CHAPTER

THIRTY-ONE

In 2001 my son David was a junior at the nonsectarian Saint Ann's School "for talented children," as they described themselves, in Brooklyn Heights. Usually, he would take the subway to school, about an hour door-to-door, as he never ceased to complain, from our home on Manhattan's Upper East Side. That Tuesday, September 11, 2001, I felt sorry for him. He had slept in just a little, and begged me for a ride to school. So we set out onto FDR Drive, which runs down along the East River, crossed the Brooklyn Bridge, made the little jog left and then a right turn into Brooklyn Heights, reaching the Pierrepont Street main classroom building of St. Ann's at about 8:00 A.M.

I kissed my sixteen-year-old scholar a quick good-bye and drove north, bucking the morning rush hour traffic back across the bridge, reaching the Manhattan side again at about 8:25. I marveled at the dazzling clear-blue sky of that late summer morning, and the stark, thrusting skyline of the World Trade Center towers and their sister skyscrapers clustered in the financial district of lower Manhattan. I buzzed straight back up the FDR, arriving at my home at about 8:45 A.M.

No sooner had I made my second cup of coffee and begun a slightly delayed perusal of that day's *New York Times* than Vera called me from her midtown office in a panic.

"Gil, turn on the television now," she said. "A plane just flew into the Twin Towers. I can see the smoke from my office. It's awful!"

I turned on the "Today Show," which had remained on the air past its normal cut-off time, and saw their cohost Matt Lauer and his crew looking on in horror, the NBC cameras fixed on the inferno that had transformed the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Just after I tuned in, at 9:03 A.M., a shadow cut across the middle of the television screen, appearing from just behind the South Tower, and a huge fireball erupted, spreading plumes of white ash out from the point of impact in all directions. The South Tower began to smolder, and then burn, with terrible, thick black smoke billowing now from both towers. As the towers burned, black dots could be seen falling from the windows. Occasionally, a close microphone would pick up a loud thud as one of the dots hit the pavement below. The dots were people, who were choosing a quick death over the slower, unspeakable fate of burning alive. Within an hour and a half, both towers pancaked, folding in on themselves. Businesspeople and janitors, restaurant patrons having breakfast in Windows on the World, and incredibly brave firemen and policemen going the "wrong" way, into the towering inferno, would all perish in a few short moments.

Everyone who saw it, I believe, will never forget it. They will remember exactly where they were, whether they were watching from halfway around the globe in Hong Kong or London, from San Francisco, or from the Vatican. September 11, 2001, felt like November 22, 1963, when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, a moment frozen in time and a day that would have grave consequences far beyond what was clear at the instant it happened.

But from where I sat, from where Vera and every other New Yorker was sitting that day, this wasn't Dallas in November 1963. This wasn't an assassination of a President; it was an attack on all of us. It was about our families. Our loved ones. Friends and colleagues in the towers, in the financial district, around the whole southern end of Manhattan; and to us, in our family, it was about our children, one just across the East River in Brooklyn Heights, and one uptown in Manhattan.

Vera and I were panic-stricken. First, what about our David? St. Ann's is so close! Is he safe? How would he ever get home? We called

him on his cell phone but couldn't get through because at the instant of the second crash, cell phones stopped working.

Vera called the landline at the school again and again, and of course the line was busy. Then we called our younger son Gabriel's school, Hunter College Elementary at Park Avenue and Ninety-fourth Street. He was far from lower Manhattan, but we had to make sure he was OK. No answer there, either. Everyone, it seemed, was, like us, in panic mode. It would be hours before we could get in touch with either of our children. Those hours for us, as for so many millions of New Yorkers, were terrifying.

In the end, the Levines were all safe, thank God. But the atmosphere in both schools had been one of confusion and fright. What about the parents of the kids in both schools who worked in the World Trade Center itself? What must these children have been thinking? What panicked screams must have echoed all across those school corridors and cafeterias, where the kids were gathered as they were told the news and terror struck their hearts as they wondered whether their dearest loved ones had lived or died. Were they late to work that day, and now safe, or were they early birds, eager to get to work, and therefore condemned?

Although the bridges and the subways were closed between Brooklyn and Manhattan, at least for the first few hours, David had been allowed to leave St. Ann's and go to a friend's house in Brooklyn Heights, where he was able to call both of us on a landline. Eventually, in the very late afternoon, he made his way home, flecked in ash from the burning towers, which was blown south across New York Harbor, towards the Promenade in Brooklyn Heights. He and his friends, and just about everyone else in the neighborhood, had gathered along the river to watch the ongoing tragedy unfold not a mile from where they stood.

For days thereafter, even all the way uptown where we live, a slightly sweet odor permeated the air. I immediately thought that it might be smoldering flesh, charring in the incessant fires that burned day and night beneath the wreckage of the towers. The deeply penetrating smell lasted for almost three weeks after the attacks. Even with the windows closed, I could not keep the smell outside.

My visits to Auschwitz came to mind. That seeming smell of flesh on fire was like nothing I had ever sensed before. But my imagination ran to what it must have been like fifty-five years ago, when the Birkenau ovens were going full blast, twenty-four hours a day, for months and months at a time.

American flags were hung from every building in Manhattan and all across New York. The sight of our proudly waving flags and the smell of what I took to be burning flesh made for terrible, complex sensory overload. In the first days after the attacks, everyone seemed to be out in the streets, searching for open markets, open restaurants. Or just wandering the streets trying to find cleaner air to breathe. As I walked in my neighborhood, I constantly drew in that smell of death. There was no getting away from it; it was suffocating. But Manhattan was sealed off. We were trapped, at least for the first few days.

Most important, though, we were all safe. We could stroke our sons' hair and thank God we were all together. Then it began to sink in. They had killed in the name of God. Our same God. The God of Abraham. They had chanted *Allahu Akbar*—God is Great—as they blew themselves and three thousand of their fellow human beings to smithereens. How could they have done that? What God would demand such an act?

"Maestro, don't you know, we pray to the same God," Bishop Dziwisz had said to me that November day six years before when I had prayed with His Holiness in his private chapel in St. Peter's. Was this that same God? It must be. But what kind of god could hear such a supplication as a way to find redemption through the death and destruction of the attackers' fellow human beings? That His adherents would invoke His name in the moment of committing such heinous crimes was incomprehensible. How could one kill in the name of God? What could the Pope be thinking now?

Almost immediately, I began to think about what the answer to those acts of unthinkable inhumanity might be. Not an answer for everyone, but for me. I am a musician—first, second, and third. As my teacher Nadia Boulanger used to ask, "What would you say you are if you are awakened in the middle of the night? What would be your

first thought?" A musician, I am sure, would be my answer. So for me, the opposite of all that madness, all the hatred, was music. The sound of terror, of metal on metal, and the horrendous noise of the buildings' collapse and the thud of flesh on concrete, could only be replaced by the musical sounds of peace. I had to find the right musical spirit to fill this terrifying terrorist void.

I called the Vatican and told Bishop Dziwisz I would come as soon as I could. That wouldn't be so easy. Travel was restricted for some time, but within a month of the attack I was in Rome, asking how I could help in whatever His Holiness' answer to this barbarity might be.

The Pope had spoken about little else. At his Wednesday audience on September 12 he spoke out against intolerance, and for peace. Peace was the only answer. He did so again and again, on every occasion he could find thereafter.

A month later, on October 11, 2001, he told the Synod of Bishops gathered in the Sala Nervi, the Auditorio Paulo VI, where I conducted my concerts at the Vatican: "It is now one month since the inhumane terrorist attacks which occurred in different parts of the United States of America. We implore tenacity and perseverance by all men of goodwill continuing on the paths of justice and peace."

He would not stop passionately promoting the cause of peace; if there was even one person within the sound of his voice, the Pope wanted to be heard. And of course, there was not just one; there were millions. But he believed the message needed to be repeated over and over again until every person on earth had heard his plea.

As I spoke with Bishop Dziwisz again and again, we discussed the possibilities for a musical event. Finally, after more than six months of back-and-forth, I came up with a plan that I thought His Holiness might feel was appropriate.

"Excellency," I said to Bishop Dziwisz, "I want to conduct a concert in Kraków, a city the whole world knows is so close to the Pope's heart, on the occasion of the first anniversary of 9/11. It should be held in one of the magnificent churches there, and broadcast from there, throughout the world. His Holiness would, I imagine, offer a

message on that important day, and his words could be sent out just prior to our musical offering for peace. Words of peace, followed by music of peace. Music for tolerance and mutual respect for all God's children. I remember your words so well, Excellency. 'We pray to the same God.' That would be our theme. What do you think? Might this be the way to add a musical dimension to His Holiness' constant plea for peace? I want to add my voice to his as best I can."

Bishop Dziwisz didn't hesitate. "Yes, yes, I think this might be very good. Kraków. Yes, I think His Holiness might well like this idea."

"Then, please, Excellency, ask His Holiness whether we should go ahead with this. I am ready to do all I can to realize this project."

It was now nearly midwinter in 2002. By this time, my private meetings with the Pope were becoming less and less frequent. "He cares for you greatly, Maestro," Bishop Dziwisz would say. "Do understand, but His Holiness' energy must be guarded so very carefully." I was not blind; I saw what the world was seeing. The Pope's health was not what it had once been. And in any case, my relationship with the Pope had become such that we could easily and transparently communicate through the good offices of Bishop Dziwisz. By now, after thirteen extraordinary years working together, Bishop Dziwisz and I had become close friends. My trust in him and his clear and direct relation of the Pope's sincerest wish was, by now, complete.

A week later, not being able to wait even one day longer, I was on the phone to Rome.

Bishop Dziwisz told me, "Yes, Maestro, the Holy Father wishes me to tell you that this idea of yours, a concert in Kraków to remember the victims of September 11, would be welcomed most warmly. It is up to His Eminence Cardinal Macharski, of course, to make all the necessary decisions, but what would you think of the Church of Saints Peter and Paul? His Holiness has a deep connection to this church. He celebrated Mass there many times during the period when he was a priest in Kraków. You know this church, I think. You have conducted there before, no? The acoustics are OK, are they not? And although the church is undergoing renovations, I believe they are almost complete. In any case, I have already spoken with Cardinal Macharski. He

is awaiting your visit to Kraków to speak about all the details. Call me at any time to keep me informed."

Two weeks after that, I was on my way to Kraków to see how our idea might proceed.

When I met him in his office on the second floor of the Curia Metropolitana down the street from the Philharmonic Hall, Cardinal Macharski told me straight away that he welcomed the initiative, coming as it did with such a strong Papal blessing. And, His Eminence thought, the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, while not nearly so magnificent as Saint Mary's Basilica, nor as historic as Wawel Cathedral, would, as Bishop Dziwisz had said, make a wonderful location for our concert.

From the Cardinal's office, I went to the Consulate General of the United States. Within minutes of raising the Pope's idea with Consul General Siria Lopez and her staff, I had the support of the United States. Siria thought this would be great for Polish-American relations and that her colleagues at the U.S. Department of State would help in any way they could. She would even approach the Polish authorities to gain their approval as well. This was all music to my ears.

Everything now seemed to be settled. The date, of course; the place. The support of the Pope, the approval of the Cardinal, the warm welcome of the U.S. government, and the promise of Polish government involvement. It seemed that everything was all set to go. The only problem was that I had no orchestra and no choir, no television, and most of all, no money to pay for any of it. With mere months to go until 9/11/02, just about everything was in fact still very much up in the air.

On my way back from Kraków I stopped in Munich to see a wonderful new friend, Helmut Pauli, who had been introduced to me by Frau Dr. Ulrike Hessler, with whom I had worked on the Concert for the Victims of the Holocaust in Munich in 1995. Helmut was a highly successful concert impresario in Germany; his tousled hair above a round and friendly face made him look younger than his middle-aged years. Beyond his music business he was a man fully dedicated to the concept of a United Europe, the European Union.

The moment I told him about the idea of a European concert to commemorate the terrorist attacks of 9/11, of the blessing of the Pope, the offer of the church in Kraków, and the U.S. and Polish interest, he was off and running with many ideas of his own.

"Maestro, what if we were to make this an event of the European Union, offered in solidarity with America?" Helmut said in his mellifluous German. "What if we were to find a European orchestra and a European choir? Perhaps they could actually donate their services to this cause? I don't know if you are aware, but I am the head of something called Europamusicale. It is the musical arm of the European Union. I like your idea; I want to help. I believe I can do this." In Helmut's enthusiasm I met my own. I was ready to believe anything he said.

It was now July. We had not more than two months to go before 9/11/02, and both of us had busy schedules of "regular" concerts ahead. Helmut organized an extensive series of concert offerings in various cities in Germany for the coming 2002–2003 season, and I had a whole host of concerts in my normal concert calendar as well. I was especially looking forward to a season-opening gala concert with the Montreal Symphony later in September. Helmut and I were both a little crazy for running with this ball.

Over the course of the next two weeks, Helmut contacted various orchestras with which he had close relationships. An astonishing number of very reputable European ensembles were ready to join us and, as Helmut had promised, wanted no fee at all. To me, though, none of the orchestras he named seemed to be right for such an important concert. This event was to be broadcast worldwide. The musical forces had to be world-class. Many times, as we spoke on the telephone between Munich and New York, I could hear Helmut's exasperation with me grow and grow.

"Maestro, what do you expect?" he said more than once. "That an orchestra of world stature will suddenly just happen to be free on precisely the date we need them?" And each time he suggested yet another orchestra, one he had most carefully chosen, I would most politely demur.

"OK, Maestro, let me just say this. The Vienna Philharmonic. Great orchestra. One of the best in the world. It is not available. Not a chance. They are booked up two, maybe three years in advance. The Berlin Philharmonic. Extraordinary orchestra, absolutely no doubt. Again, we have no chance. Not at this late date. They are booked God knows how far ahead. So what do you expect? The Staatskapelle Dresden will suddenly become free?" Helmut said facetiously.

And it struck both of us at the same time. Yes, indeed, the famed Staatskapelle Dresden, the oldest and many would say one of the very best orchestras in the world, might very well be available.

It was now mid-August, and a terrible, one-hundred-year flood had devastated cities up and down the Danube and the Elbe. Dresden was among the cities most severely hit by this terrible calamity. The scenes of destruction had been all over the news. The signposts of the city barely poked their heads above the deluge. Old Dresden, so painstakingly rebuilt after the fire-bombing of 1945, was seemingly swept away. The Zwinger Palace, the most famous edifice in the city and home to the priceless "Gallery of the Old Masters," filled with Rembrandts, Reubens, Vermeers, Titians, and Raphaels, was under ten feet of water. So too was the Semperoper, the professional home of the Sächsische Staatskapelle Dresden. The raging Elbe had taken its terrible toll.

For a month now, the famous opera house, where so many of the greatest works of the lyric genre had been premiered, including "Der Rosenkavalier" and "Tannhäuser," had been closed. No one knew when it might reopen. The Semperoper and all its musical activity was at a standstill. In this special circumstance, maybe, just maybe, the self-governing musicians of the opera's home orchestra, the Staatskapelle Dresden, would agree to perform with us in Kraków on such short notice. We decided, why not? Helmut said he would give it a try.

To his astonishment, no less my own, with not three weeks left until the 9/11/02 concert date, the Staatskapelle said yes. And in an amazing gesture of brotherly love (there is no other way to put it!), they would donate their services. The German state of Saxony, which financially supports the orchestra, would do everything in its power

to help them make their way to Poland. I couldn't believe my ears. I think Helmut Pauli was even more astonished than I.

The next day, Helmut went from strength to strength. He called a meeting of the managing council of the Munich Bach Choir, with which he had had a long and fruitful managerial relationship. The famous Munich choral ensemble, which had made so many successful recordings over the years, likewise agreed to come to Kraków. And Helmut convinced the Bavarian government to join their Saxon colleagues in helping to make it all happen. We were almost there. Then, my London assistant, Sue Banner, went to work trying to find great soloists who just happened to be free in three weeks' time. Incredibly, Christiane Oelze, a great German soprano, and Wolfgang Holzmair, a distinguished Austrian baritone, agreed to come aboard. I could hardly believe our good musical fortune. A great orchestra, a wonderful choir, and two top-notch soloists. We would have a true musical feast to offer the world on this important and most solemn occasion.

The main work we would perform was Brahms' universally beloved "German Requiem." Although it bears the title of the Latin rite for the dead, Brahms chose texts from both the Old and the New Testaments. It is so profoundly rooted in the common Judeo-Christian tradition that Brahms himself once suggested to his publisher that it be called "A Human Requiem." The title "A German Requiem," which he finally settled on, comes from his setting these biblical texts in their German translation, for Brahms a vernacular language of direct communication with his broadly based German-speaking public. This work would be home territory for the two great musical ensembles, and for the two remarkable soloists who would come together in Kraków. They all agreed instantly with my choice.

But our program also needed to honor both Poland and America: the homeland of His Holiness Pope John Paul, the inspiration for our concert, and the home of the victims of the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, and western Pennsylvania.

We chose Henryk Górecki's Totus Tuus, a hymn to the Virgin Mary setting a text that was the very motto of the Pontificate of John Paul, "All for You, Mother of God"; and Samuel Barber's Agnus Dei,

a choral setting of perhaps the most famous piece of twentieth-century American music, Barber's Adagio for Strings.

As the day of the concert drew near, we received an immense outpouring of support from all over the world. Our endeavor had captured the imagination of leaders both in Europe and the United States in a way we could hardly have imagined. The Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, sent his heartfelt wishes for the success of our important event, as did Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who had helped so generously with our Papal Concert in 2000. The State Ministers of Saxony and Bavaria, the U.S. Ambassador to Poland, Christopher Hill, and the Polish President, Aleksander Kwasniewski, all attended or sent their representatives and, in many cases, their practical support as well. The American Consulate General devoted innumerable hours to our effort.

The concert would be broadcast by Polish Television, with links to all of Europe via Eurovision, and His Holiness' message on the anniversary of the attacks would be aired, via direct link from the Vatican, just prior to the concert broadcast itself. Everything was in place, just waiting for the music to begin. It was a minor miracle we had come this far.

We would have to rehearse quickly in the two days we had to prepare. And all the rehearsals would have to take place in Sts. Peter and Paul in Kraków, as a devastated Dresden still offered no place for its extraordinary orchestra to make its music.