

CHAPTER



FIVE

The next morning, bright and early, the telephone rang. Luckily, it wasn't Vera saying there had been a travel delay. It was a producer from ABC News.

"Well, Maestro, what's going on? Are you seeing the Pope?"

I had forgotten all about this TV crew. They had begun filming a story on my appointment to Kraków back in December. The producer had gotten wind of my trip to Rome, and had asked whether they could tag along just in case.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I've been told to be at the Apostolic Palace at 12:00 noon. I have no idea what's going to happen, but somehow I'm going to be meeting the Pope."

"Fine," she said. "We know what to do. We'll see you in there."

At least one of us knew what to do. ABC had probably done this many times. For me, it would be the first and last such visit; of that I was sure.

Vera and David arrived on time at Fiumicino at 8:00 A.M. and came directly to the Hotel Napoleon, arriving about 9:30. She had slept very little (although David had dozed off as soon as the plane took off), but it didn't matter. She was very excited about just the possibility of meeting the Pope. Sleep could come later.

We dressed in the fanciest clothes we owned, and just after 11:15 A.M. hailed a plain tiny Fiat taxi to take us across the city to Saint Peter's Square. Getting anywhere in Rome on time is iffy. The combination of a Papal audience and the snarl of cars from Castel

Sant'Angelo all the way up the Via della Conciliazione to the Vatican was maddening.

When we finally arrived, I was in quite a state. My three-year-old son was with us when we arrived at the Vatican. We had not been able to find a sitter through the hotel on such short notice, and we had no idea what we would do, but a walk through the elegant audience halls of the Apostolic Palace with a toddler didn't seem to fit the occasion.

Just as we were approaching the Portone di Bronzo, I caught sight of a kindly-looking, white-bibbed, middle-aged nun, her head fully draped in black as I had seen on the streets of Kraków. She was sitting just outside the entrance to the Palace, in full view of the Swiss Guards. I looked at Vera, and she looked back at me, and out came these unthinkable words in my best Italian:

"Sister, I am Maestro Gilbert Levine from the Pope's home city of Kraków. My wife and I are on our way to meet His Holiness. This is our son David. Would you possibly be so kind as to look after him while we are with the Pope? I'm sure we won't be long."

We would normally never have thought to do such a thing, but here, in the Vatican and after my time in Catholic Poland, we somehow had faith that this was exactly right.

The good sister answered, "Of course, it would be an honor. Leave him here with me. I will keep him safe until you return."

It may seem very strange, and we both shudder at the thought to this very day, but neither my wife nor I gave it a second thought. David would be just fine. And in the end he was. He and the sister were smiling and playing happily when we came back out of the Palace. She was the first nun I had ever met face-to-face in my life. I don't know her name, and we never saw her again after that day.

After leaving David, we walked the short distance to the Bronze Door. As we proceeded into the Palace, all the same precautions and the Swiss Guards were in place. Up the stone stairs, through the magnificent hallway, and through the great wooden doors. Finally, we approached the Sediari desk just inside the Sala Clementina, and our progress came to a halt.

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This time, we waited in the large sitting room with the windows looking out on the gardens, where the corridor to Monsignor Dziwisz's tiny office went off to the right. Now I noticed something I had not had time to see the day before. Back behind a wall was a small elevator. As we waited, a priest emerged from the elevator carrying a well-worn light-brown leather briefcase. He did not quite fit in with these elegant surroundings. He was dressed in Roman collar but wore a faded parka which was unzipped to reveal a gray sweater, instead of a cassock. Something else caught my eye. The good father wore gray leather shoes, the color of the year in Communist couture. So I knew this priest was most likely from Poland. And he was coming up the back elevator without any fanfare to meet with his Polish confreres, or perhaps with the Pope himself. I felt proud that I knew that. Proud that he and I shared at least some things in common from our shared Polish heritage.

The priest in gray shoes stepped off the elevator and walked purposefully across the parquet floor and down the corridor towards the office of Monisgnor Dziwisz. In an instant he was gone.

At last another priest, in conventional Roman dress, appeared to act as our guide. We were ushered through the next doorway into yet another room. We waited there. And walked to the next room. Walk and wait. Walk and wait. We were in a sort of queue whose end we couldn't see. The Pope could appear at any time, if Michael Hornblow was right.

We were moving from room to room along the outer perimeter of the Palace. Each room was approximately the same, with windows looking out and a throne on the inner wall. Before each throne was a microphone set at an angle. Behind each throne was a door. It appeared to us that the Pope might enter any of these rooms through the door from behind the throne. We would be introduced, pictures would be taken, and he would be gone.

We moved along until we came to the corner of the Palace. There we found a sitting room with chairs and a couch. At the moment it was occupied by a group of African red-capped Bishops, gathered in a tight circle conferring among themselves. They held what were clearly

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beautifully wrapped gifts. For the Pope, no doubt. We had none. I began to feel unprepared and very nervous.

The African bishops did not throw us even a sideways glance. After a few moments, they went on into the next room, and we were asked to sit where they had sat. Some minutes later they came back out to where we were, excitedly speaking amongst themselves. Their gifts were no longer in their hands. We moved on to the next room, around the bend of the Palace and into a small antechamber; it did not feel like the Pope would enter here. It had no regal dimension. It felt like a holding room. There was an upholstered bench on the wall and two more priests. One, in a plain black cassock, spoke in perfect American English with my wife, while another, in a black cassock with a red sash and red buttons down the front, greeted us with official decorum. He smiled, but seemed stiff and on guard. He held a red leather-bound folder in his hands.

I was still of a mind that the Pope would be walking by, in whatever room it might be. I had no reason to think otherwise. The red-buttoned priest then asked me to come and look out the window. I went over, and he showed me a different view of the Papal gardens than I had seen the day before. He pointed into the distance to the east and said, "That's where His Holiness' helicopter lands."

With that, he swung around and opened a door by the window, and with no further preamble, he nudged me into the next room of our seemingly endless sequence of chambers.

While the small antechamber had been dark, with only one somewhat narrow window lighting its red-lined walls, this room was bright and large. Its floors were of shiny white and green marble. Along its walls were bookcases lined with white leather-bound books. The room's many large windows were covered in sheer fabric that made it feel airy. The priest in red introduced me to a figure in white who stood up from behind a desk. And then the priest was gone.

His Holiness Pope John Paul II rose to greet me. He looked so much younger than his sixty-seven years. He was thin and balding, with a wisp of whitish hair just peeking out from under the white zucchetto that covered his head. It looked like the yarmulke that we wear

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in synagogue on Yom Kippur, except for the point of thread that sticks straight up from the center. His white cassock had a sash trimmed in gold, which ended with his own Papal seal. The large cross around his neck was fastened by a gold chain.

He was human sized, I was surprised to see, and much smaller than I had expected, although I'm not sure why. I looked around to see who else was there with us in the room. Where was the photographer? Where was my wife? Neither was to be seen. We were alone.

The Pope invited me to sit down next to him in a chair at one end of his desk and said, "Maestro, I know your story. We must talk."

I hadn't been prepared for this at all. For a brief moment I thought of getting up and excusing myself, saying something like, "You must have mistaken me for someone else. Really, I should be going." He knew my story? How much of it? Had Cardinal Macharski sent the Pope the *Newsweek* interview concerning my appointment to Kraków that had appeared in its International edition back in December? The next few moments would tell.

I was feeling very anxious at being alone in the presence of the Pope. The Pope must have sensed this, because he reached across the corner of the desk and put his hand on mine to soothe my nerves and quiet my fear. He kept his hand right there for the entire time we talked.

His Holiness' hand was a bit rougher than I might have imagined it to be. It had done real work in a quarry during the war, I had read. That too made him seem more real. More fully human. Not like any of the pictures I had seen of him on TV but a direct, compassionate man, trying to put his guest at ease.

He began by asking the same questions that Cardinal Macharski and Monsignor Dziwisz had already asked. It was as if he had dictated the questions and wanted to vet my answers before posing them himself.

His first words were in English. I answered him in German, thinking that would be easier for him. That was foolish. He continued in English, because in his politeness he knew that English was truly easier for me. His inquiry, in whatever language, was much more

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immediately personal than the priests before him. Much more direct and from the heart than the others'.

"How is my orchestra treating you?" he asked, with a warm smile of understanding. "You know, Maestro, they are not much fun for conductors."

His orchestra. How extraordinary. And he knew their professional reputation. That he shared it brought us closer. We were immediately two citizens of the same city. He made me feel as if I were in his city now, which was also my city and thus ours. In fact, within minutes we were talking about Kraków as if we were sitting in his old office at the Curia Metropolitana, down the street from my Philharmonic Hall.

The Pope told me he had often gone to concerts there. That he loved the music of the great masters. He asked me how I really felt in his city. The heartfelt, solicitous sincerity he showed made me less afraid. And he seemed pleased when I told him that I had opened my heart to his Polish people.

Now that he had established our kindred love for his hometown, he moved on to the next topic on his agenda. And there did indeed appear to be an agenda. He guided the conversation. He had some things he seemed to need to know.

He asked about my mother-in-law. About her family and what had happened to them in the war. He asked me how I felt as a Jew, being her son-in-law, in Poland. He told me he had lost many close Jewish friends in the Holocaust, how he had grown up with them in his hometown of Wadowice, and how their memory was with him still.

I told him that I knew that Jews had been welcomed in Poland for centuries, and that although terrible things had been done to my people over those many years, there had been many good things as well. I told him what my mother-in-law had said when she urged me to take up the position in Kraków. That I had to go, to show that we still lived.

The Pope listened with great attention. He was, it seemed to me, deeply moved. He sat leaning towards me, with his hand on mine, and looked me closely in the eyes. He, like Monisgnor Dziwisz, didn't want

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to miss anything I said, nor how I said it. His look was penetrating, forceful, yet it eased my nerves still more. In this short time, he had made me feel a shared humanness of spirit that I had never felt before. He had touched a stillness in me that I had only ever felt through music.

Whether it was that lessening of tension or something else that transformed me, I will never know. But as I began to think of Kraków and of Margit, and of my terrible day at Birkenau, I said something which came from the depths of my soul. Something I had not rehearsed nor could have imagined I would ever have the chutzpah to have said to anyone, let alone the Pope.

As if it were another person, I heard myself say:

“I believe, Your Holiness, that it is you who can achieve the coming together of our two peoples after so many centuries of misunderstanding and of hate. I believe you were sent by God to do just that.”

The minute I said it, I knew I had crossed a bright red line. I had been lulled into crossing it by his empathy and his support. I wished I could take it back. His unlined face showed pain. He grew visibly uneasy.

Time went by. Perhaps a minute or more. I thought he might say something. I would have welcomed it, whatever he would have said. But he was silent, looking down, no longer at me. He seemed deep in thought.

I was growing more and more mortified. Every second was excruciating. I couldn't take it back, and it would all be over in an instant. About that, at least, I was right.

Suddenly, doors opened on two sides of the Papal Library. Vera walked in with the red-buttoned priest. A slew of photographers and the crew from ABC News came in from the opposite side of the room as well. The Pope stood and guided me, his arm on my shoulder, to the middle of the room. His touch was strong, muscular, athletic even, directing me where he wanted me to go.

Pope John Paul stood between my wife and myself. He greeted her cordially, welcoming her to the Vatican. He asked her where she was from. When she said that she was from Bratislava, he immediately

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started to speak to her in her native Slovak. He used simple phrases, but it made her smile. We all smiled. But the Pope kept looking down. He was being Papal, thoroughly gracious, but he still seemed lost in thought.

Another priest came in bearing an ornate silver presentation plate on which were placed two white boxes, one square and the other slightly smaller, with rounded corners. When the Pope reached for the boxes, the priest showed concern. His Holiness had begun to give me the rounded-corner box, and Vera the other, square one. But that was backwards. The priest knew I should get the square one, which held a Papal Medal, and Vera should get the rounded one, which contained pearl devotional beads. His Holiness realized his mistake and crossed his arms awkwardly, looking down as if in disbelief. This was a ceremonial part of his life that he had presided over countless times before. Something must have been preoccupying him.

And I was sure I knew what it was. He was still dismayed by the boldness of my comments. The temerity! Telling the “Vicar of Christ on Earth” what his destiny should be. No, more than that: what he was preordained by God to do during his Pontificate. If the Pope was thinking what I was thinking he was thinking, I was in big trouble.

As quickly as they had come in, the photographers and video crews were gone. In an instant, Vera and I were alone with the Pope once again. His Holiness walked towards a door on the opposite side of the room. Just as he was about to exit, he hesitated, and he looked back towards me.

The Pope smiled warmly, looking me straight in the eyes once again, and said, “Maestro, I will see you at your concert.” And then he was gone.

I was dumbfounded. “What concert?” I tried to say to the closing door.

Vera and I walked the whole way out the many rooms of the Palace at the double-quick in silence. I couldn't say a word. Not yet.

Room by room faded behind us until we reached the desk of the Sediari. There, just before we were about to leave the Palace proper, we

were met by Monsignor Dziwiz. The door through which the Pope had exited the Library led to the corridor down which Monsignor Dziwiz's office is located. It was all one big loop. Monsignor Dziwiz had cut us off at the crossing point.

"How was it?" he asked in Italian.

"*Incredibile*," I answered, also in Italian.

He took good note of the word. "*Incredibile*," he repeated. "*Incredibile*."

It was as if he wanted to remember it exactly.

Then Father Dziwiz said, "Maestro, the Holy Father wishes me to tell you that he thinks you have a great soul."

My jaw dropped again, and I stared into his eyes. I was beyond tears.

Then, as if an afterthought, he turned to me again and said, "And Maestro, he meant what he said about your concert!"

"What concert?" I asked, this time out loud. But all I saw was the back of Monsignor Dziwiz's cassock as he made his way down the corridor. As he reached the bend, beyond which I could have no longer made him out, he simply raised his hand as if to say, *Arrivederci*—until we meet again. And with that, he too was gone.

Vera and I walked out the rest of the way, back downstairs, in silence. My wife looked at me quizzically the whole time. She wanted to know just what had happened in there. But I could not speak. It would take a while to recover. Anyway, I had no idea what to say to her just then. "Great soul!" I thought. What had just happened hadn't even begun to sink in.

We walked out the Bronze Door, kissed our son, and thanked the kindly nun profusely. We continued out under the Bernini Columns and passed into Saint Peter's Square before I said, "You won't believe this. Let's sit down and have a coffee. I want to try to tell you what just happened."

We found a café on the Borgo Pio near the Porta Sant'Anna. I started to recount my story as best I could, but I was at a loss for words. Instead of a photo and good-bye, something truly *incredibile* had begun that day. Something that would affect both our lives immensely.

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That much I knew. I just had no idea *what* exactly, or just how it would all turn out.

For now, it was a dream. A dream which grew out of the most improbable soil of Birkenau, and of the Philharmonic Hall in Kraków, and which now had the promise of a next step. And that step would be musical. That itself was too good to be true. What came after this, what that concert would be, I couldn't wait to find out.

The next morning we picked up a copy of the official Vatican newspaper. There it was, staring back at us in black and white, the official list of His Holiness' Private Audiences from the day before:

**L'Osservatore Romano—Friday, February 12, 1988—
Nostre Informazioni**

The Holy Father received in Audience yesterday morning:
Gabriel Zubeir Wako, Archbishop of Khartoum, President of
the Bishops Conference of the Sudan; along with Joseph
Abangite Gasi, Bishop of Tomura-Yambio (Sudan) Paolino
Lukudu Archbishop of Juba (Sudan) of Sudan, and Paride
Taban, a Bishop of Bururi (Burundi) In Ad limina
Apostolorum;

as well as Henryk Muszynski, Bishop of Włocławek.

The Holy Father also received in Audience this morning
Maestro Gilbert Levine, Conductor of the Kraków
Philharmonic with his wife.