

RECHA FREIER AND TESTIMONIUM

BEFORE TESTIMONIUM

It is about my mother that I write. She and her husband, Rabbi Dr. Moritz Freier, begot four children of whom I am the eldest. As I contemplate my brothers and my sister and their offspring of nine - and their children, in turn - I am filled with a great sense of satisfaction at having been born into that family. As nature will have it, this was a joint accomplishment of Recha Freier and her husband, but I maintain it was not his or her least.

When TESTIMONIUM was conceived in 1966, RECHA FREIER was already 74 years old. It was to be the last of her major undertakings. She was born in Norden by the North Sea in 1892 into an orthodox and serene family. Her father was a sparse tall teacher, equally versed in Talmudic studies and German literature. Sparkling blue eyes looked out from beneath a big black skull-cap and the face tapered into a long white beard, as I recall him. He liked to invent stories for his own and his family's pleasure, and played the violin. Indeed, the entire family played music and Recha in particular played the piano. Her mother was a teacher of French and English and endowed with an unlikely capacity for memorizing large tracts of poetry and prose in these languages. Recha was trained to be a teacher, like her parents, and taught German, French and English. Sometime after she married my father in 1919, she began to be interested in the myths and legends of races around the globe, seeking out the motifs which were common to all. Some of the traits which singled her out became apparent at the time. She allowed herself to be impressed by what she read and heard - she was a most remarkable listener and spoke little - but she brought an independent mind to bear on any theme which preoccupied her and did not allow herself to be daunted by established authorities, once she had made up her mind. My father told me, she had written some of the most incisive commentaries on some of Shakespeare's plays. He brought these to London, when he left Germany in 1938, and stored them in the cellar of the Finchley synagogue. When a burst pipe flooded the cellar, these manuscripts were lost.

But let me go back to the early twenties. In 1921, the Jewish community of Sofia was looking for a chief-rabbi who was orthodox, Zionist, and had a secular Ph.D. This combination was rare at the time, my father fitted the description and even though he was an Ashkenazi rabbi from Germany, he was engaged.

For Juan Pablo Iglesias,
whose personality and
judgment, R.F. cherished
above all.

Switzerland and McLean
27.1.83.

My parents learned Ladino and set out for Sofia. Four years later, both the Jewish community of Sofia and my father were quite pleased to part company. My father's orthodoxy was too strict for the Sephardi community. He once upset them by invalidating the Matzoth they had baked for Passover. For his part, he did not feel party to the violent unrest which rocked Bulgaria, of which I recall the cathedral being blown up by Macedonian dissidents. And so, my parents returned to Germany - their more familiar surroundings - in 1925 or 1926, where my father was eventually elected rabbi to the three major orthodox synagogues in the Jewish community of Berlin.

Until 1931, Recha Freier had been mainly engrossed in her spiritual world, when she became aware of an increasing number of Jewish young people who found themselves unemployed and naturally also turned to the rabbi for help. There was unemployment in Germany, but the spirit of the rapidly growing national-socialist party - Hitler's party - began to pervade Germany and to ruin any prospect for young Jews to find work. With an uncanny sense of things to come - still two years before Hitler's ascent to power - Recha Freier decided that there was no future for the Jews in Germany. In defiance of the youngsters' parents and the Jewish community which was one of the most solidly established Jewish communities in the world, she set about organizing what was to become Youth Aliya.

The resistance to her was formidable even within parts of the Zionist Organization. She insisted that the young people go to Palestine, even before receiving their professional education in Germany or Europe, but receive such training in Palestine. She also insisted that they be straightaway integrated in Kibbutzim and small-holder settlements and not be brought up in institutions specially set up for refugee children. Being largely spurned by all establishments, she took on the task of doing everything herself, linking up with individuals ready to help financially, and with the few leaders of the Zionist Organization, the Kibbutz movement and the Yishuv, who were caught up in the ardour of her initiative. The first group of children left Germany in 1932 which is the year in which Youth Aliya came into being. The official document registering Youth Aliya was signed on the 30.1.33, the day Hitler became chancellor of Germany. Recha Freier could not even find prominent Jews to affix their names to the official document, except for her husband and a few friends.

When Albert Einstein recommended Youth Aliya for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1954, the last recommendation before his death, he wrote: "I have the honor of recommending for your consideration for the forthcoming award of the Nobel Peace Prize the international organization known as Youth Aliya, through which children from 72 countries have been rescued and rehabilitated in Israel." The Nobel Committee decided otherwise.

The male members of the Freier family left Berlin for London between 1937 and 1939. But Recha Freier decided to stay on, together with her small daughter Ma'ayan, as long as there was a chance of rescuing Jews, young and old. In 1941, a year and half into World War II, Recha Freier and her daughter made their way clandestinely across the frontier into Yugoslavia, and my mother still arranged for 150 young people to cross into Yugoslavia in the same fashion.

By the time she arrived in Jerusalem, Youth Aliya had become a vital department of the Jewish Agency establishment. They wanted their founder to be relegated to the past and not have her interfere in the smooth running of the organization. Recha Freier spilt no tears - no matter how she felt - and seeing much destitution in the streets of Jerusalem - healthy children supporting themselves and their families as bootblacks or beggars - she went about making arrangements for their adoption and upbringing in the communities which then symbolized the building of Israel, the Kibbutzim and small-holder settlements. Again, she had to prevail against parents and organizations, find herself the money from willing donors, and eventually, in 1941, the Mif'al le Hachshrat Yaldei Eretz Israel became the registered name for this undertaking. Like Youth Aliya it is part of the establishment to this day, entirely supported by public funds. Unlike Youth Aliya, Recha Freier remained chairman and inspiration of the Mif'al until her death.

ON THE WAY TO TESTIMONIUM

In 1958, Recha Freier set up the Israel Composers Fund. She simply realized that there were Israeli composers whose abilities she valued who had much trouble making a living. As was the case with her previous initiatives, organized support for Israeli composers was eventually taken over by the established authorities, in this case, the Ministry of Education.

In retrospect, it is manifest that she was ever more ready for what was to become Testimonium. She had become much involved in contemporary music. She had written poetry, some in Hebrew, but mainly in German. Out of the two volumes of her poems, published in Germany, some had been set to music. Even before Testimonium, she had written an operetta. She had been amused by the decision of the Minister of Tourism, Mr. Moshe Kol - himself a former director of Youth Aliya - and the Mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek, to fill in part of the valley of Hinnom in order to create a level stretch of land on which the artists' quarter, known as Hutzot Ha-yotzer, was eventually built. The valley of Hinnom, being the nearest thing we have to the concept of Hell, Recha Freier mused about the fact that access to and egress from Hell was much impeded by the Minister's and the Mayor's earth-filling initiative. She made this imbroglio the theme of her libretto.

The operetta was eventually performed in that very artists' quarter in the open air and on a stage provided by Mayor Kollek. As I recall the performance, it was entirely typical, that one of Recha Freier's grand-daughters painted the stage back-drops, other grandchildren had to man the box-office, and Recha Freier, almost blind with a cataract (from which she was eventually relieved) took over the stage direction one day before the performance, since she did not agree with the stage-director whose services she had hired.

TESTIMONIUM

In 1966, Recha Freier heard some music by the composer Roman Haubenstock-Ramati who lived in Vienna. She liked what she heard. She had just written a drama and it occurred to her Mr. Haubenstock might set it to music. Mr. Haubenstock suggested they meet and Recha Freier set out straightaway for Vienna, as was her habit of doing things. After driving her round Vienna for two days, without hardly saying anything, Mr. Haubenstock took her to a coffee-shop on the eve of her departure. She knew, he was going to tell her something which had been hanging heavily on his mind. He told her that for many years he had been wanting the passions of the Jewish people in the diaspora to be set to music and that many composers - Jewish and non-Jewish - had eagerly agreed to take part. But, there was no-one to make the dream come true. Recha Freier immediately said, she would do it, but already on her flight back to Jerusalem, she decided that Jewish history in the diaspora was not only one of sufferings - which was implied by the word "passions" - but also one of faith in salvation, of vision, of heroism, and of literary creation. In whatever she did or pondered, she would never accept that there was no remedy to any distress, historical or individual. Also, on her flight back from Vienna, she thought up the appellation "Testimonium" for this new undertaking - not passions, but Testimonium. When she told the late President Shazar what she intended to do, he suggested the word נִזְעָם (EDUTH) as the Hebrew equivalent of Testimonium, and Recha Freier adopted both appellations. She also accepted another suggestion by President Shazar. The first of the Testimonia was scheduled for 1968 - one year after the Jews had acquired the freedom of the old city of Jerusalem - and President Shazar felt, it ought to be dedicated to Jerusalem, and Recha Freier went along with his suggestion.

Recha Freier now set about everything at once. She began to choose themes, write or select texts, taking sometimes poetic licences where history was no unambiguous guide. She began corresponding with composers whom she invited to set these texts to music, and she negotiated with the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, which was eventually to perform most of the six Testimonium concerts in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. And she cast around for money, writing to everyone, starting from friends of the family and not sparing Knesset members, ministers, and presidents.

She had loyal friends whom she consulted on her thematic and organizational problems, but she did whatever she did utterly by herself. Seated by a small desk, no more than one meter long and half a meter wide, mostly writing long-hand and aided by a secretary who looked her up every day to type all that had to be typed and to file what had to be filed.

Especially fascinating was her correspondence with composers over texts and music. It was remarkable that no-one could withstand her appeal, and in her exchanges with composers, it was evident how much inspiration derived from her personality.

In his autobiography, Professor Josef Tal writes of his meeting with Recha Freier, and continues "as of then, she was to be a planet in the firmament of my life. This planet brought on much enrichment, caused frictions, drew its circles and created ever new constellations until it was recalled by God into the universe. I, though, still feel it drawing its circles around me, for it has not the measure of near or far."

In a chapter entitled "Concerning My Sonata about Jerusalem", Professor Alexander Goehr of Cambridge writes: "At that concert Bertini introduced me to Mrs. Freier. She was not a particularly large lady, but I was instantly impressed, if not overwhelmed by what radiated from her. At that time perhaps in her early seventies, she had the powerful features often found in German Jews, beautiful and strong, indicating determination and serenity. She was dressed then, as always, in a sacklike, colourless dress which hung loosely down to her ankles. It was explained to me that she was a poetess, had founded and operated the Youth Aliya from Germany right into the Nazi period and had herself only come out of Germany at the very last moment", and the entire chapter is devoted to Professor Goehr's correspondence and meetings with Recha Freier on her original concept and the eventual evolution of his composition. On some of her more mundane problems, he says this : "At the same time (and I mention this because it casts an interesting light on the way she operated) she was paying me my commission fees in tiny instalments. For not only was Testimonium her brainchild, but she fed it with contributions from friends and well-wishers all over the world. I was quite ashamed to take the money from her; but needed it badly at the time..." And towards the end of the chapter, he writes: "Next day she sent me a strange object, some dark thick paper on which she had painted in gold. She told me this expressed her reaction to hearing my music. She was now a very old lady, but still full of ideas, and above all of the enthusiasm the passion, the indifference to trivialities which had made her lead her life the way she had. It's well known how much a great good she did for the German Jewish children she helped to rescue. To more than this one of the composers whom she enthused by her schemes, I suspect, she gave something special of her own. One of her short poems reads:

Ich fühle mich
wie reifes korn.-
nun mahle mich,
Und iss mich,
Herr !

(I feel like ripe corn. Now grind me, and eat me, Lord !)

The programmes of the six Testimonium concerts appear elsewhere in this volume. For Testimonium I on "Jerusalem", Teddy Kollek had put at Recha's Freier disposal the courtyard of David's Tower. Most of the following Testimonia took place at the Jerusalem Theater and the Tel-Aviv Museum. Whenever it appeared that a sufficient number of compositions could be expected, dates were set with - mostly - the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, negotiations were engaged with conductors - Mr. Juan Pablo Isquierdo was to become the principal conductor of Testimonium - with additional instrumentalists and singers, as required by the compositions, and all else that goes with setting up performances, generally two consecutive evenings in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, each.

No-one seemed perturbed by the fact, that Recha Freier had introduced an uncommon way of putting concerts together. Every one of the Testimonia concerts was held together by a common theme, but all composers wrote their contributions independently. Even though lengths of compositions, the combinations of instruments and voices and the order of their presentation were discussed, each - or rather most - of the compositions were specially written for Testimonium with no prior knowledge of how they would accomodate with one another. And it worked. A common theme seemed as good a criterion for putting concerts together, as any other. All composers, foreign and local, would convene in Israel for the first performances of their compositions and music-critics from Germany, England, and France would fly over for the occasion regularly, joined occasionally by colleagues from other countries. As I read their reviews, I am again struck by the fact that none could write about Testimonium without writing about Recha Freier, as well.

A history of Testimonium would be as full of drama, as anything Recha Freier undertook. When a German choir could not manage a Hebrew text, sent to them transliterated and by tape, Recha Freier flew to Hamburg to coach them. When she went to look up the composer Xenakis on the outskirts of Paris - hardly able to see - she still refused the offer of the Israeli Ambassador Ben Nathan to drive her there. She was too modest to bother him, but he was so worried that he followed her taxi in his own car, in order to make sure, she arrived there safely. This ream of stories, however, which were causes of constant worry to her family, are not really of general concern.

Most remarkable were her exchanges with the composers, to which I have alluded above. When I put it to the composer Stockhausen, after my mother's death, and to a number of her friends, that I might try and continue Testimonium, which by then had become a recognised event on the contemporary musical scene, they reacted essentially by saying: " Who do you think you are? There can be no substitute for your mother."

There was much immediacy in her exchanges with the composers. By way of illustration, I recall that Mr. Xenakis played her some of his music. After listening for a while, she discerned that a mystical theme might well fit the composer's inclinations, suggested a legend on Moses' ascent to heaven, which Satan tried mightily to obstruct. In his reply, Mr. Xenakis asked for "beaucoup plus du diable", Recha Freier was not ready to yield in the Moses context, but looked around for a story in which Satan was more prominent and successful. She came upon the story of Joseph della Reina, the hero of a Kabbalistic legend who attempted to put an end to Satan's power and bring about general redemption. Joseph blundered, when he burnt incense in Satan's presence. This was his undoing. He became Satan's ally and Lilith's (Queen of Demons) lover, and eventually committed suicide. Real suicide being out of character with the surreal story, Recha Freier altered the end. According to her, Joseph knew about a secret, narrow gate that leads out of this world. Through it he went. "Sha'ar" (gate) was then indeed the name given by Mr. Xenakis to his composition.

I may conclude, with a little vignette about Testimonium VI. Testimonium VI took place in 1983. Recha Freier was by then 91 years old, one year before her death. For this event, she had reached into new realms and had written the libretto for a full-fledged opera on "Susskind von Trimberg" the only one among the German minnesingers of the 12th century who was presumed Jewish. Little, if anything, is known about him except for the poems he had left behind. These poems extolling the virtues of the family, rather than the valour of the the count of the castle or the charms of his lady, lent support to those who believed Susskind von Trimberg was a Jew. The writer Friedrich Torberg had been fascinated by this conjecture and written a novel on this theme. Recha Freier was similarly fascinated, but in her libretto the history of Susskind von Trimberg was enveloped in the mystique of the Jewish fate in the Germany of the Middle Ages, and she convened Satan and the big rusted key to the door of salvation to take their appointed parts in the drama. The libretto was set to music by Mark Kopytman and performed as a full-dress opera at the Jerusalem Theater.

A non-personal history of Testimonium would not recount a typical evening at the home of Recha Freier prior to the performance. She would be seated at her small desk next to a stove. Kneeling next to her, the stage director would be reading out to her a summary of the libretto which he had composed for the programme booklet, a number of composers and their wives would be busy in the white room - a corner of which served as a kitchen - preparing food for everyone, even as a friend would be setting up the entire programme booklet in Hebrew and I would be translating comments of German composers on their compositions into English.

The stage designer would turn up in order to have Recha Freier's approval for the stage setting of the "Big Key" scene, and the directors of the Jerusalem Theater and the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra would come along with bills, worried that there may be no money to pay for their expenses, since the Ministry of Education had told them, that there was no reserve from which to pay the money the Minister had promised to Recha Freier. It was a daunting array of problems which presented themselves all at once to Recha Freier, day by day, and it required her quiet and indomitable resilience to reassure everyone.

I cannot help recalling that she once said to one of her grand-daughters: "I am the wretched, aged Caliban." This was apparently in reference to the old and deformed slave Caliban in Shakespeare's Tempest, who forever rebelled against the attempts to put him in his place. A few days before her death, as Recha Freier was battling to breathe, with eyes closed and unable to speak, the same grand-daughter asked her: "Are you still the wretched, aged Caliban ?" and Recha Freier, already consumed by her efforts to survive, summoned the last vestiges of strength and nodded in assent. This time, she was rebelling against death; in her mind, just one more establishment.

After the first performance of "Susskind von Trimberg", Recha Freier introduced changes in the stage directions for the following evening with unfailing intuition, changes which evoked the admiration even of the critics who commented on the performances.

This is the first time, I have tried to put down some impressions on the history of Testimonium. Testimonium has not become part of the establishment, even though the Israel Festival would like to continue it. It was Recha Freier's creation. As I realise the on-going interest in her various endeavours and the manner in which her family is engaged in helping to satisfy enquiries, I realise we did right to put on her tombstone: " I am asleep, but my heart is awake" (Song of Songs V.2.).