

# Catholic Review Column: Defiant Requiem

Seventy years ago in Terazin, a town located in the former Czechoslovakia, the Requiem Mass of 19th century Italian opera composer Giuseppe Verdi was performed for the first of 16 times over a two-year span.

Verdi composed the piece in 1874 in honor of Alessandro Manzoni, an Italian poet and novelist whose works inspired Italian nationalism and advocated for the unification of Italy. It is a powerful work that requires a large orchestra and chorus and features thunderous and dramatic music, contrasted with music that invokes a more melancholy and somber mood.

In Terazin, the members of the chorus numbered 150. They learned by memory the demanding and lengthy piece from a single vocal score and performed before audiences that consisted of prisoners and guards. The 16th and final singing of the Requiem came before members of the International Red Cross. The performers were attempting to sing what they could not say: that they were prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp where unspeakable horrors—shielded from the rest of the world—were being set upon them. Terazin was not just a town in Czechoslovakia, it was the name of the Theresienstadt concentration camp.

Fellow Jewish prisoner Rafael Schachter was also an accomplished conductor. It was Schachter who formed and held together the members of the prisoner-chorus. As members were taken to their eventual deaths, Schachter would train new members so that the hope-inspiring work would continue. Those fortunate enough to survive and recount the unimaginable experience credited Schachter with saving their lives by inspiring in them hope and diverting their minds from the circumstances that enveloped them—hunger, despair, pain, and dread.

The story of Schachter and his “Defiant Requiem: Verdi at Terezin” is now being told in a moving performance that combines the music of the requiem with video first-hand accounts from survivors and members of the original chorus. The creation of Maestro Murry Sidlin, currently Dean of the School of Music at the Catholic

University of America, the “concert drama” features actors who offer insight into Schachter’s mindset. For him, and for members of the chorus, “Singing the Requiem was their act of defiance, a statement of their dignity and quest for freedom; a temporary solace from their brutal confinement; an assurance of God’s presence; a desire to express a collaborative spiritual belief in their own humanity amidst the unspeakable violations perpetrated against them.”

I was privileged to serve on the Honorary Committee that helped bring the Defiant Requiem to Baltimore’s Peabody Conservatory last week. It is part of a larger effort to raise awareness of the Holocaust, the plight of those imprisoned at the Theresienstadt concentration camp, and of this inspiring moment in the history of mankind. Cardinal Dolan and the Archdiocese of New York similarly helped to bring the event to New York in recent years. It has since been performed in places all over the world, including Terazin, the site of the Nazi concentration camp at the closing of the 47-nation Prague Holocaust Era Assets Conference.

After the final performance before the Red Cross in June 1944, members of the chorus, including its director, Rafael Schachter, were taken to Auschwitz. Schachter did not survive.

The performance of this all-Jewish choir imprisoned in a World War II concentration camp of a choral work “steeped in the Catholic liturgy” is a reminder to us all that eternal hope and the aspiration for moral courage and human dignity unites us as children of God. In a fractured world where human dignity is often compromised, may the Defiant Requiem inspire us in the work of creating “a civilization of love” wherein the life and dignity of each person is respected and cherished.