

THE VIOLIN AND THE JEWS

By Ian Altman

The names read like the list of Who's Who in the violin world: Ferdinand David, Fritz Kreisler, Isadore Lotto, Joseph Ernst, Henri Wienie ski, Joseph Joachim, Leopold Auer, Mischa Elmen, Toscha Seidle, Yehudi Menuen, Nathan Millstein, Paul Koschanski, and the king himself, Jascha Heifitz. In more recent times, Isaac Stem, David Oistrakh, Leonid Kogen, and today, Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zuckerman, Schlomo Mintz, Gil Shaham, Maxim Vengerov - the list seems endless.

What is the reason that so many of the great violinists are Jewish - and almost none of them are observant - and some became Christian? The story has many questions and few answers, but the pinnacle of the art seems to be Jewish in its origin.

The sociological phenomenon of the Jew in Europe is the beginning. Expelled from most countries at least once, confined to ghettos, the onerous "Jew Tax," not allowed to own land, not allowed to hold public office, no citizenship (chattels of the state), constant changing of a pale of settlement (see *Fiddler on the Roof*); we are all aware of these things. Any history of the Jews must deal with this phenomenon. One of the ways to escape, if you had great talent, was in the arts. Indeed, the Jewish performing musician became a relatively common thing in the Nineteenth Century and led to a very specialized type of anti-Semitism, "they could imitate genius and recreate great masterworks but never create masterworks of their own." As a consequence, there are only a few important Jewish composers and most of them, like Mendelssohn and Mahler, became Christian; not so much out of conviction but to facilitate their careers.

But, back to the violin. If one became a great master, the world would grant a type of life not permitted other Jews. Phillip Roth points out in his book *Violin Virtuosos from Paganini to the Twenty First Century*, that after the enormous popularity of Mischa Elmen, Russian Jewish parents either in Russia or in the United States would save their money to give their children violin lessons with the hope that their offspring might open a new world for them.

It was simply a way to escape the European drudgery that Jews had to endure. Of course, only a select few made it. But still, in the late Nineteenth Century and the first half of the Twentieth Century, roughly seventy percent of the violin sections of major orchestra were Jews. Another contributing factor, and one that I feel is disappearing, is the Jewish emphasis on education coupled with the desire to excel. Again, the great escape. In my own childhood the most vivid memory of my father was his constant repetition of this concept; "Son, whatever you do, you must do it better than the next person because you are a Jew."

When I relate this to other people, even Jews, they say this is a terrible thing to have endured. My response is, "Don't be foolish; it gave me a work ethic that has allowed me to utilize my meager talents to the best of my ability." I feel certain that the Mischas, Jaschas, Grischas, and Abraschas that came out of Eastern Europe and were successful suffered a fate similar to mine. Of course, only the truly gifted became giants.

Another contributing factor was the role music played with the rise of Chassidism. It was a very powerful and emotional surge that spilled over into serious art forms.

In order to be a first class violinist or any other instrumentalist, you need four things. First, you must have a good ear; it is indispensable. Second, you must have a physical knack for the instrument, just as a sprinter has fast feet. Third, good training must be available from an early age, proper reflexes cannot be learned after the teen years. Fourth, there must be a desire to succeed by nature or instilled by parents and/or teachers. Then it is an uphill battle.

Now, do Jews have these four things in greater abundance than other peoples. Sometimes it seems so. We make up only one tenth of one percent of the world's population yet we have more than twelve percent of the Nobel prizes awarded. Does this result stem from a people with more gifts or a people with more desire - coupled with chutzpah or courage - a very unanswered question?

But it does not need to be answered; instead we should be aware of our past. We should aspire to the achievements of our predecessors. Just as we say "never forget," a prominent part of the High Holidays Mahzor, (Rosh Hashanna, Zichronot in Musaf) we must never forget what we can and have already done and do it again.

If this sounds like a lecture, it is. I am a teacher.