

SYMPHONY PERFORMS PIANO CONCERTINO SUNDAY

Polish-Jewish dentist recalls saga of his composer father

By Rabbi Baruch Cohon

Andrej Szpilman lives in Poland, spends considerable time in Germany, and managed a conversation with me from there just before flying to Los Angeles for the world premiere of his father's composition, *Piano Concertino* by Wladyslaw Szpilman. The work will be featured in this Sunday's concert by the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony at Valley Beth Shalom.

The composer himself died last year, but his life and work form the subject of a book titled *The Pianist*, winner of the L.A. Times Book of the Year award in 1999 and currently being filmed by Roman Polanski. It was Andrej, a dentist with a writer's soul, who polished its language and saw it through Polish, German and English editions.

Originally written in 1945, the book was a rough and emotionless chronicle of the experiences of Wladyslaw, a gifted pianist who studied in Berlin with the famous German virtuoso Artur Schnabel — who found him so promising that he taught him for free, while other students paid high fees — until Hitler came to power. Then he returned to his native Warsaw to pursue his studies with Polish pianists Michalowski and Smidovitch, and then at the age of 24 joined the infant Polish Radio. He played popular songs, accompanied singers, and improvised bridges and intros.

Among his colleagues and classmates in those days was a curly-haired fellow who later found candelabrum-lit fame as Liberace.

Wladyslaw Szpilman also wrote film music before the war. In fact two of his movie songs became popular hits and were sung all over Poland. The lyrics were written by his brother, who was

martyred in the Holocaust, as was all the rest of his family.

Ghetto gates were closing. Bombs were falling on Warsaw. And Wladyslaw was working on his concertino. Today it sounds amazingly upbeat, its harmonies recalling Gershwin, its spirit defying — even denying — the evil that was closing in.

Andrej, born after his father's miraculous survival, first read the story at the age of 11 and remembers somehow suppressing it in his own mind, as if it was the story of someone else. He and his father never talked about it.

And then one day, after it was published, a journalist came to interview the two of them. A German girl, she listened to their story — still told unemotionally — and then confided in them: "I learned two weeks ago that I am Jewish." A former demonstrator against Israel and the U.S. during the Gulf War, she was struggling to internalize this new knowledge of her own identity, and needed their story. Needed their experience.

After that, Andrej and his father were able to talk.

Hearing his father's music played for the first time with a symphony orchestra will be an event that is bringing Andrej halfway around the world.

The Szpilman Concertino will share the program Sunday with another world premiere, suites from the Oscar-winning film *Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kinder Transport* by Lee Holridge. Other Holocaust-related compositions selected by conductor Dr. Noreen Green to round out the program include works by Shony Alex Braun, Robert Strassburg, Robert Elfman and Michael Isaacson.

Don't miss it — 7:30 p.m. Sunday at Valley Beth Shalom, 15739 Ventura Blvd., Encino.

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