CHAPTER THREE

Once my appointment was announced to the press, there was an amazing outpouring of interest. *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, National Public Radio, and ABC News, among many others, called for interviews. I hadn't really thought about the public aspect of it; my concerns had been more private: my mother-in-law's reaction, my Polish-Jewish roots, and of course, the music-making. But I couldn't have imagined it would be such a news story.

The media interest led me to believe that there could indeed be larger issues at work than I had thought. I was going to Kraków as the first American head of an artistic institution in the East Bloc in this period of glasnost. So I began to think of myself and my Music Directorship in somewhat more historic terms. It was more than a little daunting. This added political dimension made me nervous and very uneasy.

It went beyond the surveillance of the Polish secret police, or SB, as they were known. I now knew I would have to face them head on, something I dreaded just from the week I had already spent in Kraków. My uneasiness was even more acute than the reality of Auschwitz-Birkenau, which I would have to confront in its constant proximity, reminding me every day of the worst tragedy in the history of my people. It even went beyond the challenge of building a relationship with my new orchestra. I would have had to do that if the Kraków Philharmonic had somehow been transplanted to

Chicago. That's what musicians and their conductors do. They find a way to be together that makes them larger than the sum of their parts.

No, what was truly beginning to seem overwhelming was my being an American in Poland, a member of the society of the West in the Communist East, of living behind the Iron Curtain as a vulnerable pioneer. I found the idea of being a political guinea pig distasteful. The secret police would be looking at me up and down and sideways: to intimidate me, to keep me in line. That was one thing. But to think that my activities would have larger international implications was something I had not fully considered. The intense press interest made me understand that I would never be able to do my work in Poland without the eyes of the world following my every move.

The realization of my larger role in turn led me to think about the fact that there was now a Polish Pope and that Kraków was his hometown. But, I thought, what could the relationship possibly be? I was Jewish, from New York, Pope John Paul II was the leader of more than a billion Catholics worldwide. Why would he conceivably care about me? It had been just about the farthest thing from my mind. Still, now I began to wonder. Could there somehow be such an implausible connection? Could the world be so strange?

After all, I knew so very little about the Church before I went to Poland in 1987. My only vague recollection about popes up until then was that when they were elected at the Vatican, the smoke rose white out of the chimney of the Sistine Chapel, and that their coronations were most impressive. Up until that time, I'd never even met a Catholic priest in my life. It was a very, very long way from there to any conceivable encounters with a pope.

Before my first trip in my new position, Vera and I sat down for a serious talk about our family, and how this would affect us and our son. Vera had a job at a bank in New York. My new Polish position would involve a serious financial sacrifice as it was. We could not also give up her income. And, Vera told me, "In any case, I don't think it would be good for David. He's only three years old, and there would

be no American kids his age. I think it's better if we come back and forth to visit you, as often as we can afford."

I finally arrived in Kraków at the end of November 1987, and promptly began rehearsing for my opening concert as Music Director of the orchestra. I wanted to begin my Music Directorship with a truly great work: Mahler's Third Symphony fit the bill to a tee. It is a strong and optimistic statement of Mahler's love for all creation. Musically, though, that was a huge mountain to climb, because it is one of the most gargantuan of all symphonies. At eighty minutes of uninterrupted virtuosic musical challenge, it requires an enormous orchestra of one hundred–plus musicians, a women's chorus, a children's chorus, and a mezzo-soprano soloist. The Kraków Philharmonic had never done this work before, so it was a way for us to come together musically by learning something new. Once we had climbed this artistic mountain, we could feel that much stronger about our musical future together.

If this sounds like the beginning of a marriage, in a way it was. Orchestras and conductors have to learn to respect and admire each other to make good music together. Different conductors may work better or worse with different orchestras. And not all Music Director–orchestra relationships are meant to be. But in this case, the Mahler Third on our first program and the subsequent program of Brahms' Violin Concerto and Dvořák Symphony No. Eight, which we performed the next week, made for an auspicious beginning. In one realm at least, the musical one, which I knew the best, we would be OK. My art would be there for me to rely on as I faced the other challenges of my new Polish post. I hadn't been in Kraków more than five days when something happened that was, to say the least, totally new for me. It was the Wednesday of the week of rehearsals leading to our Friday and Saturday subscription series concerts. Completely unexpectedly, I received word via the U.S. Consulate that I had been called in to meet with His Eminence Franciszek Cardinal Macharski, Archbishop of Kraków.

I walked across the ring road in front of the Philharmonic Hall, across the Planty, the park which surrounds the old city, and

proceeded down the street to the Curia Metropolitana, the offices of Kraków's Archbishop.

After I entered the courtyard of the Curia, I turned right and went along a sheltered walkway then up two flights of stone steps covered by straw matting. All around was quiet, so all I could hear was the crunch, crunch, crunch of my shoes, disturbing my own discombobulated thoughts. This would be my first-ever conversation with a Catholic priest. What would this meeting be like? Try as I might, I couldn't stop my feet from making that awful noise. As I got to the top of the stairs, I noticed oil paintings of the Cardinal's predecessors as Archbishop of Kraków. One of the last I saw was the most recent portrait, that of Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, now His Holiness Pope John Paul II.

I knocked on the heavy wooden door, and an older man who was not a priest answered. He led me into an antechamber where I took off my coat. Then we walked together into the Cardinal's waiting room, which was filled with people who had come to make a call on the Archbishop that day. Occasionally, His Eminence would come out and look around to find his next petitioner. When it was my turn, the Cardinal ushered me into his inner office, a room right out of *Anna Karenina*, filled with samovars and paintings and Persian rugs. Very elegant in an understated way. His Eminence was tall and gaunt and very patrician-looking. He fit right in with the rows of paintings I had seen outside his door. He said to me in a very courtly English, "Welcome to Kraków. How are you, Maestro? Please do sit down."

Cardinal Macharski and I began a meandering conversation about Kraków, and how much he admired the Kraków Philharmonic. He asked how I, an American, liked his medieval city, coming, as he knew I did, from the bustling metropolis of New York. He said, as if reading my mind, that if our interview, as he called it, had taken place before 1939, it would have been with the Chief Rabbi. I said I thought Kraków was a beautiful city, which I did, that the Kraków Philharmonic was a wonderful orchestra, which I also believed, but that there were some aspects of life that took some getting used to. Poland, I said, as His Eminence well knew, was not the United States. I looked out of

the Cardinal's window in the direction of the offices of the Communist Mayor of the city, which were just down the street. Without saying another word, we both knew what I meant. One didn't talk openly about these things, but they were very much in the air.

After twenty minutes or so of this back-and-forth, the Cardinal said, "Well, Maestro, good of you to come. You must tell all that you have told me to the Holy Father."

I looked at him like I hadn't heard him correctly. It took me a minute to even realize who it was His Eminence had meant by "the Holy Father." I only thought that if the occasion arose, it would indeed be wonderful to have the opportunity to meet the Pope.

I left the Curia and went straight back to my hotel. I went on with the rest of the week and the weeks that followed, not really thinking about what had been said in the Cardinal's private office that day. I had much too much else on my plate to be thinking about what I was sure was an offhand comment.

I was preoccupied, as I had been from the beginning, with the oppressive nature of the surveillance that went on. I wasn't completely taken aback by it. I had lived through the week with the Dresden Staatskapelle and the East German Stasi, and then a period during the Prague Spring Festival with their Czech "colleagues," and my week in Kraków the February before. But there was an aspect to the intensity of the attentions of the Polish SB that I found newly oppressive.

One condition of my contract was that I be able to come and go as I needed, something no one else in my orchestra could hope to be able to do. Getting a visa out of Poland in 1987 was a rare gift that went only to the most reliable of artists, who could be counted on to come back to communism even after they had tasted the fruits that the West had to offer. So my multiple-entry visa, which allowed me to come and go as I pleased, a first in all of Polish-American relations to that point, was an object of some serious curiosity, and no little envy among my Kraków musical colleagues.

Yet one of the really big fights that first week was not about my visa but about where I would live. The orchestra, and I was sure the

SB, wanted me to live in the apartment that was reserved for the Music Director. It was, by local standards, a nice small apartment in a relatively new if drab apartment block. As far as space was concerned, there was nothing wrong with it. And it was located relatively near the center of the city, something very difficult for most members of the Philharmonic to find.

But this apartment didn't have a phone, and in those years in Poland there was no prospect of ever getting a phone. The wait could last years! And the building didn't have a guard downstairs, who although undoubtedly would have reported on my movements to the authorities, would have at least been a witness should anything untoward have occurred. If I took this apartment, I would be totally cut off from the outside world. This was a frightening prospect, given that I was subjected to constant secret police surveillance. There was no way I would stay there. God only knows what might have happened to me, and no one would have ever been the wiser.

So I turned down the apartment and, after much contentious back-and-forth with the authorities, moved into the Holiday Inn, which was then the best hotel in Kraków, although it was a fifteen-minute drive outside of town. It had desk clerks downstairs and telephones that worked. I thought I would be much safer in the Holiday Inn than I would have been in the apartment, but nothing was ever that simple.

The secret police decided they would make my decision about where to live seem as oppressive and as foolish as possible. The hotel put me on the fifth floor, which was where every delegation from the West seemed to stay. I assumed that was because that floor was the most electronically advanced, in terms of secret police surveillance. After my move, administrators in the Philharmonic would comment on something that they could only know if they had been privy to my private phone calls made from the hotel. I surmised that members of the security apparatus must have told very select members of the Philharmonic hierarchy some of the things I said on the phone. I was safer than I would have been in the Music Director's apartment, but I

still had no semblance of privacy. But then, I don't think anyone did in Communist Poland.

One nice thing about the Holiday Inn were the regular visitors from Project Hope, a Christian organization that brought in doctors and nurses who wanted to volunteer at the Kraków Children's Hospital. They would come in for a week of intensive work, ministering to Polish kids, performing lifesaving operations, even open-heart surgery—all for free. Project Hope eventually rebuilt the entire Kraków Children's Hospital, and the Kraków Philharmonic and I gave a concert in honor of its dedication. I enjoyed the good old American camaraderie I had with those Project Hope medical folks. It gave me a little less sense of isolation to share a dinner or two with them in the dining room of our common home away from home.

Life in the hotel was never easy. One day I left the hotel and got down to my orchestra-provided taxi before I realized it was raining. I decided to get an umbrella, and ran back up to my room. In the time it had taken for me to get downstairs and back upstairs, something weird had happened. I tried my key in the door, and it wouldn't work, although it was the same key I had used a few minutes before. I went down to the front desk and asked what was going on. The Polish lady behind the desk looked at me with great concern. She made the sign of the cross and said, "If I were you, I wouldn't go back up there. If you can't get in, it means you are not meant to get in. If I were you, Sir, I would just get back in your car and be on your way."

When I got back from my rehearsals that afternoon, I found that things had been moved. A suitcase that had been on one bed was now on the other bed. Other things had been moved around ever so slightly but enough for me to know. I am not an expert on espionage, but I know that if people don't want you to know they've been in your room, you won't know it. These people knew what they were doing, which was scaring the heck out of me, showing me that no place was safe. I imagine they wanted me to conclude that I might as well move into the apartment, or just leave Poland altogether. It ran through my

mind that even though the authorities in Warsaw wanted me there, the Kraków SB apparently did not.

I picked up the phone and called the American Consul General, Michael Hornblow. I said, "I'm not staying here anymore. It's not healthy."

He said, "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Things have gotten out of hand. I am really at my wit's end." I was speaking very ostentatiously because I knew, and he knew, that whoever had switched my suitcases was also listening in on our conversation.

Hornblow waited a second and then said, "OK, Gilbert, come to us. Please come stay in our home."

Moving into the Consul General's residence was not what anyone had in mind, especially not Michael and Caroline Hornblow. Yet, with my wife and son, who had long been scheduled to come to Kraków for a visit, I spent some peaceful days in the Consul General's lovely Christmas-decorated house. It was completely surveilled by the men in trench coats ever present on the outside, and probably by microphones planted on the inside, but at least I had peace of mind that this experiment in international living was not to be undone in one week by the thuggish tactics of the Kraków secret police.

The provocations didn't end there. Once, when Vera and David were safely back home in New York, I went out to the movies. At the end of the show, a very pretty, ostentatiously dressed girl approached me afterwards to say, "Oh, are you American? Can I show you around the city?" She was lovely but obviously a plant. It was pretty heavy-handed. They wanted to see if they could get me in a compromising position, and take a few pictures for their files.

For somebody with no training or preparation, not even a one-day State Department course a foreign correspondent might get, it was scary. And I was the Music Director of the Kraków Philharmonic, not a guest conductor. I wasn't leaving after a single week. I was committed to the orchestra, responsible for their musical and, to some extent, financial future through the tours and recordings, and all the things a Music Director does. I couldn't just leave. My contract was for three-

and-a-half years. So, as far as I was concerned, I wasn't going anywhere.

In the end, the music-making made everything worthwhile. I had heard the Kraków Philharmonic in Boston on one of their U.S. tours. They toured regularly to America and to Western Europe, and had won a Grand Prix du Disque. I was an admirer of their artistry and their tradition.

Now I was proudly conducting them as their Chief.

We found a common ground, especially in Beethoven and Brahms. I came from a strong European tradition. My mentors had been Sir Georg Solti and Klaus Tennstedt. Solti was a Hungarian and a galvanic Wagner and Beethoven interpreter. Tennstedt, an East German refugee enormously successful in those years in the West, was one of the greatest Brahms and Mahler conductors of the second half of the twentieth century. I could learn from the Kraków orchestra's tradition and also bring them something of my own musical perspective. Every time the secret police tried to knock me out of kilter, the orchestra brought me back, reminding me of just why I had come to Poland.

At the time, I was leading rehearsals with the orchestra in English or German. There were then two concertmasters in the Kraków Philharmonic, an English-speaker named Mieczyslaw Szlezer, who had studied at Indiana University and whose English was very good, and the other an older gentleman who spoke German. So when the orchestra was being led by the concertmaster who spoke German, I spoke German (a language in which I felt completely comfortable). He would translate what I said into Polish. I didn't speak any Polish, so I didn't know what was being said. When Mr. Szlezer was the concertmaster, I spoke to him in English and he translated into Polish.

Sometimes I said something about the music in fairly elaborate terms, but when he translated it, it came out as just one sentence. And sometimes, after that one sentence, they would look at me very oddly. I wasn't always 100 percent sure that Szlezer was translating exactly what I had said, nor saying it with quite the degree of politeness which I always tried to use in relation to my orchestra. I had enough to do

to understand the orchestra on a musical level. Our different spoken languages just added to the complexity of it all.

I did have a rather interesting relationship with Mr. Szlezer, who was always looking for American magazines—*Newsweek* or *Time*—or whatever other Western publications I had brought with me into the country, which were not then available to the general Polish population. Szlezer would sit with me and practice his excellent English. I enjoyed it as well. Having a conversational partner in my native language was something I truly looked forward to.

My concertmaster's religious background, however, was always a bit of a puzzle. His family name sounded Jewish, but I was never sure. At one point my curiosity overcame me:

"Szlezer—isn't that a Jewish name?" I asked.

He answered, "Yes, Maestro. I am of Jewish heritage."

"Was your mother Jewish?" I inquired. By Jewish law, if his mother was Jewish, then so was he.

"Yes, yes she is."

"And your Father?"

"Yes, he is also."

"So," I said, "you are Jewish then."

"No, Maestro; as I said, I am of Jewish heritage."

I pressed him no further, and returned to other things.

After what the Nazis (and the Russians) had done to Poland during the war (both of Mr. Szlezer's parents were Holocaust survivors), and with some in the most extreme elements of Polish society still harboring strong anti-Semitic sentiments, I could well understand why he might be uncomfortable with his religious identity. But our conversation still made me very sad.

Then, early in the winter of 1988, after reading an article about Polish politics in *Newsweek*, I asked Mr. Szlezer what he thought the future might bring to his country. "You know, Maestro, I truly believe my grandchildren will live under communism. I see no end to this system. It is our Polish fate. There is nothing to be done." His dark vision for what lay in store for his country made me even sadder still.

The other person whom I met, who befriended me without linguistic bridge, was a man named Czeslaw Pilawski. Czeslaw was a violinist and the Personnel Manager of the Kraków orchestra. Then in his mid-fifties, he was old enough to have seen the war firsthand. On our Sundays off, he would pick me up at my hotel and drive me into the Polish countryside to proudly show me his homeland. He didn't speak English, and I didn't then speak Polish, but somehow we made ourselves understood. On other occasions, he even invited me to share a meal in his home. That openheartedness, and his ever-present smile, were as precious as they were rare.

I went back to Birkenau again and again. I had made a commitment to my mother-in-law to do so and to never forget. I also sought out the Kraków Jewish community for the first time. I went into Kazimierz and found the Jewish community center, a kind of disheveled suite of rooms on the second floor of a nondescript apartment building. I met the Jakubowiczs, a quintessential Polish-Jewish family who had come to Kraków after the war and established themselves as a kind of nucleus of the two hundred Jews who were left out of the eighty thousand who had lived there before 1939. Czeslaw and his brother Tadeusz were fascinated by me, an American Jew. They were less nervous about me than were other people, most of whom were scared of having anything to do with me. Associations like that could be trouble; conversations could be misinterpreted or reported to the SB, so it was not at all easy to get close to Poles, even those in my orchestra, during that period. And outside the job, I wasn't finding many other opportunities for Polish friendship.

But the Jewish community was more welcoming, not because they were any less afraid but because they needed the outreach to a larger Jewish world. I was from New York, one of the world's biggest Jewish communities. We talked about what Jewish life was like in New York. And we talked about their lives in Kraków. Small in numbers and resources, their lives were just so different. They asked me a lot of questions: Can you help us with reconstruction? Can you help bring us a Rabbi for the High Holy Days?

They invited me to go to the Remuh Synagogue to pray with them, to partake of their Jewish lives. I wasn't especially close with these people; we didn't have a lot in common. In New York, one doesn't get close to someone just because they are Jewish. But in Kraków, I was a Jew alone, and these people were, effectively, my only kin. I wanted to do what I could to help them, but I didn't really know what that would be. Still, they were a link to my mother-in-law, to the survivors who had stayed in Poland. There was a connection that gave me a sense of Jewish history in that place that was not just in dead buildings and painted-over mezuzahs. I would try to do what I could.

I went home for my winter break, feeling wonderful about the music-making and beginning to digest the many different things that had happened. There was nothing so sweet as getting on a Pan Am plane, settling back in my seat, and realizing that for all intents and purposes, I was free again. What a relief.

My stopovers in Frankfurt on my flights home became an oasis. There people were free to say what they wanted. In Frankfurt, I felt normal. I was finally on my way to the West. West to New York, my family, my friends, and the bright lights of my hometown.