimaginable.

But my mother-in-law hadn't spent any time in Auschwitz 1. For it was the site of a more antiquated form of barbarism. Hundreds of thousands were martyred there. One by one by one. It is the site of the infamous "Block of Tears," an execution ground where Poles and many others met their tragic deaths. The highly mechanized, twentieth-century innovation in lethal cruelty was to be found at Auschwitz 2. When the Nazis decided they wanted to murder thousands upon thousands of human beings a day, they invented a new and more efficient system, the killing factory at Auschwitz 2, called Birkenau.

So I asked my driver to take me there. He said, "You don't need to go. There is nothing left to see."

And I said, "Yes. I really do. Please just leave me at the entrance. I will come and find you later."

He took me grudgingly to Birkenau. I got out of his taxi, and went through the infamous brick gates through which the railroad tracks once ran: one-way tracks for all those people, for my mother-in-law and many of her relatives. Gates that led to a hell on earth. And millions never made the return journey.

It was a cold, snowy, smoggy, unpleasant day, and I was glad it was so. If it had been a day of sunshine in June, I'm not sure the contrast would have been understandable in God's creation. I walked a very long way along the railroad tracks to get to the first area that I remembered Margit speaking about. The place where she was taken off the train and where the "selection" was done. Some people went to the left, almost everyone to the right. On both sides of the tracks, I could see wooden barracks, some of which the poor Polish people who lived in the villages around the camp had begun to disassemble, because they needed the wood for fuel in the bitterly cold winters after the war. There were still some, though, that were completely intact. I peered inside. They were not barracks; they were more like chicken coops, with floor-to-ceiling stacked shelves and only ten or twelve inches between them, where lice-ridden sacks had been placed for people to sleep on, piled one on top of another. To call them places of human habitation is a gross exaggeration. Humans lived there, so they were indeed a habitation, but they were hardly fit for even a despised animal.

I imagined my mother-in-law there, and I imagined her surviving for months on end. People died every minute of every day, even those who were "selected for life." There were no sanitary facilities, just holes in the ground. People were so close together that if someone had a cold, everyone in the barracks would have a cold, or worse, the next day. If someone had dysentery, everyone had dysentery; if someone had typhus, everyone had typhus. A confoundingly enormous number of people died of disease, so that the Nazis didn't then have to doom them to "special treatment." They only had to burn their corpses. Every

day was execution day, whether one was sent directly to the gas chambers or not.

I walked farther down the tracks and saw in the distance, hidden by some trees, the crematoria. Margit had told me that she had participated in dynamiting the crematoria, forced to by the Nazis in an attempt to destroy the evidence and cover up their horrendous deeds when they abandoned the camp. I couldn't see the ovens as they had been, only the remnants of the death buildings and the red brick chimneys of the furnaces, lying akimbo on the ground, as if they had been dynamited only yesterday. As if the earth would not accept this awful detritus from the foulest human mind and hand.

My mother-in-law, Margit, had always talked about the horrible stench, the stink of the burning flesh that permeated the camp and got into every fiber of what was left of her clothes. It was clear that the odor of death could be smelled and felt for many, many miles around. The wind would have born its terrible message of death in all directions, depending on which way it was blowing. Everyone nearby would have known, though it may have been just too terrifying for them to give that smell a name.

While I was near the crematoria, I bent down and picked up some earth; it was very light, like ash mixed with dirt. Forty years later, there were, incredibly, still pieces of human bone in the loam. I realized in horror that I was walking on graves. Perhaps the graves of Margit's brother, or one of her dozens of cousins and aunts and uncles. Or someone's wife, husband, or most terrifying of all, someone's little child. It was a shattering, smothering dirt that I felt I would never be able to wash away.

I went to Birkenau many times after that, but this was a sobering first day. In February in Kraków, the days are very short, and by four o'clock it was getting dark. I returned to the waiting shabby old Polski Fiat taxi, glad to get out of the bone-chilling cold. I went back to my hotel and felt emptied of all human warmth. God, I wondered, why had I ever come to this place?

But the next day, Monday, I remembered what had drawn me to Kraków in the first place, and what had made me feel I needed to be

there: the music-making. Aside from my mother-in-law and my heritage, I was drawn back to Central Europe for an artistic experiment. As in Dresden, when I was returning to the roots of the Weber and the Beethoven I conducted there, here in Kraków, in Galicia, I was going back to the Austro-Hungarian roots of Mahler and Mozart. With the Kraków orchestra we performed the Mozart D-Minor Piano Concerto, one of the greatest piano concertos by one of the greatest musical geniuses who ever lived, and the Mahler Fourth Symphony, which, strangely, in the last movement sets words describing a child's idyllic vision of heaven. I was so in need of that after what I had seen at Birkenau.

I also felt something very special when I walked through the door of the Philharmonic Hall to work with that orchestra. These musicians, who on the outside were victims of the Communist system, of its pollution and grayness—inside these walls, these orchestral players seemed free. When they walked through the door, they were artists first and political pawns second. They entered sometimes a little bit hunched, but when they came onto their stage, they walked with pride as the dedicated musicians they were. They were inheritors of the great Central European orchestral tradition that Kraków represented. And I was there to partake of it all with them.

Kraków, which was the seat of Polish kings during the "Golden Age" of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and beyond, had a rich musical heritage in Chopin and Szymanowski, but it was also, from about 1800 to 1917, the capital of Galicia province, a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the very heartland that bred Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Dvořák, Brahms, Bruckner, and Mahler. Cracovians spoke German, along with their native Polish, during the whole of the nineteenth century and, it is said, relatively happily so. If the music of these legendary composers is alive in Prague, their works live on vibrantly in Kraków also. The culture is more similar to Vienna than one could imagine. In 1987, Cracovian ladies could sometimes still be seen promenading on Sundays arm in arm up and down on the embankments of the Wisla River under Wawel Castle, as I had seen them do in Stadtpark or Prater in the Vienna of those days.

When I stood on the podium and made music with these Kraków musicians, we needed no interpreter, even though my Polish at the time was nonexistent. My German and my English served us well enough, but it was music, the universal language, that made us understand one another instantly. It is one of the true miracles of my art which never ceases to amaze me.

We started our rehearsals with Mahler's ethereal Fourth Symphony. From the opening gentle sleigh bells, played by musicians for whom *sanie*, as they are called in Poland—sleds drawn by horses with bells around their necks—were still a part of their country's winter landscape, to the glissandi-slides in the violins, which were played so naturally you would never have thought they were a rarely called-for effect, I was hearing a Mahlerian tone-palette as the composer himself might have imagined it. The clarinet sound was different from any clarinet sound I knew, except perhaps in Prague. The sound of the strings was almost edge-less, something akin to what I had encountered in Dresden. It had a glow about it, like the glow you would see in the hearth, in the ash-gray coals that remain after a long quieted fire. These sound embers were very soft and warm, not hot, about to burst into flame. The whole orchestra made a burnished sound, like brushed and polished brass.

This Kraków orchestra was about bringing alive the folk tunes and nature sounds in Mahler, sounds that were very much in the composer's ear, hailing as he did from Margit's Moravia, just south and east of Kraków. These musicians recognized those Mahler folk tunes intuitively, as part of their inchoate musical vocabulary. They didn't play as virtuosically as American orchestras, but they played in a special way nonetheless. One that was their own.

I knew that part of the intensity of my Mahler Fourth that first week, part of the spark of making music in Kraków with that Polish orchestra, came from my visit to Birkenau. Part of the reason I could lose myself in the incredible dreamlike quality of the heavenly aspects of Mahler's fairy tale was that I needed to leave that cruelest of imaginable worlds for the creative one that came out of the same roots, the same imagination, that same soil and culture. I needed to conduct that

magical work of Mahler's that week. It became my salvation, the musical and artistic release for all that I had seen. It was my way of coping, of righting myself after confronting the hell of Birkenau.

This was the gift that this Mahler performance gave to me. Whether the members of the orchestra could sense this, I don't know. But I do know that only the Mahler Fourth could have healed the hole in my heart and soul. It became my saving grace.

For the first time as a conductor, I experienced a personal unity, in an ethnic and religious sense, with the salvation that was represented by my musical and artistic sensibility, in a way I could not have imagined before. Music had never served quite that purpose for me. It was truly cathartic. It was like connecting with the best in life after having seen the worst. From the hell of Birkenau to the heaven of Mahler Four.

The orchestra played the Mozart concerto with a quiet elegance, sitting back and letting the music develop by itself without forcing it. There is much talk these days about original performance practice in eighteenth-century music. Here in Kraków, in 1987, I heard a seamless stylistic line, handed down from generation to generation, which might have been in the spirit of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that Mozart himself would have recognized as his own.

Then we performed the Ives Third Symphony, a very American but also a very spiritual work, and very accessible for Ives, who is one of our most iconoclastic composers. Other orchestras had performed Ives in Poland, and there was, strangely, a vogue for his work. His Third ends with church bells that are supposed to be superimposed on the ending of the work. We had the idea to record the bells from one of Kraków's many spires, and to play them back in the Philharmonic Hall at the work's conclusion. But which bells? There were so many churches. We recorded the sounds of this church and that, and finally found one that really worked. The connection between Ives and these Kraków players was much more than just their church bells, however. They seemed to connect spiritually with Ives, as if the New England Congregationalist organist and these Kraków Catholics felt the same underlying touch of the hand, of a being higher than themselves. They

seemed quietly moved by the religious calm that pervades the symphony's last movement, entitled "Communion," with its sonorous, bell-pealed close.

Much to my surprise, at the end of the concert, Krzysztof Penderecki, a renowned composer as well as the dominant figure in the Polish official musical establishment of that time, jumped up and started applauding enthusiastically. He even led the wonderful European honor of rhythmic applause. His approbation was clear.

Afterwards, at a postconcert reception, Penderecki approached me and said, out of the blue, "Gilbert, this concert went very well, don't you think? How would you like to be Music Director of the Kraków Philharmonic? I believe the time is right."

The time is right?! This was 1987. The tanks had just been removed from in front of the U.S. Embassy after the lifting of martial law. It was not a place for a permanent position for anyone from the West, and certainly not for an American. But Penderecki seemed serious enough, and he kept repeating his idea over and over. I smiled back at him. But I couldn't imagine this would ever come to be. I tried my best to put it out of my mind.