


CHAPTER  
  
TWENTY-THREE

Saturday evening, November 4, 1995, my wife and I were in our kitchen preparing a dinner at our home for our new friend Winnie de Montesquieu and his young son. They were visiting New York, and we had promised to show them the same hospitality in our home that Winnie had shown us when we had been welcomed to his flat in Paris. We had met Winnie when I was conducting the Messe de Minuit at Notre Dame. Winnie is the Baron de Montesquieu, heir to an ancient aristocratic title, and as such was fascinated, he said, to find out how it felt to be the actual person in a family who had achieved a noble rank. I was sorry to disappoint Winnie by telling him that since the nineteenth century Pontifical Knighthoods could not be passed down from father to son. The Levine noble line would most likely stop with me.

Not only were we preparing dinner for Winnie and his son, but my bags were packed and ready in the next room, for I was on my way to the Vatican the very next night. I had a very full schedule planned out in Rome. A meeting with Monsignor Dziwisz, a coffee in the private apartment of Cardinal Cassidy, a meeting with Dr. Solange de Maillerdoz, the Head of International Relations for Vatican Radio, and a luncheon appointment with two good friends at the Vatican, Dr. Marjorie Weeke, the Head of Audio-Visual Services at the Pontifical Commission for Social Communication, and her boss, Archbishop John Foley, the President of that important Vatican office. By seeing

## THE POPE'S MAESTRO

Drs. Weeke and de Mailleroz, I was meeting with two of the most highly placed laywomen in the Vatican's rarified hierarchy.

At some point in our dinner preparations, Vera and I decided to find out what was on the news. What we saw when we tuned in stunned us. Prime Minister Itzhak Rabin of Israel, the 1994 Laureate of the Nobel Prize for Peace, had been assassinated at a peace rally that very evening in Tel Aviv. This was unimaginable. Why would anyone want to do such a thing?! Then we heard that the killer was a fellow Jew, a right-wing fanatic who could not abide Rabin's efforts to bring peace to the Holy Land. I was furious, in shock, and completely uncertain about what to do next.

All through our dinner we debated. Should I cancel my trip, or should I go? But then I was going to the Vatican, not to Israel, and the officials I was going to see were not in the Vatican's diplomatic service. My personal shock and grief would remain just that, personal, whether I was in Rome or New York. I wasn't such good company that evening, but I hoped that the Baron de Montesquieu understood.

The following night I boarded my nonstop flight to Fiumicino Airport, from where I set off straightaway to my home away from home, the ivy-walled Hotel Raphael, next to the Piazza Navona and a mere ten-minute walk from the Vatican. After a quick shower and change I made my way across the bridge over the Tiber and passed the Castel Sant'Angelo, turned left, and walked in the direction of Saint Peter's. Just before entering the Via della Conciliazione, I turned right to find the modern building that houses the Catholic Church's voice heard round the world: Radio Vaticana.

Dr. de Mailleroz greeted me in her cramped office with a wonderful welcome and a broad smile. I was subdued. I couldn't hide from Solange, by now a good friend, that I was deeply troubled by what had taken place in Israel. Dr. de Mailleroz is a refined noblewoman from an important old Swiss family, who had spent many years in Vatican service. Her extraordinary linguistic skills include French, German, Italian, English, and I was sure, some Latin as well. That polyglot nature and her empathetic personality made her perfectly suited to her

## KADDISH

job of bringing the Vatican's message to people around the world. She expressed her condolences, although I am American, not Israeli, and gently went on to our agenda for the day.

Vatican Radio was interested in knowing whether my Church-related concerts of the previous months in Baltimore and Saint Paul, which had already been broadcast in the United States, might be suitable for worldwide distribution via Vatican Radio. Solange wanted to know whether I was happy with the musical level of these performances. She wanted my approval before going ahead with the necessary contractual arrangements for broadcast.

My answer was that I couldn't have been more pleased with the Baltimore Symphony and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. If everyone else was happy with the technical aspects, I told her, I was certainly happy to see them shared worldwide.

My next official meeting, a rather informal get-together with Cardinal Cassidy, took place in his large elegant apartment, just inside the Vatican, in the building which had once housed the Holy Office, the dreaded Inquisition that had terrorized church heretics and my Jewish forebears for hundreds of years. Putting that history firmly out of my mind, I rode the elevator up to His Eminence's apartment and was shown into his drawing room. His Eminence walked into the room, his arm outstretched.

"So wonderful you have come, Maestro. I am so pleased to be able to welcome you to my home," he said, smiling broadly and openly, as Australians seem to be so able to do.

We had not seen each other since the Shoah concert of 1994, and the Investiture of my Papal Knighthood. This private coffee was His Eminence's most personal way of saying "well done" once again.

We talked for three-quarters of an hour about the change in Catholic-Jewish relations since our event in April 1994. We reminisced about the event itself, and laughed now about the near misses—mistakes we had thank God avoided, which could have proved so detrimental to our cause. We even talked about music, a love His Eminence and I could share with ease. But most of all Cardinal Cassidy

told me of the incredible beneficial effects our concert had had on his work with the Jewish community worldwide.

"The issues still remain difficult," he said in his easy, Aussie-inflected English, "that's for sure. They're not so easy to solve after hundreds of years. But it's like we are brothers and sisters now, engaged in a back-and-forth. It can get pretty heavy still, but it never gets angry, like it sometimes did before. It's what the Holy Father has always wanted, I believe. A dialogue where we could air our differences, and move towards some sort of reconciliation. The Shoah concert has been a great help in all this. And, as I said after the event, we would never have started with that concert if it hadn't been for you."

At the end, when I was about to leave, Cardinal Cassidy said, "Terrible about Prime Minister Rabin! I thought we were finally getting somewhere. Please do say hello to Monsignor Dziwisz for me." I looked at him, just a bit puzzled. How did he know where I was headed? I wondered, but then I knew. I didn't have to ask. This was the Vatican. It was like a small village, and everyone knew everything about everybody, or so it seemed.

I took the elevator down to the bottom floor, and fairly ran across the back of the Vatican, passed three sets of Swiss Guards and the Sediari to get to my five o'clock appointment with Monsignor Dziwisz in the Apostolic Palace. Out of breath, I arrived in his small office, by now so familiar, and waited for the clock to strike the hour.

When he walked through the door at the rear of the room, he too wore a broad grin. This was the first time we had actually seen each other since my knightly investiture. He congratulated me, staring at the rosette, the symbol of my noble rank, that glistened in my lapel. Then he too mentioned Prime Minister Rabin, as if feeling my anguish.

Diffidently, I asked, "You know, Monsignor, I am sure this is not possible, but it would mean so much to me to be able to thank His Holiness personally for the extraordinary honor of this Knighthood. It is not at all necessary. There is nothing in particular for me to discuss with His Holiness just now. But I feel I owe him so much."

Monsignor Dziwisz looked at me for what seemed like a very long time. I returned his gaze, thinking how serious he seemed, that

KADDISH

something else entirely seemed to preoccupy him. I feared I had asked too much.

Finally, he said to me, “Maestro, can you come tomorrow to Saint Peter’s? His Holiness will be there. Please come to the side entrance of the Basilica, the one on the south side. Someone will be waiting for you there at 12:30 P.M. I believe His Holiness will see you. Maestro, *a domani!*”

I was so pleased with the news that I might possibly be seeing the Pope that it took me a while to realize just what might be in store. For the first time in all my years of knowing him, if I met His Holiness the next day, I would not be seeing him in the Apostolic Palace, or in the Aula Paolo VI, but at Saint Peter’s Basilica. Then I thought, what had Monsignor Dziwisz meant when he said, “I believe His Holiness will see you”? I was concerned about the serious look on his face. He clearly had something on his mind. He didn’t need to share it with me, of course. Only the Pope would finally decide. But my nervousness grew with each passing hour. It would be difficult to sleep that night.

The next day, at the appointed hour, I presented myself at the South Portal of Saint Peter’s. I was met there by an officer of the Swiss Guard, who walked me through a covered hallway away from the entrance, out underneath Bernini’s magnificent Monument to Alexander VII, across a short open space to the large wooden organ works off the south side of the apse of the Basilica. I was now just a short distance from the Baldacchino, the stunning canopy above the Papal Altar that dominates the middle of the largest church in all Christendom. There I was left alone.

I could hear the singing and recitations, resounding off the Basilica’s hard stone floor, of the Papal Mass being said at the funeral for a Cardinal who had died a few days before. If I craned my neck to my right, I could see His Holiness in white vestments and the many high-ranking Vatican Cardinals in their bright regalia celebrating the Mass along with him. In the front rows of the Basilica were many, many Bishops and Archbishops, some of whose faces I recognized but many, of course, I could not. This was a very High Mass indeed,

## THE POPE'S MAESTRO

an important Church occasion. Obviously. I just had no idea at all what I was doing there.

Up until that day, Saint Peter's to me was a beautiful architectural marvel filled with superb treasures: Michelangelo's *Pieta*, sculptures by Bernini, and so many others. I had visited it many times while I was in Rome but always as a tourist. But I had never attended a Catholic Mass here, let alone one celebrated by His Holiness, and I felt somehow that a mistake had been made. Perhaps I was in the wrong place after all, regardless of what Monsignor Dziwisz had asked me to do.

I waited some twenty minutes for the Mass to end, and the Papal party to recess. His Holiness walked by me with three priests in attendance, Monsignor Dziwisz among them. Neither the Pope nor Monsignor Dziwisz looked my way, nor would I have expected them to. Then the Pontiff and this very small retinue came to a point just ahead of me, turning right towards a marble wall opposite where I was standing. An unseen hand opened a door in that marble wall, a door that had not before been visible. The Pope walked through this door with his short priestly train in tow. No sooner had the marble door opened than it closed again, leaving no sign that there had ever been an opening in that stone wall at all.

Meanwhile, the Cardinals, followed by the Archbishops and Bishops, continued to recess. Among the Cardinals were several whom I knew, including Cardinal Cassidy. As His Eminence walked by me at a stately pace, he turned and caught sight of me, standing by the side of the organ. The smile that had greeted me the day before in his apartment was now all but gone. Instead, he looked at me as if to say, "What are you doing here? This is not your place." I looked back and opened my arms with hands held out as if to say, "Beats me! I have no idea!" He half smiled back, still clearly puzzled by my presence.

Finally, when everyone had left, when all the dignitaries had exited Saint Peter's, I turned to the officer of the Swiss Guard, who was still standing watch, although whom he was guarding was now not so very clear. He stood between me and the door in the wall that was no longer there, and said not a word.

KADDISH

I got his attention. “Perhaps I should go,” I said. “His Holiness is clearly very busy now. I can come back another day. Whenever he wishes. Or not at all ...”

The Swiss Guard quietly said, “Please wait here. Maestro, it was requested that you remain right here.”

Five minutes went by. Then ten. By now, the Basilica was completely silent. Every last person, whether priest or worshiper, had long since left. I grew smaller and smaller as I shrank with the embarrassment of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But still I waited, feeling more and more curious.

At last, the invisible door in the marble wall opened once again. Monsignor Dziwisz peered out from behind the door and signaled me with his index finger to follow him back inside. I felt like looking around to see whether there was someone else behind me. This just didn’t feel right. But I trusted Monsignor Dziwisz completely, so I followed him inside.

When I walked across the threshold, I found myself in a very small chapel filled with light, despite the curtains that covered all the windows. Three priests and His Holiness were gathered in a room not bigger than an intimate study. On the far wall of windows to my left stood two priests: Monsignor Piero Marini, the Pope’s liturgist, and Archbishop Dino Monduzzi, the Prefect of the Pontifical Household, whom I had come to know during the preparations for my Papal Concerts. They both looked at me as if to say the very thing that was on my mind: “What on earth are you doing here?”

Monsignor Dziwisz, however, knew why I was there. He welcomed me warmly, and I could tell he wanted me to feel at ease here in this most private and sacred space. I suddenly felt as if I were in the Holy of Holies, that place in the Temple in Jerusalem where only the Chief Rabbi could enter, and only on Yom Kippur. True, I didn’t see the golden cord that the Chief Rabbi let out behind him so that he could be rescued from his encounter with God. But the marble door that was not a door gave my imagination room enough to run.

In the middle of the chapel, his hands clasped in front of him, his eyes tightly closed, sat His Holiness, deep in prayer. He seemed

## THE POPE'S MAESTRO

oblivious to all that was going on around him. He certainly took no notice of me as I entered, as quietly as I could.

Monsignor Dziwisz gently guided me towards the praying Pontiff. He carefully positioned me so that I was looking directly into the face of the Pope, and not towards the figure of Jesus on the cross that hung on the wall of the chapel.

I stayed looking into the visage of the Pope as he prayed to his Christ for a very long time. The room was completely silent. No one moved. I could hear my own breath. The Pope prayed silently, not even moving his lips. I found myself drawn deeper and deeper into him, into his prayer. At the same time, in some mysterious way his prayer was becoming my own. I searched my litany of Jewish prayer, then silently said the Kaddish, that ancient prayer in Aramaic that His Holiness' Savior would have said over and over in his daily life as a pious Jew. But soon after that I ran out of worded prayers.

As I stood there, moment following moment, my prayer turned with seamless ease into pure music, the real and true language of my spirit. I imagined in my mind's ear the most beautiful music of God. And then I thought of a place in the Adagio of Bruckner's monumental Symphony No. Nine, the most spiritual work of that most spiritual of all composers, a work Bruckner himself had dedicated to "A Loving God." In this passage, about midway through, aching high strings descend against a rising bass, forming the sonic image of peace in sound. This music now sang in me so strongly that I thought that it must be filling that small sacred room to bursting, that everyone in that chapel could hear Bruckner's immense heart-filled voice. All must be hearing what I was hearing, its placid, soulful call to God. I was lost in this powerful reverie for what seemed like an eternity. The music soared, on and on.

Then, as the Pope was moved from his sitting position to one of kneeling at a prie dieu, Monsignor Dziwisz moved me sideways, inching me forward just enough so that I would remain in my position gazing at the Pontiff. By now the Bruckner Adagio's fluted voice had all but stopped, replaced by silent prayer and, then, by stillness itself. In this stillness, I imagined myself not as one man alone, but it was as



KADDISH

if I had been accompanied here, in this Papal Chapel, by millions and millions of my fellow Jews. My mother-in-law, the six million murdered. And the millions of my forebears, who could not have imagined this moment when I, a Jew, would be praying silently with the Vicar of Christ on earth in his Holy of Holies, in Saint Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in Rome.

At last, as if breaking our silent trance, His Holiness was finally helped to his feet. He walked over to me and grasped my hands, looking deep into my eyes. He looked at me with such a penetrating gaze, in fact, that I had to look down, almost ashamed of how small I felt next to him in that room.

Finally, the Pope asked, "With him gone, can there be peace?" The question hung in the air, seemingly for an eternity. I sensed immediately that he was referring to Prime Minister Rabin, but he must have known I could not possibly have an answer. I don't really believe he was asking me. It was the question on his mind and in his prayers that day. But I was surely not the right one to ask. He continued to look at me until I finally raised my eyes to meet his.

And just at that moment, as quiet as it had been before, that small room suddenly became alive again. His Holiness looked at my rosette and proudly congratulated me on my Knighthood. I showed him a video of the Papal Concert to Commemorate the Shoah. I had had so little inkling of what was to happen that I had brought it with me to my Papal audience that day. The Pope seemed pleased and took the gift, quickly handing it to Monsignor Dziwisz. He thanked me again for the concert. I in turn thanked His Holiness from the bottom of my heart for the incredible honor of the Knighthood but even more for the privilege of having been entrusted with the Papal Concert to Commemorate the Shoah. His trust was more valuable than all the honors in the world.

Our friendly conversation went on for a bit. The Pope inquired, "Maestro, how are your sons doing?" Then, he asked me to remember him to my mother-in-law, Margit. "Please tell her that I pray for her." His Holiness smiled strongly, his smile reaching all the way inside me, as if he knew just how moved and how shaken I still was by what had

## THE POPE'S MAESTRO

just occurred. And as quickly as that, the Pope and his retinue were gone.

I found my way out of Saint Peter's and across the open space, passed the Vatican Gas Station to the Palazzo San Carlo, where Palestrina, the great Renaissance papal court composer, had once lived and where my friends Dr. Marjorie Weeke and Archbishop Foley now worked. I plopped myself down, exhausted, in a chair in Marjorie's office and said, "You won't believe where I have just been, and what I have just experienced." After knowing me and my relationship to the Pontiff, I am not sure anything would have surprised Marjorie. But this experience clearly did.

Over lunch at a favorite restaurant, I Quattro Mori, just outside the Vatican walls, I related my encounter with His Holiness that morning after Mass. Marjorie said she had had no idea such a chapel existed. His Excellency Archbishop Foley, who had been present at the Mass, said he knew that it existed but that he had never seen it himself. I was left with many, many more questions, but in the end they came down to just one.

Later that afternoon, still very much in a daze, I called Monsignor Dziwisz on the telephone. I asked simply, "What was that? What happened in the Pope's chapel this morning?"

"Maestro, don't you know? We both pray to the same God." I thought I could see him smile through the phone, a warm smile of compassion for my still bewildered state. Then he said a fond "*Buona sera, Maestro, a la prossima—until next time*" and rang off.

The next day I was back on a plane to New York. I believe we did in fact touch down at Kennedy, but I was still up there in a daze for many months thereafter.