The Gentile Jewish Composer
By Andrew Marc Rosemarine
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In 1948, Stalin recognized the newly born State of Israel in the hope that it would turn against its former colonial occupier, the British Empire. But the tyrant from Tbilisi began an anti-Semitic campaign at home that would culminate in a plan of mass deportations and false accusations that Jewish doctors were trying to kill off the Soviet leadership, allegedly acting for American and Jewish interests. Only Stalin's death would save Soviet Jewry from yet another catastrophe at the hands of totalitarianism. At this most inauspicious moment for Judophilia, Dmitry Dmitriyevich Shostakovich courageously raised his head above the parapet, choosing to compose "From Jewish Folk Poetry." He wrote: "I could see anti-Semitism all around me. Jews became a symbol for me. All of man's defenselessness was concentrated in them."

Born in 1906, Shostakovich is currently celebrating his centennial, a fact that is contributing to his status as one of the most celebrated classical composers. Born in St. Petersburg to a politically liberal and tolerant family as the second of three children, in his early years he was generally considered a prodigy both in piano and as a composer. Shostakovich's music matters not just because of its great aesthetic accomplishments and its brilliant portrayal of the full panoply of human emotions, but also because of its daring depiction of suffering under Stalinist terror, as well as his musical denunciations of Tsarist and Nazi totalitarianism. His musical genius is being celebrated around the world this year with all manner of festivals and performances, and much has been written and broadcast about his compositions, his complex character and his difficulties with Stalin. Less well known is his work saving Jewish lives, and his constant courageous public identification with Jewry - which repeatedly got him into deep trouble with the Soviet authorities.

Shostakovich’s music was highly controversial. Some saw his *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenskas* as a satire aimed at Stalin, who attended a performance. When an article appeared in Pravdaattacking the composer for presenting "chaos instead of music," it was thought by many to have been penned by the dictator himself. This caused Shostakovich to fear for his life. Many of his friends had been murdered or sent off to the Gulag for falling foul of the Bolshevik Tyrant. The composer packed a case for the moment when the KGB would come for him, and lived in constant fear of its knocking on his door.

In 1961, when the Siberian Yevgeny Yevtushenko published his poem *Babi Yar* in 1961 in an all-too-brief thaw from Soviet terror, it commemorated the slaughter of thousands of Jews in 1941 in a ravine near Kiev at the hands of the Nazis. Shostakovich's imagination was fired, and he set the poem to music, turning it into his 13th Symphony. The poem begins plaintively "Over Babi Yar there are no monuments. The steep precipice, like a rough-hewn tomb..." The words include the strongest possible identification with Jewish suffering: "I imagine now that I am Jewish. Here I wander through ancient Egypt. And here, I am crucified on the grass and die, And still bear the marks of the nails. ...I am each old man, shot-dead here, I am each child, shot-dead here." The Soviet authorities disapproved of high art singling out the persecution of the Jews, as anti-Semitism was widespread in the country. Yet this is exactly the reason

Shostakovich chose the poem, which includes references to Tsarist pogroms, the Dreyfus Affair, Anne Frank and the Russian Hundreds, as an all-embracing unequivocal condemnation of anti-Semitism.

When the composer first sang his setting to Yevtushenko himself, on reaching the words "It seems to me that I am Anne Frank," Shostakovich wept openly. It was the compassion for Jewish suffering which so moved him as to court personal disaster by setting "*Babi Yar*." When the composer's first choice of conductor realized the danger of performing "*Babi Yar*," he pulled out. Shostakovich was distraught but refused to give up. His next choice, conductor KP Kondrashin (KPK), explains the pressure he personally came under to pull out also. The Russian Minister of Culture, Popov, who had the power to destroy all involved in the project, called Kondrashin just hours before the first performance. Popov was forced to back down. The Soviet regime was aware of Shostakovich's heroic status among many of the people, and Popov felt it safer not to apply further pressure. Nevertheless, the performance that night was a great success, with boisterous applause bordering on hysteria. When a soloist bass singer naively asked the composer why he chose this poem "when there is no anti-Semitism in the USSR?" the composer lost his cool, revealing - beyond any doubt - his motivation. "No, there is. There is anti-Semitism in the USSR. It is outrageous and we must fight it. We must shout about it from the roof-tops."

Babi Yar was the most famous occasion Shostakovich stuck his head out for Jews, but there were many others. He loathed anti-Semitism. He personally intervened to save Jewish friends and others. At personal risk to himself and his family, he hid one Jewish refugee from the Soviet authorities, as his parents had done in Tsarist times. When the sculptor Ilya (Eli) Slonim, wholly unsuitable for fighting, came to say good-bye, having just been summoned to the war front, Shostakovich, without letting the sculptor know, intervened with the authorities to have him moved to cultural duties. After the leading Yiddish Theater actor Solomon Mikhoels was assassinated at Stalin's instigation, and Mikhoels' son-inlaw, the composer Mieczyslaw Weinberg, was arrested, Shostakovich wrote to Beria, the head of the Soviet security services, to plead for his release, again endangering his own life. Fortunately, Stalin died and Weinberg was released. Previously, Shostakovich and his wife Nina had made arrangements to look after Weinberg's young daughter in case Weinberg's wife was also arrested. Isaak Glikman, who became Shostakovich's correspondence secretary and who published a book of the composer's letters to him, wrote: "Although he often interceded on behalf of others, he never asked for anything for himself. It was so much against his nature that he was actually incapable of doing so." Jewish-born composer Gustav Mahler's works were a major influence on Shostakovich stylistically.

Shostakovich's use of Jewish melodies and Jewish inspired themes in his own works is unique in a gentile composer of his stature. He was deeply attracted to Jewish folk music because, he said, "It is multifaceted: it can appear to be happy while at the same time it is profoundly tragic." He was familiar with I.L. Kagan's Jewish folk music collection *Yiddisher Folklor*, which appeared in Vilna in 1938. In 1948 the composer set to music "From Jewish Poetry," gleaned from I. Dobrushin and A. Yuditsky's compilation, although the translations from Yiddish into Russian were poor. Shostakovich was not be discouraged. The final lines express the difficulties of Jewish life: "The frosts and winds have come again. I do not have the

strength to bear it silently. Cry out, children! weep! For Winter has returned." The Union of Composers refused to allow the work to be performed publicly for many years. Stalin's calumny that Jewish doctors were plotting to overthrow the Soviet system (the Doctors Plot) did not assist Shostakovich's attempts to have it played. One of the songs, "Happiness," concludes with the words, "Our sons will become doctors, oi! oi! oi!" After this work, he received anonymous letters, accusing him of selling himself to the Jews.

The composer had numerous personal friendships with Jewish musicians and composers. Shostakovich completed his student Benyamin Fleischman's opera *Rothschild's Violin*, after the student was killed in combat in WWII. It later became a film with the same name. Shostakovich dedicated his two violin concertos and sonata to the Jewish violinist, David Oistrakh. Both would end their days in the same earth in the Novodievotchy Cemetery in Moscow, together with Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders; ironically, given the composer's revulsion for their oppression of the people.

The power of Shostakovich's music was immense. Even the Soviet authorities acknowledged that. He was awarded the Order of Stalin five times, an incredible achievement for one who, in perhaps Stalin's own words, had once composed "chaos instead of music." In 1969, a preview of his 14th symphony, with its heavy emphasis on matters of death, was organized to check whether the regime would authorize its performance. A hardline Bolshevik apparatchik noisily stormed out in the middle. Everybody presumed this was a demonstration of his disdain. In fact, he was found dead outside: the symphony had killed him with a heart attack! Shostakovich himself died in 1975. Poet Yevtushenko wrote, "Over people like Shostakovich death has no power. His music will sound forever. Great art succeeds where medicine fails - victory over death. When I wrote *Babi Yar* there was no monument there. Now there is a monument."

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