

It's Auschwitz the opera

By Jessica Duchen, September 22, 2011



Inmates are ordered to display the camp numbers tattooed on their arms in the ENO's production of *The Passenger*

This week at English National Opera, a remarkable opera was unveiled for the first time in the UK. *The Passenger*, written in 1968 by the Polish-Jewish composer Mieczyslaw Weinberg, was once praised by Dmitri Shostakovich as a masterpiece, but lay unstaged until last year. It is based on a novel by the Polish writer Zofia Posmysz, in turn based on her experiences as a prisoner in Auschwitz.

Posmysz, who is 88, is exceptionally open about her experiences; writing about Auschwitz, first as a play and then as the book in the early 1960s, seems to have proved strongly cathartic. The story explores the strange relationship between two young women in the camp - a prisoner and the overseer for whom she works. Despite the grim events it relates, the message of *The Passenger* is one of profound compassion. Extraordinarily, instead of giving a direct account of her three years in Auschwitz, Posmysz chose instead to think herself into the mind of her enemy, whose real name was Anneliese Franz, and find the humanity within.

At the opera's start, a German couple, Lisa and Walther, are sailing to Brazil. On the boat, Lisa glimpses a woman whom she had believed dead. In shock, she tells her husband for the first time that she was once an overseer at Auschwitz. Her memories of the camp and of the mysterious passenger, Marta, are played out in the lower half of the split stage.

Posmysz, a devout Catholic, was arrested and sent to Auschwitz for possessing leaflets relating to Polish underground schools. "The first six months were the hardest," she recalls. She was forced to undertake hard labour in freezing conditions. Her intense faith sustained

her - "I was convinced that I could not die in Auschwitz" - and then came an intervention which took her indoors out of the cold to serve as a bookkeeper for Franz.



Survivor: Zofia Posmysz

"I remember several moments when I felt she was not just a robot carrying out the sadistic wishes of murderers," Posmysz says. "There was an element of good in her. One time she saw me writing a letter - once a month a prisoner was allowed to write home. But she feared that I was passing messages between prisoners, which was forbidden, so she asked: 'Who are you writing to?' I'd almost finished the letter - it was in German, as we were only allowed to write in German. And she asked - asked - if she could read it. She did so, then she corrected the errors in my German. She behaved like a teacher towards a pupil, sometimes more like an older sister to a younger sister.

"But the most important thing, the reason I wrote *The Passenger*, was her attitude to Tadeusz's arrest." The young man in Posmysz's life is transformed in the opera into Marta's fiancé, a violinist, whose brutal murder for playing Bach forms the opera's climax. "Anneliese was the one who brought Tadeusz to the camp to teach me how to keep accounts. That was for three days. After that, I had no contact with him except for some secret messages. When he was arrested Anneliese informed me of this and said: 'I hope you didn't correspond with him?' I said: 'Of course not'; I'm not sure whether she believed me. A few days later she told me that Tadeusz had been shot. She added these last words, which I remember to this day: 'A shameful loss of a man'. This is why I wrote *The Passenger*."

In autumn 1944 Franz left Auschwitz: "The Russians were already on the perimeters and it was obvious that the Germans had lost the war. The big fish of the camp left and she went with them." Posmysz heard nothing more about her until 1970 when a visitor arrived from the Frankfurt am Main war crimes investigations. He told Posmysz that considerable evidence had been collected against Franz, but she had proved impossible to trace. "He had gathered from my book that the relationship between her and me had been such that perhaps I could still have contact with her."

Posmysz had no idea where Franz was, or what she might have done. "Regarding her attitude to our unit, there's nothing that could have served against her. But I remember that one morning I found her looking very poorly. She said that the night before she had been on the ramp - the transportation into the camp and into the gas chambers - and she said: 'It was terrible'."

Intriguing, perhaps, that Weinberg chose to write about Poles in Auschwitz, rather than Jews. He had lost his entire family in the Holocaust; it is possible that writing about the Jewish experience would have been too painful to bear. The Soviet authorities were also notoriously averse to the topic of the Holocaust, regarding the wartime suffering of its own

people as more significant. But Weinberg's chosen characters made no difference when it came to attempts to stage the opera.

Posmysz well recalls her meetings with Weinberg and his librettist, Alexander Medvedev, in Moscow, where Weinberg spent most of his life - and their intense disappointment when a planned staging was cancelled. "The opera was supposed to be performed in the Grand Theatre in Warsaw, but the authorities suspended it as a work of 'abstract humanism'. Only the Minister of Culture could tell you what that meant. I really regret that Weinberg did not live to see it performed." The composer died in 1996; Medvedev lived just long enough to see the premiere last year.

Posmysz has been closely involved with the production, which is directed by David Pountney; it started life last year at the Bregenz Festival and is now being taken up by opera houses around the world. Seeing the opera staged represented the fulfilment of a dream for her. "I'd lost hope that it would ever be realised," she says. "The first time I saw it, it didn't really sink in because I was so moved by the occasion. There are moments in the music that really grasp the heart."

What would she say to those who feel that Auschwitz cannot be put onto a stage? "I also used to think no words could express such an experience. But that's changed, because even if a hundredth of the truth is told, a fragment will live on in future generations. That is what we owe those who died there."

'The Passenger' is at English National Opera until October 25. Box office: 0871 911 0200