

# THE CELLIST OF AUSCHWITZ

*Anita Lasker-Wallfisch is nearly a hundred and has forgotten nothing. In “The Commandant’s Shadow,” she meets the descendants of Rudolf Höss.*

**By Alex Ross**

August 9, 2024



Photograph by Dmitrij Leltschuk / laif / Redux

“**H**ier spricht Anita Lasker, eine deutsche Jüdin,” a voice says, youthful but precise. “This is Anita Lasker speaking, a German Jew.” The

recording was made on April 16, 1945, at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, one day after British troops liberated the site. The BBC was eliciting statements from various former inmates. Lasker, then nineteen, described how she had first been imprisoned on political grounds, then sent to Auschwitz, and finally consigned to Belsen.

“I would like to say a few words about Auschwitz,” Lasker goes on. “The Auschwitz prisoners, the few who survived, all fear that the world will not believe what happened there.” She proceeds to convey some of what had happened—scenes that were not yet familiar to a global audience. “A doctor and a commandant stood on the platform as the transports arrived, and before our eyes people were ‘sorted.’ This means, they were asked their age and state of health. . . . Right, left, right, left. Right is toward life; left is toward the chimney.” Lasker was a cellist in the Auschwitz women’s orchestra, and she played music amid the horror. A few times, she falters as she delivers her account, but she is matter-of-fact to the end.

And so she remains, at the age of ninety-nine. Since 1946, she has been living in London; in 1952 she married the pianist Peter Wallfisch, who died in 1993, and added his name to her own. She occupies a modest town house in the northwestern neighborhood of Kensal Rise. I visited her there last summer. When I mentioned the BBC recording, she smiled and said, “I spoke such good German!” Her living room is crowded with books. She had been reading “Time’s Echo,” Jeremy Eichler’s meditation on musical memorials to the Second World War.

As the number of Holocaust survivors dwindles, Lasker-Wallfisch is one of the most forceful and eloquent witnesses still living. More than that, she embodies a lost way of being—the intellectual spark of German Jewish culture before Hitler. With her shock of white hair, ruddy face, and exacting eyes, she looks twenty years younger than she is. She is mordantly funny. She speaks in epigrams and aphorisms. She has no patience with sentimentality or stupidity. An unrepentant smoker, she intersperses her remarks with well-

timed drags on a cigarette. Her voice has descended at least an octave since 1945. The word “indomitable” might have been invented for her. She is perhaps the most awe-inspiring person I have ever met.

“I recently had another visitor,” she said to me. “The son of Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz. Sitting in that chair, right where you are now.”

That meeting can be seen in Daniela Völker’s new documentary, “The Commandant’s Shadow,” which is now streaming on Max. The film focusses mainly on Höss’s descendants and their attempts to come to terms with the mass murderer at the head of their family. Lasker-Wallfisch’s daughter, Maya, a psychotherapist, is also a prominent character. Amid a tableau of troubled souls, Lasker-Wallfisch descends as a *dea ex machina* of ironic reason. The spectacle offers a striking inversion of power. As she put it to me, with a slightly mischievous air, “I have never seen anyone *so nervous* to come into my little house!”

**F**or decades, Lasker-Wallfisch said relatively little about her experiences in the Holocaust. She concentrated on establishing herself as a musician—she was a founding member of the English Chamber Orchestra—and raising a family. Her son, Raphael, is himself a notable cellist; her grandson Simon is a classical baritone based in Berlin, her granddaughter Joanna a Los Angeles singer-songwriter, and her grandson Benjamin a Hollywood film composer (“Twisters,” “The Flash”). It wasn’t that she wished to forget Auschwitz and Belsen; she would talk about them if she was asked. But she wasn’t often asked, and eventually she wrote down her memories so that her family could retain them. In 1993, she read aloud some passages from the manuscript on the BBC, prompting interest from publishers. The memoir appeared as “Inherit the Truth, 1939-1945,” in 1996. Two years later, Lasker-Wallfisch gave an extensive interview to the U.S.C. Shoah Foundation.

She was born in the Prussian Silesian city of Breslau, which is now Wrocław,

in Poland. Her father, Alfons, had a successful law practice; her mother, Edith, was an accomplished violinist. Lasker-Wallfisch and her sisters, Marianne and Renate, all played instruments. On Sundays, the family spoke French so that the children could maintain the skills they had picked up from a governess. Lasker-Wallfisch writes, “In my youthful ignorance I considered this to be absolutely ridiculous, and so never opened my mouth on Sundays.” Saturday afternoons were devoted to coffee, pastries, and readings of Goethe and Schiller. Like so many educated German Jewish families, the Laskers believed in the greatness of German culture, and their devotion made it harder to see what was being done in that culture’s name. The fact that Alfons had received an Iron Cross for his service in the First World War seemed like extra insurance. In “The Commandant’s Shadow,” Lasker-Wallfisch recalls, “My father, unfortunately, was a complete optimist. He would say, ‘The Germans can’t be that stupid.’ And then he realized: the Germans *are* that stupid.”

As Lasker-Wallfisch’s cello playing progressed, her parents wanted her to continue at all costs. Because no one in Breslau was willing to take on a Jewish student, she was sent to Berlin to study with Leo Rostal, who later fled to the U.S. It was 1938, and Lasker-Wallfisch was only thirteen. In her relative innocence, she enjoyed being on her own and wandering the city, but Kristallnacht ended the idyll. She remembers a pervasive smell of alcohol the morning after; liquor shops had been smashed up, and their contents were running in the gutters.

Lasker-Wallfisch returned to Breslau, where things grew grimmer by the month. A chapter of her book entitled “The Destruction of a Family” reprints family letters from the period. Marianne, the oldest child, had reached England shortly before the German invasion of Poland. There were plans for Renate to join her there and for Anita to go to Paris, but the outbreak of war trapped the girls in Germany. Amid increasingly desperate efforts to arrange an escape, Alfons tried to maintain a semblance of normalcy. In one letter, he writes, “At first we read ‘Don Carlos’ and then we

dared approach 'Faust.' We have just finished the first part. I think it was a good idea. All the participants got a lot of enjoyment from it." On another occasion, he proudly recounts Anita's concert appearances and her mastery of Latin.

On April 9, 1942, Alfons and Edith were deported. Anita and Renate wanted to go with them, but Alfons refused. "Where we are going, you get there soon enough," he said. The last message he sent was a quotation from Psalm 121: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help." Alfons and Edith are believed to have been murdered in the transit ghetto of Izbica, where mass killings took place in November, 1942.

The next stage of Lasker-Wallfisch's story is the stuff of a thriller. She and Renate were forced to work at a paper factory where French prisoners of war were also present. The sisters began forging papers for prisoners who were planning to escape. Their handiwork was expert—Lasker-Wallfisch later saw one of their forgeries on display at the Imperial War Museum—but they were caught when they tried to escape themselves. As they were being marched off to Gestapo headquarters, they decided to take cyanide capsules that a friend, the conductor Konrad Latte, had given to them. "As my tongue touched the white powder," Lasker-Wallfisch writes, "I imagined I was dying and I remember that I felt very faint." But it turned out that Latte had had second thoughts about his offering and had surreptitiously substituted sugar for cyanide. After the war, Lasker-Wallfisch was able to express her gratitude. In her inimitable way, she said to Latte, "Thanks for the sugar. I enjoyed it."

The sisters were tried and convicted—which, they eventually realized, was a stroke of luck. Two friends who had escaped punishment were killed in Auschwitz soon afterward. But when Lasker-Wallfisch was sent to the same dreaded place, in 1943, she came with a group of *Karteihäftlinge*—prisoners with a file—who did not undergo a selection. *Karteihäftlinge* could be summoned back for further legal proceedings; therefore, disposing of them

might cause bureaucratic complications. Lasker-Wallfisch writes, “Clearly, it was better to arrive in Auschwitz as a convicted criminal than as an innocent citizen.” But she did not feel fortunate at the time. She recalled the scene in her Shoah project interview: “It was freezing cold—it was December in Poland. An enormous amount of noise, screaming, dogs barking, and people in capes, black capes, walking about. I mean, not the most welcoming atmosphere.”

During the intake process, in the course of which her hair was shaved off and a number was tattooed on her arm, Lasker-Wallfisch casually mentioned that she played the cello. “That is fantastic,” one of the prisoner orderlies said. “You will be saved.” Lasker-Wallfisch soon found herself talking to a “handsome lady in a camel-hair coat wearing a headscarf”—Alma Rosé, the daughter of the celebrated violinist Arnold Rosé and Justine Rosé-Mahler, Gustav Mahler’s sister. Rosé was the conductor of the Auschwitz women’s orchestra and was in need of a cellist. The musicians received preferential treatment because the S.S. leaders liked having live music at the camp. Once, Lasker-Wallfisch performed Schumann’s “Träumerei” for Josef Mengele.

Many Auschwitz musicians testified that Rosé saved not only their lives but also their sanity. In the spirit of her perfectionist uncle, Rosé worked her ragtag band of musicians relentlessly hard. Lasker-Wallfisch writes, “With this iron discipline she managed to focus our attention away from what was happening outside the block, away from the smoking chimneys and the profound misery of life in the camp, to an F which should have been an F-sharp.” Rosé died in 1944, probably of botulism, despite apparently sincere attempts on the part of camp doctors to save her.

In the fall of 1944, Lasker-Wallfisch was transferred to Belsen. With her was Renate; the sisters had been separated after their prison sentences and found each other again in Auschwitz. Belsen was not a death camp, but tens of thousands of people died anyway. Lasker-Wallfisch writes, “Auschwitz was a place where people were *murdered*. In Belsen they *perished*. . . . People died

like flies. Corpses began to pile up and decompose in the warmer weather. We moved about like zombies.”

After the liberation, the sisters remained in Belsen, which became a displaced-persons camp. The happiest day of those early months came when a Captain Powell brought Lasker-Wallfisch a cello. “I HAVE A CELLO!!!” she wrote to her sister Marianne. That she had emerged from the horror with her critical faculties intact is shown in a letter she wrote to a cousin in July, 1945, on the occasion of a concert by the celebrated violinist Yehudi Menuhin:

It goes without saying that Menuhin played perfectly, for he is Yehudi Menuhin, after all. But I must confess (and please don't take this as impertinence on my part) that I was a little bit disappointed. It wasn't soulful in the way I imagine Casals's playing is. I had the definite feeling that he was saving himself. Now it may be that the atmosphere here did not inspire him particularly. It was impossible to achieve complete silence in the hall. I was sometimes thoroughly ashamed of the audience. It's a wonder that he didn't break off halfway through. As for his accompanist, I can only say that I can hardly imagine anything more wonderful. One hardly noticed that there was any accompaniment at all, and yet I had to stare mesmerized at this man who sat on his chair as if he couldn't count to three and played so perfectly and beautifully.

On the program was Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto. In Lasker-Wallfisch's recollection, the accompanist conjured an uncanny shimmering sound at the beginning.

Later, she learned the pianist's name: Benjamin Britten. The most spectacularly gifted of British composers had joined Menuhin for a series of concerts in occupied Germany. The visit to Belsen affected Britten deeply. At the end of his life, he told his partner, Peter Pears, that it had “colored everything he had written subsequently.” Britten set about writing a song cycle, “The Holy Sonnets of John Donne,” the capstone of which is a darkly triumphant setting of “Death Be Not Proud.” The singer fixes for nine long beats on the word “death” before thundering, “Thou shalt die.” Is this Britten's response to the atrocities of Belsen? Lasker-Wallfisch is wary of

making too broad a claim. “Nobody has seen Belsen who wasn’t at Belsen,” she said to me.

In the late nineteen-sixties, Lasker-Wallfisch rediscovered the letter she had written about Menuhin. She decided to show it to Britten, who regularly conducted with the English Chamber Orchestra. He wasn’t an easy man to approach—“a very difficult character, very nervous,” she told me—but she found the right moment during a rehearsal at Snape Maltings, the concert venue at Britten’s Aldeburgh Festival. She said, “If you want to hear a completely unbiased criticism about your piano playing . . .”—and handed Britten the letter. The composer, who knew some German, read it with fascination and asked if he could borrow it. Very soon afterward, a fire consumed Snape Maltings, destroying Britten’s piano and throwing the entire festival into chaos. But at the beginning of the next rehearsal, at a substitute venue, Britten’s first words were: “Anita, I’ve got your letter.”

In the aftermath of the war, England appeared to Lasker-Wallfisch to be the promised land—the home of the liberators and also of her sister Marianne and her cousin Helli. Getting there, though, was no easy matter. According to official policy, displaced persons could join family in Britain if they were under the age of twenty-one and if they had no relatives elsewhere. Renate had turned twenty-one that January. For a fee of fifty cigarettes, registry scribes revised both sisters’ ages downward. Anita revived her forgery skills to concoct a document that helped them cross into the Netherlands and Belgium.