

## “Hanukkah and Hope”

The delicate is not always the most durable. Living things are notoriously perishable. Blind, impersonal forces can appear to command our destinies. But sometimes the tenderest realities are also the toughest and most enduring, like flickering candles that not all the gales of hatred or destruction can fully extinguish.

So it was in Dresden in 1945, a cultural center of museums and cathedrals rather than a military bulwark, where thousands of tons of incendiary explosives dropped from Allied bombers over the course of three days created a perfect firestorm that snuffed out the lives of over twenty-one thousand children, women and men. Among the hundreds of buildings burned—homes, churches, hospitals and schools--was the Dresden State Library that housed a collection of rare and irreplaceable musical manuscripts from the baroque period.

One of those manuscripts was by the composer Tomas Giovanni Albinoni, a Venetian born in 1671 who composed operas and cantatas for voice and sonatas and concertos for oboe and other instruments, but much of whose output has been lost. Two centuries after his death, his imprint on the musical world had largely been forgotten. But amid the charred ruins of the Dresden library, a small scrap of Albinoni's music remained—only a bass line with a few bars of melody. Yet on the basis of that tiny fragment, another Italian, Remo Giazotto, was able to reconstruct and recompose what has become known as the greatest of Alinoni's works and a masterpiece of the Western canon—the sadly magnificent Adagio in G Minor for organ and strings. Let me play it for you now ...

[Music plays]

Paper burns at 451 degrees Fahrenheit. The fires in Dresden raged at temperatures hovering around 1500°. Out of that holocaust, an immortal piece of music miraculously survived. The most sensitive is not always the strongest, you see. But sometimes the creations of the spirit can withstand the most brutal assaults of history.

So it was in Sarajevo, in 1992, when Vedran Smailovic sat down to play Albinoni's Adagio. The siege of his home city, known for its social tolerance and cultural pluralism, had been underway for almost a month. What had been the nation state of Yugoslavia had collapsed, reviving all the memories of Europe's wartime genocide as Serbs practiced ethnic cleansing against their erstwhile neighbors, shelling the site of the 1984 Olympics, which had been a symbol of international cooperation, with artillery and small arms fire. For residents of the beleaguered city, food and water were in short supply. The infrastructure was crumbling. A bread line had formed in the streets on the afternoon of May 27, a few hundred yards from where Smailovic lived, when a shell landed in the midst of the hungry people, killing twenty-two and injuring another hundred.

At the age of thirty-six, with a bushy moustache and tousled hair, Smailovic was the principal cellist for the Sarajevo Opera. Donning his evening clothes, he appeared the next day at 4 p.m., the hour of the attack, and began to play seated upon a small folding chair in front of the bakery where the atrocity occurred. Each day, for that day and twenty-one afternoons following, amid the whistling fire of snipers, he played what he

called “the saddest music I know,” the G Minor Adagio.

To the hail of bullets and gunfire, he responded with a gesture that embodied the highest and best in our civilization. Some wondered if the musician might be mentally unbalanced, pitting the sound of music against the roar of mortars. But Smailovic replied that the real madness lay with the perpetrators of the violence. “My mother is a Muslim and my father is a Muslim, but I don’t care,” he explained to one reporter. “I am a Sarajevan. I am a cosmopolitan. I am a pacifist. I am nothing special. I am a part of the town. Like everyone else, I do what I can.”

Smailovic didn’t stop the war with his cello. The siege continued for a thousand days, claiming ten thousand lives and causing immense physical devastation. But his story became a talisman of sanity and hope to millions around the world, and a source of strength to other residents of the beleaguered town who managed amid the mayhem to rear their children and hold their families together, to go about their jobs, to publish newspapers and even to organize concerts and theatrical productions—to keep alive the memory of what Smailovic called “the beauty of a life without fear.” Croats and Serbs, Muslims and Christians alike know his name and today place flowers on the spot where for twenty-two days, humanity triumphed over barbarism.

[Music plays]

A candle is a small thing. Its flame can seem almost insignificant amid the vast darkness of the night. But the glow of one small candle is sometimes all we need to glimpse the path toward a livable future amid the pitfalls that lie in wait. Its trembling light can bring comfort against the terrors that inhabit the gloom round about. Serenity and assurance, confidence and faith in life’s goodness are all symbolized in the kindling of Hanukkah’s menorah.

The tradition goes back over two thousand years. The tiny state of Israel, which had been overrun and dominated so many times by mighty empires, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians, once again found itself embattled by successor kingdoms to the conquests of Alexander the Great. In 198 B.C.E., the Jewish homeland was swallowed whole by the Seleucid dynasty, based in Syria, whose ruler, Antiochus IV, installed his own image in the temple as a deity to be worshiped by an obedient people. The temple’s treasures were looted to finance the king’s military campaigns against rival states in Egypt and Macedon. Records show that forty thousand Jews were massacred in Jerusalem alone as the king sought to crush resistance and replace a religion based on Torah with one rooted in reverence for his own authority and the earthly power of the state.

Hanukkah commemorates the cleansing of the temple and the restoration of God’s law to the Jewish community. It celebrates peoples’ right to self-determination and their right to be different. For the Jews were different from their neighbors. Unlike the Greeks or Romans or Egyptians, they worshiped a deity who was never to be confused or conflated with Caesars or Pharaohs or other autocrats, a God whose demands for justice and compassion transcended the laws of any temporal court or jurisdiction, a divinity who preferred righteousness and ethical living to ritual or sacrifice or to the esoteric cults of the mystery religions so popular around the ancient Mediterranean. Many times, in defeat, in exile, at the mercy of marauding armies, the followers of

Yahweh must have wondered where God's presence could be found or what had become of the promise of peace. As they re-dedicated their holy temple, they must have wondered how the small amount of sacred oil could be kept burning in the lamps until more could be blessed and consecrated. Hanukkah recalls the seemingly inexplicable fact that fuel sufficient for only one day kept the menorah burning for eight, and so for eight days in the month of Kislev, Jews continue to light candles each night. But the larger miracle lies in the profound hope and perseverance of a battered people who refused to surrender their ideals or give up their faith that "might makes right" is not God's law, who despite overwhelming odds continued to hold to their belief that the sovereign and ordering principle beyond and behind the world's bloodshed and chaos is on the side of decency and kindness.

[Music plays]

The higher, purer notes of human nature sound softly. Violin, cello, and organ threaten to be drowned out by the rumbling of tanks and the guttural shrieks of war. But when the last of the cannon falls silent and the martial cadence is mercifully at an end, the solemn, elegiac music of humanity will still resonate somewhere in the heart's recesses, calling us back to our better selves.

Why does the Iraqi National Symphony continue to play? Three times every week, they gather to rehearse in a compound in eastern Baghdad.. They've run short of reeds. Clarinetists like Ali Khasaf need cork to repair their woodwinds and most music stores are out of business. The theater where they were accustomed to give performances was burned by looters after the American invasion in 2003. Some of the artists live in neighborhoods infested with gunmen and militia who believe that Western music is un-Islamic and might kill them if they were spotted carrying instruments in the streets. Several performers have fled Baghdad—three string players escaped to Syria and an oboist managed to reach Dubai—but as of last September, fifty-nine of the company remained, giving concerts of Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and music of their own composition for audiences of their countrymen and women who turn out in large numbers, despite the guards carrying Kalashnikovs in the aisles, to capture a moment of elevation and normalcy in an otherwise terrorized existence. One concert this fall drew three hundred listeners. They come for the music and to affirm the possibility of a life without jihad or suicide bombers.

Up until the 1940's, the orchestra was mostly composed of Jews, descendants of Judaism's thriving diaspora that had been driven into Babylon six hundred years before the time of Jesus. Only a handful of those first Hebrews now remain of the tens of thousands who once lived in Iraq. Yet the remaining members of the symphony include both Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims, Kurds, Armenians, Assyrian Christians, and Turkomen, as well as four women, representing the diversity of Iraqi society. Every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday, they tune their instruments and practice: amid the noise of discord, underlying harmonies waiting to emerge.

No one knows how long their determination will persist. Perhaps some new regime will outlaw their music, like the Taliban in Afghanistan. The fatigue and stress of war take their toll. But the human spirit is like an indestructible scrap of manuscript rescued from a burning city, like the notes of an adagio played courageously for twenty-two days, like

the wavering flame of a candle that refuses to be dimmed. Somewhere, somehow, against all the forces of cruelty and indifference, the light will shine, and the music will go on.

[Music plays to end]