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THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW

The Jewish Conductor and the Polish Pope

How two men used music to bridge religious differences and historical hatreds.

By **MATTHEW KAMINSKI**

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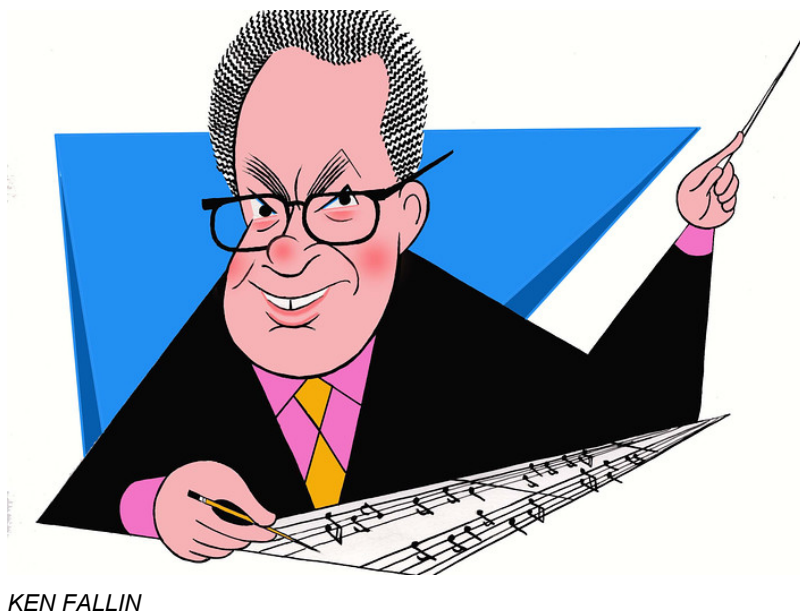
One February day in 1988, Gilbert Levine was summoned to the Vatican's Bronze Gate. "Where is that?" he asked. The Brooklyn-born Jewish conductor had no idea that the Portone di Bronzo was the principal entrance to the Apostolic Palace. He had met his first Catholic priest only months earlier.

At the palace, Pope John Paul II, vigorous at 67, welcomed Mr. Levine to his private library. The pope had asked to meet the American who had recently taken over the philharmonic in Kraków, the Polish pontiff's hometown. This was still the Cold War, and Mr. Levine was the first Westerner to lead a major musical institution in the Soviet sphere. "How are you treating my orchestra?" the pope asked with a twinkle in his eye. Turning serious, "How is my orchestra treating you? You know, maestro, they are not much fun for conductors."

"A crazy conversation ensues," says Mr. Levine, who's now 66, recalling that first meeting. The two men discussed music, Kraków and Mr. Levine's family. The conductor's father's parents emigrated to America from prewar Poland. His mother-in-law survived Auschwitz; some 40 relatives perished in the Holocaust. As a child, Karol

Wojtyła had played soccer and gone to school with Jews. He told Mr. Levine that he had lost many close Jewish friends in the war.

"Something came over me in the midst of this," says Mr. Levine. "I really thought this was such a rare opportunity that would never come again, that in any case I was meant to be there for some reason and that six million people had died and I said to him, 'I believe God put you on this Earth to make things better between your people and mine.' I said those words to the pope. And he stopped talking. And he looked down." He never replied directly.



Mr. Levine kicked himself for his display of New York chutzpah. He thought he had crossed "a bright red line" in "telling the 'Vicar of Christ on Earth' what his destiny should be," Mr. Levine writes in "The Pope's Maestro." But as the title of that 2010 memoir suggests, the encounter was the beginning of an unusual collaboration—"a deep spiritual friendship," in the words of the late pope's

private secretary and current archbishop of Kraków, Stanisław Dziwisz. On May 5 at Washington's Constitution Hall, Mr. Levine will celebrate the canonization of John Paul II and Pope John XXIII in a concert with works by Verdi, Brahms and Henryk Górecki.

The canonization ceremony at the Vatican this Sunday is prompting fresh evaluations of John Paul's legacy. He inspired millions in Eastern Europe to defy and defeat communism. He failed to stem the secular tide in the West and saw his church tainted by the child-abuse scandals. As notable in his long pontificate was the outreach to other faiths, above all to Judaism.

Pope John XXIII started down this road in the late 1950s by expunging references to Jewish "perfidy" in Catholic liturgy. Soon after his death in 1963, the Vatican rejected the notion of collective Jewish guilt for Christ's crucifixion. John Paul, the Pole who had seen the Holocaust first-hand, made it his mission to try to heal those wounds.

Mr. Levine's life-changing move to Kraków came by chance. As a student at the Yale School of Music in the early 1970s, Mr. Levine met the Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki, who recruited him to the Kraków job in 1987. An American was a controversial pick for the Poles. Martial law had ended only a few years before, leaving a grimy pall over the country's old royal capital and cultural center. As a Jew, Mr. Levine took on a high-profile post in a country intimately identified with Jewish suffering. Around that time, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir said of Poles and anti-Semitism that they "suck it in with their mother's milk."

Kraków has a vibrant Catholic intelligentsia congregated around the weekly magazine *Tygodnik Powszechny*. Mr. Levine, who learned Polish, found a warm welcome in that group and soon came to the pope's attention. An invitation followed their initial meeting for Mr. Levine to celebrate the first decade of John Paul's pontificate by bringing the Kraków Philharmonic Choir to the Vatican. The pope also blessed the conductor's then-controversial idea of holding a concert in a disused synagogue in Kraków's old Jewish neighborhood of Kazimierz.

After the "reconciliation" concert at Kraków's Tempel Synagogue in 1990, Mr. Levine came to speak at the Yale Hillel, the campus Jewish organization. I was in the audience. A student next to me stood up and called the conductor a traitor for going to Poland and bringing a primarily Christian orchestra into a Jewish house of worship. "The Poles killed the Jews," he said. Mr. Levine didn't get a chance to respond before an elderly Jewish man raised a thickly accented, trembling voice from across the room. "You don't know what you're talking about," he said to the student. "Poles and Jews lived together for 800 years. We have a common history."

Over the 17 years of their friendship until John Paul's death in 2005, Mr. Levine performed a handful of times for him. Most memorable was the concert 20 years ago this month. In the early 1990s, Mr. Levine had wanted to commemorate the Holocaust in Rome and invited the pope. "His immediate response was why not do it here in the Vatican?" says Mr. Levine. In his retelling, this was the pope's response to his impolitic challenge to extend a hand to Jews.

"I believe that he had been looking for a way to express the church's deep compassion and understanding of what took place," Mr. Levine says over lunch in Manhattan, where he now lives. "They couldn't find the language. He believed, after knowing me for three years, that music could be that language. The core of our relationship was his belief in me—which was astonishing, and humbling is not even a word—but [also] his belief in my art."

Prominent Jews and Catholics hated the idea of the Holocaust-commemoration concert at the Vatican. John Paul was the first pope in history to make an official visit to a synagogue in 1986, but the Vatican establishment considered the Holocaust a third rail best avoided. The Holy See feared disrupting the talks under way to establish diplomatic ties with Israel, which occurred in late 1993. Virtually all major Jewish organizations boycotted the concert. "There was incredible mistrust," says Mr. Levine. "Every Jew thought I was a sellout for having a relationship with a Polish pope."

Details of the event were fought over and the project almost died. An example: The Vatican hierarchy opposed the plan to seat the pontiff and the rabbi of Rome on chairs of equal size. John Paul waved them off, showing little care for ceremony or protocol. "He wore the clothes," says Mr. Levine, "he never allowed the clothes to wear him."

Finally on April 7, 1994—Holocaust Remembrance Day, which falls on Monday this year—the pope welcomed Holocaust survivors into the Vatican to commemorate the Shoah. He insisted that the Vatican use the Hebrew term for the genocide. Actor Richard Dreyfuss read the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, accompanied by Leonard Bernstein's Symphony No. 3. Referring to Holocaust victims, John Paul said: "They are all here with us." The pope and the rabbi sat on matching chairs, and beside them was Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, the president of Italy, which had been Hitler's World War II ally.

The success of the concert, broadcast live internationally, softened the skeptics. When later that year the pope made Mr. Levine a knight commander, the highest honor accorded to a non-ecclesiastical musician by the Vatican since Mozart, the Anti-Defamation League, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council and many others sent the conductor congratulatory letters.

Mr. Levine says the Vatican event marked "a sea change in Catholic-Jewish relations." A few concerts and one famous man can only do so much, but Mr. Levine insists that the progress has been real and dramatic.

"Things are much better now than they were, and I think [that's] because of John Paul," says Mr. Levine. "I think Poland has changed because there's a lot more Western influence. The raw aspect of the Holocaust is no longer there, and people can look at the history in different ways. John Paul's pontificate, which was 27 years long, is not a panacea but it was an enormously positive influence. And I think on the Polish side and also on the Jewish side—and I think, if I may say, what we did together—was significant because on the front page or the third page of every newspaper in the world was that picture of him, the rabbi and the president of Italy. He understood the power of the

media and the power of television unbelievably and used it magnificently.”

Mr. Levine calls John Paul a “great rabbi,” a teacher: “This will sound bizarre, he actually nurtured my Jewish faith.”

“He believed that Judaism was a living and an abiding faith and that the tie that binds Jews to God is unbroken and is not diminished by the advent of Jesus or the advent of Christianity,” says Mr. Levine. “And that’s a phenomenal insight and phenomenal gift because it allows the sustenance of both Judaism and Christianity without diminishing either one. And I have Jewish friends who still think, you know, ‘What is this Christian nonsense?’ Who are you to say? Who are you to think that?”

In 2004, a year before the pope’s death, Mr. Levine conducted a final “Concerto della Riconciliazione.” The program was in Italian, English, Hebrew and Arabic. Hobbled by Parkinson’s disease and frail, the pope “fought like crazy” to bring together the three major monotheistic religions, says Mr. Levine. John Paul in his remarks called “for a sincere reconciliation among the believers in the one God.” The chief rabbi and imam of Rome were there with him.

As Mr. Levine recalls of John Paul, “9/11 was an absolute watershed for him. He couldn’t believe that people would kill with the word God on their lips—Allahu akbar. He could not believe it. And he was going to use music, he thought, to demonstrate his understanding of the roots in Abraham, the commonality of our belief in one God and the commonality of the concept of resurrection.”

John Paul went to his grave with disappointments. He didn’t fill the pews in Europe. His Poland didn’t lead the revival of Christianity that he had hoped for. Muslims, Jews and Christians are little closer to reconciliation. Nearly a decade after the end of his pontificate, Catholics are divided over John Paul’s conservative stances on birth control, priestly celibacy and homosexuality.

As a Jew, Mr. Levine has no stake in most of these intramural Catholic arguments. Still, his loyalties are plain. His John Paul wasn’t out of touch but ahead of his time. The pontiff’s religious orthodoxy grew out of his three-decade struggle to ward off communist encroachment in Poland, Mr. Levine says. Was John Paul flawed? Of course, he says, all men are sinners: “I don’t think being declared a saint means you were a perfect person. More importantly, he would never say he was a perfect person.” The pope he knew was modest, normal, human.

“We were all blessed to live in the time of John Paul,” Mr. Levine says. “The reason to me

that a person is made a saint is because the lessons that they have to teach endure.”

Mr. Kaminski, a Polish-born Catholic, is a member of the Journal's editorial board.

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