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# THE TRUTH ABOUT FANIA FÉNELON AND THE WOMEN'S ORCHESTRA OF AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU

Susan Eischeid

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# Contents

# Author's Note

Since 2000 the author has had the privilege of interviewing many of the surviving members of the women's orchestra at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Several of these initial encounters burgeoned into ongoing correspondence and ultimately into friendship. Without exception, the women expressed great anger, hurt, and despair over the portrayal of their orchestra as presented by Fania Fénelon in her Holocaust memoir, *Playing for Time*. Many have fought valiantly for years to rebut this memoir and to counteract its influence. As time passed the survivors, advancing in age, began to die. In the meantime, although inaccuracies in Fénelon's account are increasingly noted in the scholarly arena, the overall influence and ubiquitous presence of her book continues unabated. After visits to several prominent Holocaust research facilities, and examination of dozens of resources, the discovery that the Fénelon memoir is still actively recommended, sold, praised, and cited validated the author's decision to move ahead with this project. Two of the remaining survivors, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch and Helena Dunicz Niwińska, have contributed greatly to every facet of its development. It is to them, their courage, and their ongoing and unceasing quest for truth that this study is dedicated.

# Abbreviations Used in Note Citations

| | |
|---|---|
| AC | Annotated Copy |
| ALW | Anita Lasker-Wallfisch (used only in reference to Lasker-Wallfisch's personal papers) |
| APMO | Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum |
| CGQJ | Commissariat general aux questions juives (General Commissariat for Jewish Questions—Vichy regime) |
| FNDIRP | National Federation of Deported and Imprisoned Resistance Fighters and Patriots |
| HN | Helena Niwińska (used only in reference to Niwińska's personal papers) |
| IPN | Institute of National Remembrance, Poland |
| ITS | International Tracing Service, Bad Arolsen |
| PLO | Palestine Liberation Organization |
| RSHA | Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Security Main Office) |
| UDA | Union of Auschwitz Deportés |
| USHMM | United States Holocaust Memorial Museum |
| ZAPK | Krakow City Archives |

# List of Images

CHAPTER 1

# The Truth About Fania Fénelon and the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau

**Abstract** In this introductory chapter, Eischeid provides the context and rationale for her comprehensive rebuttal of the 1976 Holocaust memoir *Playing for Time* by Fania Fénelon. Fénelon's book has become a cornerstone of Holocaust scholarship, selling thousands of copies. Sadly, large parts of her memoir are now understood to be embellished or manufactured. Although the scholarly community acknowledges this in a minor way, Fénelon's memoir continues to be utilized in all aspects of Holocaust commemoration. Eischeid gives voice to the other survivors who rebut Fénelon's account and—while not criticizing scholars or institutions who champion her work—uses this study as a "call to arms" to effect change in the way that work is utilized.

**Keywords** Fania Fénelon • *Playing for Time* • Introduction • Holocaust memoir • Impact of Long term legacy

## Introduction

> "I have learned the lesson that he who is first to write his memories, can rewrite history. After he does, others have to react and deny it from a worst position.[1]"



S. Eischeid, *The Truth about Fania Fénelon and the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau*,
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Arie Olewski

Son of Rachela Zelmanowicz Olewski, survivor of the Auschwitz-Birkenau women's orchestra

"To my dismay, my worst fears have come true and Fania Fénelon's book on the women's orchestra in Auschwitz has become the material which is used by people who are interested in this particular subject.[2] I just hope that it is not too late to do anything about destroying her completely misleading account of what really happened.[3]"

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch

Survivor, Auschwitz-Birkenau women's orchestra

In 1976 a female survivor of the Holocaust, Fania Fénelon, published a memoir of the time she spent in the women's orchestra at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Titled *Sursis pour l'Orchestre*, and later in English *Playing for Time,* Fénelon's book became an overnight success. In 1979 the memoir was adapted as a CBS television movie with a screenplay by noted American playwright Arthur Miller and has further inspired multiple and ongoing stage, musical and theatrical productions. Through these varied incarnations and multiple printings in many languages, *Playing for Time* has reached an international audience of millions. Now, some 40 years later, it is time to re-evaluate the impact and legacy of Fénelon's memoir.

For many people, *Playing for Time* was and is their first introduction to both the Holocaust and to the topic of music in the Holocaust. It is cited in multiple sources as an accurate portrayal of this orchestra and of musical activities in the camps. Both the book and the movie hold a prominent place in Holocaust libraries, Holocaust museum bookstores, and other memorial site or commemorative bookstores which feature Holocaust writing and scholarship. Lesson plans for younger students have been built around the memoir and continue to be utilized and distributed via the internet. As an active performer and lecturer on Holocaust music since 1987, the author notes that Fania Fénelon is always the first person audiences recognize or about whom they ask questions.[4] At the time of writing *Playing for Time* is listed as a resource for further study, or used as a primary source of information about music in the camps and the women's orchestra, on the websites of many respected Holocaust institutions including Yad Vashem, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, and the United States Holocaust

Memorial Museum (USHMM).[5] After publication, *Playing for Time* was featured in the popular market as a Book of the Month selection and continues to sell thousands of copies on book retail sites such as Amazon.com.[6] New incarnations of, or inspired by, the book continue to find an audience, including stage productions of *Playing for Time* in Israel in 2014 and England in 2015. It is difficult to imagine another Holocaust memoir which has been so popular in the commercial market for such a sustained period of time, and equally utilized and cited in the scholarly arena.

Sadly, and devastatingly, the *Playing for Time* phenomenon has overshadowed and tainted the lives of the other survivors of the women's orchestra. Since its publication their lives have been spent valiantly fighting to rebut this book and its impact. Their efforts can be described as nothing less than heroic.

From its first inception *Playing for Time* misrepresented and disparaged several women in the orchestra, most egregiously the conductor Alma Rosé and musician Claire Monis. Equally wounding was Fénelon's portrayal of the women as a squabbling mass of petty individuals and her cruel treatment of prisoners of other nationalities—particularly the Polish women. Her memoir does not accurately represent the closeness that many members felt for one another and the true support system they provided each other emotionally. Those bonds are still evident among survivors. As the first book published about the orchestra, *Playing for Time* established—for better or worse—the foundation of historical memory on the subject. Other survivors of the orchestra who rebutted the account as embellished and largely false were never able to overcome the initial impact of Fénelon's work. As a result, *Playing for Time* has largely entered into the always tenuous annals of historical memory as truth.

## Notes

1. Arie Olewski, e-mail message to author, May 24, 2014.
2. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to Mrs. Brantz, September 5, 1992, Personal collection Anita Lasker-Wallfisch (ALW).
3. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to author, April 16, 2014.
4. Over 100 public lectures and recitals presented on the topic "Music in the Holocaust," in multiple venues nationally and internationally, 1987–present. Dr. Susan Eischeid.
5. Gila Flam, "Heartstrings: Music of the Holocaust," Yad Vashem, date accessed February 1, 2015, http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/…/music_

and_Holocaust.asp; "Music and the Holocaust," Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, date accessed February 1, 2015, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/…/Music_and_the_Holocaust; "Music in the Ghettos and Camps," date accessed February 1, 2015, http://www.ushmm.org.

6. http://www.amazon.com, *Playing for Time*, Review Section, Accessed December 1, 2014.

CHAPTER 2

# The Auschwitz-Birkenau Women's Orchestra

**Abstract** In this chapter, Eischeid describes the formation and realization of the only all-female orchestra in the Nazi camp system. Recruitment for the organization is detailed, as well as the orchestra's living conditions, personnel, and repertoire. Although focusing on the prisoner musicians, the chapter also explores the sponsorship of the orchestra by leading camp officials Franz Hössler and Maria Mandl. Important members of the ensemble are introduced, including conductor Alma Rosé, niece of famed composer Gustav Mahler. The chapter closes with the ultimate dissolution of the orchestra and the fate of the survivors.

**Keywords** Auschwitz-Birkenau Women's Orchestra • History of • Personnel • Dissolution of • Nazi camp system • Franz Hössler • Maria Mandl • Alma Rosé

The orchestra highlighted in Fénelon's memoir was formed in spring of 1943 in the Auschwitz subsidiary camp of Birkenau, where the female prisoners were housed in both brick and wooden barracks.[1] Two of the highest ranking officials in Auschwitz-Birkenau—Oberaufseherin (Head Overseer) of the women's camp Maria Mandl, and SS Hauptsturmführer (Captain) Franz Hössler, Kommandant of the women's camp—had observed the



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success of the men's orchestras in other parts of the Auschwitz complex. Both Mandl and Hössler wanted the prestige, "cultural gravitas", and credibility a women's orchestra under their command would engender. Through their influence and efforts, the orchestra became a reality.[2]

The orchestra was formed in several stages. In April, an order was given to the barrack's chiefs to begin a general recruitment of women who played a musical instrument. The same order was given to workers in both the political unit and the admitting office who registered incoming transports of female prisoners.[3] A Polish prisoner named Zofia Czajkowska was chosen by Mandl as the first conductor and Kapo (foreman) of the music Kommando. Czajkowska aided in the continued recruitment of musicians and, although not particularly talented, proved seminal to the foundation of the orchestra. Violinist Zofia Cykowiak stated simply that Cjakowska "with some musical knowledge, provided a basis on which to begin."[4]

By the end of June 1943, membership of the orchestra had reached 20 musicians.[5] New members were gradually added from the camp population and incoming transports. As months passed and other prisoners learned of the orchestra and its protected status, places in the group became increasingly competitive. For example, Dutch survivor Flora Schrijver Jacobs remembers that when she learned they were looking for musicians she put her name down as a pianist. One of the messengers came to her and said, "For God's sake, is there nothing else you can play? Otherwise you'll be dead within a week." Flora said she could also play the accordion and, out of 150 women who had said they could play the piano, was chosen with two others to audition.[6] Flora got the position. By 1944, at its height, the orchestra utilized 42–47 musicians and 3–4 musical copyists.[7]

The orchestra had both Jewish and non-Jewish members and represented a broad variety of nationalities, including women from Germany, Poland, France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Greece, Czechoslovakia,[8] Belgium, Russia, Ukraine, and Austria.[9] These women played an improbable combination of instruments consisting of mandolin, violin, guitar, flute, recorder, horn, piano, percussion, cello, double bass, and accordion. Hundreds of musical instruments—often their owner's most precious possessions—had been confiscated in the Auschwitz complex from prisoners arriving in the camp. Access to these instruments was arranged by Czajkowska working with representatives of the men's orchestra and other camp officials.[10] The orchestra additionally utilized several vocalists.

Despite these assets it proved daunting for the inmate musicians, working within the larger milieu of a labor and extermination camp, to reach a credible level of artistic performance. The orchestra's first concerts sounded less than professional and the musicians struggled to present a polished product.

Then, in July 1943, a famous and accomplished violinist named Alma Rosé was transported into the main Auschwitz camp (Auschwitz I). Rosé was the daughter of a well known violin soloist named Arnold Rosé and niece of famed composer Gustav Mahler. Mandl was delighted to learn of Alma's presence and in August of that year arranged to have her transferred to Birkenau to conduct the women's orchestra.

Alma Rosé is responsible, without doubt, for forming the women's orchestra into a cohesive unit. Her task was immense—most of the musicians were young girls, many teenagers, often with little or no formal training. With consistent discipline and a strong sense of self, Alma molded the young players into a viable performing unit.

Head Overseer Mandl saw to it that the girls in the orchestra were excused from the daily outdoor roll calls in the winter and were instead counted in their own barracks. They were allowed to keep clean with regular showers and had access to a latrine on a pre-determined schedule. Mandl also approved the installation of a small iron stove for heating and for keeping the instruments at a constant temperature, a wooden floor for the music room, plus bedding for the musicians and tables where they could eat. As one survivor later exclaimed, "That was a luxury!"[11] Socks and underwear could be changed more often than in the rest of the camp, and the musicians were provided special uniforms for concerts.[12]

The orchestra women were given the same inadequate food as the rest of the prisoners. Violinist Violette Jacquet remembers that, in addition, "like all work Kommandos, we received a *Zulage* [supplement], three times a week; Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. This consisted of 1/3 of a loaf of bread, and a ration of margarine, sausage, jam, or beets."[13] Although by camp standards the orchestra women were relatively better fed, and despite the sporadic supplements, they suffered from constant hunger. Zofia Cykowiak remembers that many of the orchestra members also endured typhus, phlegmon (acute bacterial infection), and scabies, and that some died from typhus.[14]

The orchestra rehearsed for long hours and, as with all prisoners in Birkenau, the women were constantly aware of the incoming transports

and the continued extermination of new arrivals just outside the door of their barracks.

The orchestra's repertoire was eclectic and modified for the unusual combination of instruments. Traditional literature by composers like Mozart, Schumann and Schubert was expanded to include popular works such as the dance hall *Jalousie-Tango*, and sentimental ballads. Also performed were German marches and military songs, waltzes, operatic selections, and arrangements of lighter classical works by composers like von Suppé and Johann Strauss. Eventually, the orchestra developed a repertoire of over 200 pieces.[15] Alma Rosé, a virtuoso violinist, often performed as soloist.

One of the primary duties of the orchestra was to play at the entrance of the women's camp as columns of labor details were marched out to work in the mornings and then back again in the evening. Most of the surviving members of the orchestra have vivid memories of performing this function. The orchestra also played regular concerts in the hospital block (Revier) and presented weekly concerts nearly every Sunday at noon in and around the women's camp Sauna building. The Sunday concerts were attended by many of the SS, camp officers, and privileged prisoners (Kapos, Blockovas, etc.) who sat in the front rows, while ordinary prisoners crowded at the back and stood to listen.[16]

Descriptions of these conditions, concerts, and personnel provided Fania Fénelon—a vocalist—with the raw materials for her memoir.

On April 5, 1944 the women's orchestra suffered an irreparable blow when Alma Rosé died under suspicious circumstances. On the previous Sunday, Rosé had left the music block to eat with Elsa Schmidt, Kapo of the *Bekleidungskammer* (storehouse for prisoner clothing). That night Alma returned to her room, desperately ill, and died three days later. The cause of death is unknown, although theories range from poisoning by one of her dinner companions to botulism contracted from tainted food or alcohol. Rumors about Alma's demise circulated widely for some time.

After Rosé's death a Russian musician and pianist, Sonia Vinogradova, was appointed the new conductor. Survivor Helena Niwińska noted that "She (Vinogradova) took over an ensemble for which music had become routine, and conducted a repertoire that was familiar. She herself never developed anything new, and she did not possess any special musical aspirations in that regard. Under her baton, the orchestra did not maintain the level it had earlier reached under Alma Rosé."[17]

As 1944 drew to a close, the command at Auschwitz and its satellite camps began to prepare and implement a mass evacuation of prisoners and

a dismantling of buildings and equipment. The orchestra members were gradually dispersed. Many of the Jewish musicians were sent by rail into Germany to the camp at Bergen-Belsen.[18] Some of the Polish Aryan prisoners were transferred first into Auschwitz I, then sent on death marches, and finally transported by rail into Germany to camps such as Ravensbrück and Neustadt-Glewe.[19]

Although a few of the women from the orchestra perished during these travails, the majority lived to see the end of the war. Most credited their survival to the orchestra at Birkenau, and to Alma Rosé.

## Notes

1. Franciszek Piper, "The Exploitation of Prisoner Labor," *Auschwitz 1940–1945* (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2000), 172–173.
2. Helena Niwińska, interview with Susan Eischeid, Krakow, Poland, June 10, 2003. See also Zofia Cykowiak, "*Zarys historii kobiecej orkiestry w Oświęcimiu—Brzezince" (An Outline History of the Women's Orchestra in Oświęcim-Brzezinka)*, Krakow, 1985, nr rejestracyjny 44527, Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w Oświęcimiu (APMO).
3. Zofia Cykowiak, *An Outline History*, ibid., 1.
4. Richard Newman with Karen Kirtley, *Alma Rosé: Vienna to Auschwitz* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 2000), 230.
5. Ibid., 230–232.
6. Ellen Lock, "Het meisje met de accordeon," *Aansprak*, June 2012, 12. http://www.svb.nl/Images/Aansprak_2012_2_en.pdf Accessed June 16, 2015.
7. Helena Dunicz Niwińska, *One of the Girls in the Band* (Oświęcim, Poland: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2014), 171–176.
8. Following the Nazi occupation of the Sudetenland, Slovakia became a "puppet state" of the Third Reich. Because of this, many female inmates from this region considered themselves "Slovakian" not Czechoslovakian.
9. Niwińska, *One of the Girls*, 171–176.
10. Newman, 230.
11. Zofia Cykowiak, interviews with the author, tape recording, June 3, 2003 and May 15, 2004, Krakow, Poland. Author's personal collection.
12. Newman, 250–253.
13. Violette Jacquet Silberstein, annotated copy *Sursis pour l'orchestre*, compiled 1987–1992, translated by Kenneth Kirk (referred to subsequently as Jacquet AC).
14. Cykowiak, *An Outline History*, APMO.

15. Helena Dunicz Niwińska, "Truth and Fantasy," *Pro Memoria* Nr. 3–4 (Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1996), 65.
16. Newman, 265.
17. Niwińska, *One of the Girls*, 119–120.
18. Jacquet AC.
19. Niwińska, *One of the Girls*, 132–134.

CHAPTER 3

# Fania Fénelon and the Inception of *Playing for Time*

**Abstract** In this chapter Eischeid answers the question, "Who was Fania Fénelon?" Fénelon's personal biography is detailed as well as the impetus behind the creation of her Holocaust memoir. Co-author Marcelle Routier's involvement is explored, as are the initial versions and subsequent editions of *Playing for Time* including *Sursis pour l'orchestre*, *The Musicians of Auschwitz*, and *Das Mädchenorchester in Auschwitz*.

**Keywords** Fania Fénelon • Biography • Inception of memoir • *Playing for Time* • Editions • Marcelle Routier

Fania Fénelon, a singer and pianist, published the first account of the orchestra in 1976. She subsequently became the most famous—and infamous—member of the group, when her memoir caught the popular imagination and became a best seller. At publication and for many years thereafter Fénelon's book was accepted at face value. By the time further research proved much of the book to be in error or heavily embellished, her memoir was already very well embedded in the Holocaust consciousness.



S. Eischeid, *The Truth about Fania Fénelon and the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau*,
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## Who Was Fania Fénelon?

Fénelon was born Fany Goldstein in Paris to a middle class family with a Jewish father and a Catholic mother. Her birth date has always been in question since Fania herself gave only the day (September 2) and dissembled about the year. The other women in the orchestra agree that she was older than her implied age by some 10–15 years. There seems to be some consensus that Fénelon's real birth year was 1908, which would have made her 75 years old at her death in 1983 and 36–37 years old during her time in the camps.[1]

As a young woman Fénelon studied music at the Paris Conservatory. Although many biographies of Fénelon's life and her own statements[2] claim that she attended the conservatory until 1940 and obtained a First Prize (Premiere Prix) in Piano "despite her diminutive size and small hands," this is not substantiated. In reality, Fénelon was registered at the conservatory from 1922 to 1925 (upon enrollment listing her birth date as 1908) studying solfège and piano, but "did not get a reward (diploma or prize)."[3] Although later portrayed as an opera singer, in reality Fania mostly sang cabaret in various venues throughout the city.[4] In the first edition of her book Fania describes an early marriage to an unfaithful man who was drafted into the military and who later married another woman. Fania stated that she only discovered this outcome after the war, thinking throughout the war that she was a widow.[5]

Most biographical references to Fénelon cite her frequent statements that she was a heroine in the French Resistance during the occupation of France.[6] These claims often contain contradictions and embellishments.

Whatever the truth of her post-occupation activities, it is certain that in January of 1944 Fénelon was deported from Paris via Drancy to Auschwitz on a *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (RSHA—Reich Security Main Office) Jewish transport.[7] After entering the camp on January 22 and undergoing 48 hours of quarantine, Fania was recognized as a singer by another prisoner and taken to the orchestra block. There she became a member of the women's orchestra. This is the period of time she writes about in her memoir.

At the beginning of November 1944, during a mass evacuation of the camp, Fénelon was moved from Auschwitz to Bergen Belsen in Germany. She was liberated there by British forces on April 15, 1945.

After the war Fania Fénelon struggled to establish herself professionally. In frail health, Fénelon received a small pension from the French government. For the next several years she worked as a free-lance singer

and pianist, appeared in theatre productions, recorded an album of French *chanson*, and toured Europe with various productions. For a period Fania taught at a high school for music in East Berlin and became active in various socialist political groups.[8] She was successful without achieving major recognition or fortune as an artist. Fania occasionally accompanied a famous vocalist of the day, Aubrey Pankey, with whom it was rumored she had an affair. Pankey was notable not only for his talent, but for being a successful black man in an often inhospitable social climate. A friend later remembered that although Fania was very enamored of Pankey, he did not reciprocate.[9] Fénelon eventually settled in Paris where she lived modestly if not always within her means.

In 1959 Fania met Albert Maltz, an American journalist, who proposed a potential collaboration on a story about the women's orchestra.[10] Although they traveled together to visit the camp site at Auschwitz, this plan never came to fruition. The meeting with Maltz does seem to have served as a catalyst for Fénelon, however, and in the early 1970s when the opportunity arose to collaborate with a French writer named Marcelle Routier, Fania took it.

Routier was a journalist who had written a substantive biography of the singer Edith Piaf,[11] and co-written several autobiographies,[12] as well as writing fictional novels. Although already quite productive and successful, Routier's collaboration with Fénelon achieved a wider and more international scale of recognition.

*Sursis pour l'orchestre*[13] was published in 1976 and promoted as Fania Fénelon's memoir of her experiences as a member of the Auschwitz-Birkenau women's orchestra. In the following two years both English and German translations were published, first under the title *The Musicians of Auschwitz*,[14] and later under the title *Playing for Time*.[15] Multiple editions in other languages followed, as did a controversial television movie adaptation in 1980. Written in a dramatic and hyperbolic style *Playing for Time* achieved immediate popular success. Just as quickly, its veracity was challenged by the other women in the orchestra who were, by this time, living throughout Europe and overseas. When a second edition was published, Fénelon revised some of the content at their instigation, dropping one chapter altogether. Yet the basic structure of the book remained the same and the long campaign for truth and verisimilitude began for the other survivors.

Over the next several years *Playing for Time*, in all its incarnations, continued to attract a worldwide audience. Fénelon herself died on December

23, 1983, having survived her time in Auschwitz by almost 40 years. Spirited to the end, Fania never apologized to the other survivors for the anguish she had caused. As word of Fénelon's death spread across the globe, obituaries began appearing in many countries and several prominent American newspapers carried the news. Both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *The New York Times* published Fania's obituary, which contained a synopsis of her life as presented in the memoir. There was no mention of the controversy surrounding the veracity of Fénelon's story, only of controversy over the casting of actress Vanessa Redgrave in the lead role of the television movie.[16]

Fania's version of her story has lived on after her death. At the time of writing, *Playing for Time* has been published in 13 languages: French (2 editions), English (8 editions), Greek, Czech, Italian (3 editions), Hebrew (2 editions), German (15 editions), Norwegian, Dutch (2 editions), Swedish, Japanese, Finnish (2 editions), and Serbo-Croatian, with at least 13 subsequent adaptations of the story for stage, television, and film.[17]

## Notes

1. Obituary, Fania Goldstein, *Gazeta Krakowska*, December 30, 1983. This information is also verified by the archives of the Paris Conservatory, which state that Fany Goldstein registered there as a student in 1922 and listed her birth date as September 2, 1908. Mme. Cécile Grand, Head Librarian and Archivist, Conservatoire de Paris, Médiathèque Berlioz, Paris, France, telephone interview via Dr. Ofelia Nikolova, April 9, 2015.
2. Fania Fénelon, *The Musicians of Auschwitz*, 2nd ed. (London: Billings and Sons Ltd., 1977), book jacket biography. See also "Fania Fénelon," http://dictionary.sensagent.com/Fania-F%C3%A9nelon/en-en/ Accessed June 9, 2015.
3. Mme Cécile Grand, Conservatoire de Paris, telephone interview, April 9, 2015.
4. Gabrielle Knapp, *Das Frauenorchester in Auschwitz: musikalische Zwangsarbeit und Bewältigung* (Hamburg: von Bockel Verlag, 1996), 282.
5. Fania Fénelon, *Sursis pour l'orchestre*, (Paris: Stock Publishers, 1976), 119–124. Translated by Kenneth Kirk.
6. Fénelon, *The Musicians of Auschwitz,* book jacket biography.
7. "Abschub-Nr. 66"/Evacuation No. 66, 1.1.9.1/11183124 and 1.1.9.1/11183850: Transport List of the "B.d.S. Frankreich, ITS Digital Archives, Bad Arolsen.

8. Knapp, 283–284
9. Knapp, 283–284.
10. Knapp, 287.
11. Marcelle Routier, *Piaf, l'Inoubliable* (Paris, Distribution Dilisco, 1990).
12. Obituary, Marcelle Routier, *Le Monde*, August 25, 2001.
13. Fania Fénelon, *Sursis pour l'orchestre* (Paris: Stock Publishers, 1976).
14. Fania Fénelon, *The Musicians of Auschwitz*, first English edition, (London: Billing and Sons Ltd, 1977).
15. Fania Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, (New York: Berkley Books, 1977).
16. "Fania Fénelon, 74; Memoirs Described Auschwitz Singing." December 22, 1983, http://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/22/obituaries/fania-fenelon-74-memoirs. See also "Fania Fénelon", Obituary, *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 1983.
17. Worldcat, First Search Database, Produced by OCLC, accessed January 26, 2015.

CHAPTER 4

# Problematic Aspects of Fania Fénelon's Testimony in *Playing for Time*

**Abstract** In this chapter, Eischeid synopsizes the major concerns. Aspects of false promotion, misrepresentations of the personality and character of the other musicians, and their initial response to Fénelon's work, are explored. Resources utilized in the critical analysis of the memoir are detailed, as is input from 17 other members of the orchestra. Data utilized includes live interviews, personal correspondence, archival testimonies, press coverage, documentary footage, annotated copies of Fénelon's memoir, and correspondence with descendants.

**Keywords** Fania Fénelon • *Playing for Time* • Problematic aspects • Controversial portrayals • Resources utilized

Although it is clear that Fania, working with Routier, presented a considerably embellished and distorted view of the actual history of the orchestra and Auschwitz, the book was never presented as a "novelization," or as a work of historical fiction only vaguely inspired by real life events. Rather, the memoir was actively promoted as a "factual novel."[1] In 1981 the paperback edition in Germany appeared with the comment, "Everyone should read this story of the women's orchestra, who wants to know authentic things about the Holocaust."[2] Later editions followed



S. Eischeid, *The Truth about Fania Fénelon and the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau*,
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suit: "One of the most powerful true stories of our time,"[3] and "The True Story of the Orchestra Girls who survived the Holocaust."[4]

Apart from the profound misrepresentations of Alma Rosé and Claire Monis, Fénelon seems to have made a conscious choice to portray her other colleagues in the orchestra in the worst possible light. Women are variously described as "monsters," "pigs," "fat shapeless cows," and so on, while Fania made up poorly disguised pseudonyms for most of the characters in the book.[5] Angered and hurt, the other survivors were horrified by the success of *Playing for Time* and by what they viewed as the egregious anomalies in Fénelon's testimony.

Part of their reaction was surprise. During her time in the orchestra, although not universally popular, Fania was not seen as an adversary. Cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch comments: "She was just one of us, liked to tell stories, and was generally liked,"[6] while two of the Belgian survivors, Hélène Scheps and Fanny Birkenwald, stated that although they were now very angry with Fania, they had considered her a friend in the camps.[7] In general, Fania was warmer towards the Jewish prisoners and those from western Europe and held herself aloof from the eastern European women. Polish survivor Helena Niwińska notes: "In any case, she wasn't nice. She was very self-assured. Like many of the Jewish women who spoke western languages, her attitude towards us was not nice."[8]

In the book *Playing for Time* Fania presents herself as the "heroine" of the story, the true leader of the orchestra, a saintly and generous individual who held herself above the petty jealousies and misbehaviors she portrayed in the others. Lasker-Wallfisch notes of the book that "there are too many misrepresentations to name, but the most serious one is that Fania took on the role of 'hero' when, if there was a 'hero' at all, it was Alma Rosé."[9]

When exploring Fénelon's flexible approach to memory three issues rise to the fore: the mischaracterization of the women's relationships with one another, the negative portrayal of Alma Rosé and the glorification of Fania, and the slanders against musician Claire Monis (the character "Clara" in the book). Additionally, the other women took issue with many of the portrayals of specific events and the characterizations of themselves and of the SS and camp officials.

To determine the extent of Fénelon's embellishment, testimony was gathered via live interview (Zofia Cykowiak, Helena Dunicz Niwińska, Margot Vetrovcova, Hilde Simche), extensive correspondence and telephone interviews (Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Helen Tichauer, Hélène Scheps), and by previously published interviews with other survivors

(Hélène Scheps, Esther Bejarano, Regina Bacia, Fanny Birkenwald, Eva Steiner, Rachela Olewski, Flora Schrijver Jacobs, Sylvia Wagenberg). Additional corroboration was culled from other sources, including personal memoirs, archival testimony, correspondence with descendants, and film documentary appearances (Yvette Assael-Lennon, Flora Schrijver Jacobs, Violette Jacquet Silberstein, Claire Monis, Rachela Zelmanowicz Olewski, Esther Bejarano).

Three annotated copies of Fénelon's book were utilized, in which survivors commented on anomalies in Fania's account, page by page. These copies were shared by Helena Niwińska, Arie Olewski (from his mother Rachela's collection), and Olivier Jacquet (from his mother Violette Jacquet's personal papers). They represent three distinct post-war geographical regions—eastern Europe, western Europe, and Israel—and were compiled at different times between 1986 and 2014. For all page references to Fénelon's work the version utilized is the first English edition, *The Musicians of Auschwitz*, published in 1977.[10]

After comparing and contrasting all of these resources it has been determined that Fénelon's memoir contains at least 81 specific instances of prevarication, embellishment or imagination; as well as a problematic overall tone, inaccurate and cruel depictions of specific individuals, and pervasive non-substantiated assumptions and conclusions.

One can argue that Fénelon's memoir is so hugely successful in the popular market, in part, *because* of her often sordid and inflammatory portrayals of her colleagues. For the uninformed reader such sordid details add drama and titillation. For her colleagues, however, Fénelon's portrayals wounded them deeply.

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch notes that: "Of course, the various accounts of events are bound to differ, but there is a central truth which should never be compromised."[11] All of the survivors agree that there *are* elements of truth in the book, most often in certain descriptions of the camp and the depiction of hunger. But they also universally agree that the "central truth" of the orchestra was not accurately represented.

## Notes

1. Knapp, 288.
2. Ibid.
3. Fania Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, English edition, 6th printing, 1979.
4. Ibid.

5. Newman, 324.
6. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to author, April 16, 2014.
7. Georges Fabry-Francy, "La Tele U.S. a Fait d'Auschwitz une Affaire de Sexe," *Paris Match*, 1981.
8. Helena Dunicz Niwińska, interview with the author. Tape recording. March 22, 2014, Krakow, Poland. Author's personal collection.
9. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to the author, April 16, 2014.
10. Fenélon, Fania. *The Musicians of Auschwitz* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd Publishers, 1977).
11. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to author, April 16, 2014.

CHAPTER 5

# Goals for Exposing the Inconsistencies in Fénelon's Holocaust Memoir

**Abstract** In this chapter Eischeid discusses her two primary goals in exposing the manufactured incidents and embellishments in Fania Fénelon's Holocaust memoir *Playing for Time*. Eischeid's first goal is to reveal how deeply embedded many of these embellishments are in Holocaust scholarship, writing, and remembrance and how they are now accepted as truth. The intent is absolutely not to criticize respected Holocaust scholars and institutions, rather to change the way in which Fénelon's work is utilized and cited. The second goal of Eischeid's study is to insure that the voices of Fania's colleagues in the orchestra are fully heard—at last—and that their testimonies assume equal weight in the pantheon of remembrance.

**Keywords** Fania Fénelon • Holocaust memoir • *Playing for Time* • Crtitical analysis • Goals for exposing inconsistencies • Extent of influence • Other survivor's tesimony

Fania Fénelon's memoir is not the first Holocaust document to face careful scrutiny. There are bound to be factual errors in Fénelon's account and, indeed, factual errors are fairly common in Holocaust testimonies. For most survivors it was impossible to be accurately aware of the "big



S. Eischeid, *The Truth about Fania Fénelon and the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau*,
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picture" from the context of their individual experience. James Young describes this as a horrible irony—that the insights of many survivors may be even less reliable in a "factual sense," *because* of their proximity to events.[1] Additionally, after the war many survivors were frustrated by the futility of trying to express something comprehensible about what Lawrence Langer terms "an impossible reality."[2]

Young makes a convincing case that any survivor-memoirist, however intent on documenting Nazi atrocities, in the end documents nothing more persuasively than his or her own existence after the Holocaust.[3] The publication of a memoir reinforces that in both a literal and a literary sense.

Langer also notes that, although a Holocaust memoir is usually by its nature more harrowing than a normal autobiography, it is still bound by certain literary conventions such as chronology, characterization, dialogue, and the invention of a narrative voice.[4] Any surviving victims from the camps who chose to write about those experiences had to adopt some literary strategies to allow their reader access into that unfathomable world.[5]

Fania Fénelon is no exception. Nonetheless, in Fania's case she undoubtedly crossed several lines. These range from her embellishment and outright manufacture of events, her mean-spirited and inaccurate characterizations of the other women, and perhaps most importantly—her continued insistence that her memoir was a "true story," not fictionalized in any way.

The primary goal of this study is absolutely not to criticize respected Holocaust scholars and institutions, rather it is to try and effect change. The utilization of Fénelon's story, and "facts" as presented by her in otherwise excellent works of scholarship and institutions of memory, reveals no carelessness on the part of scholars and administrators. Rather, it reveals how ubiquitous Fania's story has become and how many details are now accepted as truth.

It is the author's belief that it is no longer acceptable to utilize Fénelon's account in *any* way, and certainly not in any scholarly arena. The memoir should not be a suggested as a resource for further study and it should be removed from the websites of Holocaust institutions. It should no longer be sold, promoted, or featured commercially by Holocaust institutions. It should not be recommended as a seminal resource on the orchestra, or at least not recommended without full disclosure of its controversies. Any new editions of previously published works containing references to the

Fénelon should make note of its unreliability. It should not be utilized as a foundation for Holocaust education, online or off.

There are too many fallacies in Fania's memoir, which have been too well documented over a sustained period of time, to rationalize its usage or to recommend it as a tool for further study simply because it has a dramatic and accessible writing style, and some partially accurate depictions of camp life. Likewise, Fénelon's now well documented predilection for embellishment and overt distortion of facts from every phase of her life, calls into question even the most benign of statements. With the plethora of material now available about the Holocaust, further utilization of Fania's memoir as an educational resource is at best, lazy and unjustified, and at worst, deliberately harmful.

An additional goal of the author's study is to bring more fully the experiences of the other women into the public arena. For years many of Fania's colleagues have largely been ignored, dismissed, or placated. It is time for their thoughts about Fénelon's portrayal to be studied, and for their testimonies to carry equal weight. Then and only then, and deservedly, will their voices assume equal or greater value in the history of the women's orchestra.

## Notes

1. James E. Young, *Writing and Re-Writing the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 33.
2. Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies; The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 40.
3. Young, 37.
4. Langer, 41.
5. Ibid., 42.

CHAPTER 6

# Key Issues of Distortion and Embellishment in Fania Fénelon's *Playing for Time*

**Abstract** In this chapter Eischeid details the primary concerns of the other survivors regarding Fania Fénelon's Holocaust memoir *Playing for Time*. Of these, three issues rise to the fore: Fénelon's mischaracterization of the women's relationships with one another, the negative portrayal of conductor Alma Rosé, and the extreme slanders perpetuated by Fénelon against musician Claire Monis. Eischeid cites multiple instances of embellishment, distortion, or imagination. The other survivors agree without exception that the "central truth" of the orchestra was not accurately represented by Fénelon.

**Keywords** Fania Fénelon • *Playing for Time* • Holocaust memoir • Key issues of embellishment • Interrelationships between women • Alma Rosé portrayal • Claire Monis portrayal

Examination of the varied testimonies of the other women reveal that it is possible to find a general consensus of opinion about major events and figures in the life of the orchestra, even as the unique character and personality of each woman shines through in her comments. Inasmuch as possible, the author has tried to maintain these individual personalities while synopsizing, in a larger sense, the relevant concerns.

When disputes arise between testimonies, the author has presented all of the input for consideration. In general, a story is detailed only when it has three or more other survivors weighing in to contradict or reinforce



S. Eischeid, *The Truth about Fania Fénelon and the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau*,
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what Fania says. The author has allowed single interjections by orchestra members when personal portrayals and mischaracterizations arise.

## Interrelationships Between the Women

Without exception, the other women in the orchestra were dismayed by Fania's portrayal of their interrelationships with one another and her representation of the general group dynamic. All agree with Helena Niwińska when she states: "The ways in which Fania writes about her colleagues is abominable! [Nearly everyone was portrayed] as bad, ugly, stupid, immoral, greedy, etc. In my opinion there was a good atmosphere in the orchestra."[1]

> In spite of everything the prisoners attempted to remain human, to help each other and show concern and sympathy. Friendships and human bonds arose that lasted for a lifetime. In some cases camp friendships filled the aching emptiness left by the loss of those one loved best, who did not survive the hell of Birkenau.[2]

Many of the survivors credit their survival to the close bonds and support which existed between them. Zofia Cykowiak remarked: "Sporadic misunderstandings—understandable in the group of people forced to coexist day and night in camp conditions and which resulted mostly from language barriers and cultural differences—were quickly resolved."[3]

Lasker-Wallfisch explains that: "The most important reason for [any] lack of communication between us was, of course and above all, the language barrier."[4] Helena Niwińska concurs: "Personally I think that communication between us was difficult due to the language barrier. For example, I would talk a lot to a Czech woman, Margot, in English. We did this for practice, among other reasons. We had little contact with the women from France or Belgium—just because of the language."[5] "Because of the difficulties of understanding one another, closer contacts sprang up within the language groups."[6]

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch also described: "Unbelievable loyalty among us. We did not STEAL from one another!"[7]

> We, and with WE I mean the motley crowd of bickering women who [in Fania's book] provided the backcloth to the contest between Alma Rosé and Fania Fénelon, were in reality not a bunch of unruly kids, but were a very

> close-knit gang where everyone contributed something to the survival of the other. We looked after each other, bullied each other at the first symptoms of slackening, saw to it that everyone washed every day from head to foot—no matter what the temperature was.
>
> In other words, in spite of our circumstances we maintained a standard of behavior which none of us have to be ashamed of, and this includes of course, Fania Fénelon.[8]

Rachela Zelmanowicz Olewski maintained throughout her lifetime that Fania's book did not accurately represent the closeness that many members felt for each another, and the true support system they provided each other emotionally.[9] Hilde Simche also wished the book could have sent a different message and that it should have described the harmony between the women in the orchestra,[10] while both Hilde and Sylvia Wagenberg emphasized that: "The women didn't lose their humanity, they tried to help each other out as much as possible. The arguments, competitions, hate and jealousy described in the book did not happen in real life. Although the book led you to believe that Fania was a role model of thoughtfulness and humanity, the truth was she was a small member of the orchestra who didn't stand out."[11]

Wagenberg stated in an interview that "Fania exaggerated her own role in the book, took liberties, and gave a novel-like depiction of events. Fénelon, for example, depicted opposition between nationalities. But there were not such oppositions because women of different nationalities and various beliefs were cognizant: "One Enemy, the Nazis!"[12] (Image 6.1).

## The Portrayal of Alma Rosé

It is Fania's portrayal of Alma Rosé which most disturbs other survivors of the orchestra. Lasker-Wallfisch notes that: "The representation of Alma is the most serious untruth since she [her memory] will go down in history."[13] Lasker-Wallfisch added that what the book (and movie) showed "was a TOTAL misrepresentation of Alma as bigoted, servile, mean, stupid and cruel. She was none of these things. She was a person of very high standards in EVERY respect. She had an impossible task—to make an orchestra out of a bunch of people where only a handful played their instruments well. Alma threw herself into the task with a fervor which seems absurd under the circumstances. Focused our attention on matters

**Image 6.1** Alma Rosé, publicity photograph 1930s. Reprinted by permission of the Gustav Mahler–Alfred Rosé Collection, the Music Library, Western University, London, Canada

like playing the right notes, rather than dwelling on what was going on outside the barracks."[14]

Niwińska speculates that Fénelon's portrayal of Rosé was due to jealousy. "The way in which Fania [portrays] Alma is really astonishing! Why? Probably, as in the case of Claire, she was jealous. Fania criticizes Alma in many ways, as human being, as Kapo, as a musician, instead of being grateful that Alma [took] her into the orchestra.[15] Israeli survivor Rachela Olewski concurs and states: "I know that she had personal jealousy of Alma Rosé. Fania did not like her because Alma didn't like her."[16] Olewski adds: "Alma was a proud woman and all that interested her was the music," noting that Fania "glorified herself, she was not accurate, she made us look bad, she was not a hero, Alma was so much more than that."[17]

Sylvia Wagenberg and Hilde Simche also stressed that—above all—they felt hurt by Rosé's depiction in the book and that Alma was misportrayed,[18] while Hélène Scheps and Fanny Birkenwald, interviewed jointly in 1981, wondered openly why Fania would have portrayed Alma in such a way.

> Yes, why? Truly, we can't understand Fania's attitude of not recognizing that Alma, in spite of her difficult personality, won the fight for our lives. She knew it, too. She knew full well that Alma intervened several times to get some of the sick ones transferred from the Revier [hospital] before it was too late. To stay at Revier was to fall into the trap of "selection" and embark on the journey without return.[19]

Zofia Cykowiak, before her death, spoke often about her despair over Fania's cruel depiction of Rosé and stated firmly that "Alma was a righteous person, a person of big culture of mind and heart."[20]

Many of the survivors take issue with Fania's characterization of Rosé as weak and subservient to the SS officers. Throughout her memoir Fénelon presents herself as fearless in the face of the SS officials and camp officers, and castigates Alma for her servility: "I was beginning to find her obsequiousness with this most monstrous of SS chiefs quite unbearable."[21] Violette Jacquet counters: "I never saw Alma grovel; on the contrary she was always very dignified and reserved."[22]

Helena Niwińska states emphatically that Fénelon's characterization "was NOT true!! Alma was VERY strong. If anyone was subservient, it

was Fania!! Alma was very proud! She would stand up to the SS!"[23] "Alma behaved with dignity, her posture always straight up, never smiled to them [the SS], always related seriously to them, never with servility."[24] "By such an attitude she obliged the Germans to treat her kindly. They addressed her as 'Frau Alma,' which was incredible in camp conditions—especially in the case of a Jewish prisoner. She was demanding but just."[25]

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch notes that in the film (and book),

> Fania Fénelon emerges as the moral force who bravely defied the Germans and held members of the orchestra together, while the conductor, Alma Rosé, is depicted as a weak woman who imposed a cruel discipline on the orchestra from fear of Nazis and who was heavily dependent upon gaining Fénelon's approval. It just wasn't like that. Fania was pleasant and talented, but she was not as forceful as Alma, who helped us to survive. She was the key figure, a woman of immense strength and dignity who commanded the respect of everyone.[26]

Although Rosé is impugned in many ways throughout *Playing for Time*, some of Fénelon's charges are more egregious than others.

One of the greatest untruths perpetuated by Fénelon is her claim that Alma Rosé used corporal punishment to discipline the musicians. In *Playing for Time* Fénelon presents this description of Rosé engaging in corporal punishment and rationalizing it afterwards:

> She stopped the cacophony after a few bars. Then at last she would emerge from her daydream, rant and rage, throw her baton at a player's head, slap whoever might be playing worst, complain of a headache, and stop the rehearsal.
>
> "One can't make music without discipline! It's incomprehensible to me that that girl cannot accept a slap she's deserved." "Why should she accept it from you?" Alma drew herself up in amazement. "What?" It's reasonable. It's my right. I'm here to make music not to indulge in sentimentality."[27]

Fania states several other times that Alma would slap the women in the face, or beat their hands with her baton, if they did not play something correctly or lost focus in rehearsal,[28] and then quotes Alma as saying the great German conductor Furtwängler used to mete out corporal punishment to his musicians.[29]

This denigrating portrayal of Alma's character is extremely distressing and universally denied by the other members of the orchestra. Helena Niwińska says simply, "Rubbish! She did not hit anyone's face!"[30]

"According to Fania, Alma was slapping very often! But it isn't true! Fania's description of Alma ranting and raging in rehearsal and throwing her baton at a player's head is totally Fania's invention."[31]

Rachela Olewski states firmly, "Alma didn't hit."[32] Anita Lasker-Wallfisch takes great exception to these scenes: "That never happened!"[33] "Understandably, Alma did vent her frustration occasionally, and threw her baton to the floor. But she never hit the women in the face!"[34] Hilde Simche and Sylvia Wagenberg say simply that Alma was a "tall, manly, uncompromising woman who always kept it together and never lost her temper. She never beat or cursed a woman in the orchestra."[35]

Violette Jacquet comments:

> Regarding her personality it is very exaggerated. Yes, Alma was demanding, but less than it says here. Yes, she was a musician and suffered truly over what was not perfect, but still less than is described here. And what on the other hand is not described as it should be is our admiration and respect for her, even if we found her demands excessive at times.
>
> Her desire for perfection revealed more her love of music than a desire to please the SS. Indeed that was why we admired her.[36]

Unfortunately, the portrayal of Alma regularly using corporal punishment is one of the fallacies most frequently perpetuated in other sources.[37] For example, in a 1981 issue of the German periodical *Der Spiegel*, Alma Rosé is described as "a fanatical violinist who drove the mostly inadequate musicians to the best possible performances—even beating them to achieve this."[38]

Nonetheless, all the women acknowledge that Alma *was* very demanding and did not tolerate any shortcomings. "Not once would she lose her temper and use corporal punishment, although it was done on a regular basis in other commands. Rather, for a musician who was not paying attention or executing something precisely enough, she would give a 'punishment' which consisted of the offender scrubbing the floor in the practice room."[39]

Of course, the arduous rehearsals, continued pressure, and the long hours took their toll on all the women, not just Alma Rosé. Zofia Cykowiak notes that, rather than physically bullying the girls as in Fania's portrayal, "I did on several occasions see Alma help, especially with the younger girls. I remember her hugging Yvette once, when a rehearsal just got to be too much for her."[40] Cykowiak also calls attention to the fact that Alma

did not require anything from her musicians she did not require of herself. "She conducted the orchestra and held rehearsals all day, in the evenings she practiced her own solo pieces, and through the night she worked on and arranged music for the entire orchestra."[41]

Fénelon also impugns Rosé's capabilities and qualifications as a musician, charges the other women find utterly ludicrous. At different times Fania claims that Alma can't conduct, that she had difficulty reading scores, and that she couldn't orchestrate compositions for use with the unique instrumental composition of the women's orchestra.

Fénelon uses these charges to bolster her own characterization as "Savior of the Orchestra." For example, in one scene Fania admits to Alma that she can orchestrate and implies that this enabled the orchestra to survive since no one else could do it as well or had been doing it.[42] Niwińska calls this patently false, noting that, before Fania's arrival, the orchestra played music orchestrated by Alma (Image 6.2).

> Fania denies that Alma could read scores and she says she herself saved the orchestra from liquidation thanks to her knowledge of orchestra-


**Image 6.2** Alma Rosé and her orchestra, the Wiener Walzer Mädeln. Reprinted by permission of the Gustav Mahler-Alfred Rosé Collection, the Music Library, Western University, London, Canada

> tion. This is obviously absurd! Alma had previously conducted Wiener Walzmädel, and was virtuoso violinist and experienced conductor. Besides, Fania Fenélon joined the group as late as the end of January 1944 when the orchestra, directed by Alma since August 1943, already had over 200 pieces in its repertoire, orchestrated by the conductor for that particular ensemble.[43]

Violette Jaquet concurs with this assessment and states that: "The life of the orchestra did not rest on Fania's 'frail shoulders.' Before she arrived the music was orchestrated by Alma herself, who directed Hilde [Simche] to assign certain parts to certain instruments. And Ala [Gres] could have continued in this fashion even in Fania's absence."[44] Rachela Olewski simply expresses contempt that Fania would present herself as the orchestrator[45] while Hilde Simche, in an interview from 1987, states that she and Alma did the orchestrations, not Fania.[46] Helena concurs and states that Fania "did not orchestrate on her own, rather under the direction of Alma."[47]

The women likewise express disbelief at Fania's statement that "Alma, a virtuoso violinist, couldn't conduct; she read her score as a player, not as a conductor."[48] Fania quotes Alma admitting, "I'd never conducted in my life, I'd never learned to read a score," a statement that both Helena and Rachela find inexplicable. Helena states angrily, "Fania writes in her book that Alma was not a good musician, that she was not a good conductor, that she had no ear for music, that she did not know who was playing out of tune, that she [Fania] stood behind her [Alma] and prompted her how to conduct. Such nonsense you know! **Not** in agreement with the facts!"[49]

Another of the slanders perpetuated against Alma Rosé is the charge that she refused to use her influence with the camp officers to request extra food for the women. Fania describes herself approaching Alma at a quiet moment and soliciting more food for the women.

> Alma, couldn't you ask Frau Mandel for a little extra, a parcel for the girls or something? They're so hungry! Her face inscrutable, her lips pursed, she answered hissingly: "No! I refuse to ask for anything for them. They spoiled my concert last Sunday; I'd be ashamed."[50]

At another moment Fania quotes Alma as saying, "Sometimes Frau Mandel asks me if the girls are hungry. Of course they're hungry, of course I could ask for food. But when they play so badly, is it not my duty to keep silent?"[51]

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch *strongly* denies that Alma would ever have blocked a request for extra food for her musicians,[52] as does Rachela Olewski who declares simply and firmly that it wasn't true.[53] Helena Niwińska concurs, stating firmly that nothing like this ever happened and that it was one of Fania's many lies. For Helena it is "incomprehensible how Fania could have concocted such filth about Alma."[54] In an interview Lasker-Wallfisch stated categorically that "Alma would NEVER have stopped Mandl from giving us supplementary food. Grave indictment indeed."[55]

The women also disagree with Fania's portrayal of the events concerning Alma's death. Fania erroneously reports that when Alma returned to the block and became violently ill, Czajkowska ran to get Oberaufseherin Maria Mandl and that Mandl returned promptly accompanied by an SS doctor.[56] Both Helena and Violette deny this version of events, with Helena simply stating that Mandl did not come to the orchestra block or Alma's room and Violette asking, "How can one imagine that the head of the bloc could have the nerve to wake the SS camp chief? Furthermore, the SS lived outside the camp. How could a sentinel have let Czajkowska leave to go get Mandl? Really, when I read this I think I am dreaming."[57]

After Alma's death, Fénelon describes how her body was placed in state in the Revier on a "catafalque covered with white flowers—a profusion, an avalanche of flowers, mainly lilies, and giving off an amazingly strong scent. To get those flowers the SS must have had to get into vehicles and go into town, to florists—there were such things in Auschwitz; it was incredible."[58] Fania later describes Mandl's eyes filled with tears and a procession of high ranking SS officers "bowing down before the corpse of a Jewess they'd covered in white flowers."[59]

Many women rebut the statement about the profusion of flowers and the obeisance by officials of the SS over Alma's body. Helena specifically notes that: "This 'catafalque' was not inside the Block, only outside. Rubbish! There weren't flowers in profusion, only one or two. [And] Mengele genuflecting before Alma's arm band and baton? Only inventions!"[60] Zofia Cykowiak states that "it is not true there were bouquets of flowers, and no formation or march of SS men in front of the body. We were allowed to say good-bye to Alma and instead of flowers, there were just branches of weeds we could find to place on the sheet she was covered with."[61] Zofia also noted that, rather than the elaborate catafalque described by Fénelon, Alma's body was lying on two stools pushed together in front of the hospital block, covered with a white sheet.[62] Helen Tichauer scorns the idea that Rosé received something akin to a state funeral and that she

was mourned by the SS,[63] while Anita Lasker-Wallfisch states simply that Alma's body was laid out on a white cloth, but does acknowledge that some of the SS seemed upset.[64]

When the television movie of *Playing for Time* was filmed the actress cast as Alma Rosé—Jane Alexander—largely based her interpretation upon the image of the conductor that Fania presented. Alexander subsequently won an Emmy Award as best actress in a supporting role for her portrayal.[65] After the premiere of the film and Alexander's interpretation of Alma was lauded, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch published a defense of Rosé in the *London Sunday Times*. It is a good synopsis of the feelings of all the women.

> Our orchestra was led in the fullest sense of the word by Alma Rosé. Alma was a most remarkable person. She commanded absolute respect from us and by all appearances, from the SS as well. If anybody ever had a real challenge it was Alma.
>
> There she was, confronted by a collection of weird instruments played by a collection of equally weird musicians. Fania was probably the only real accomplished musician among us, along with four or five others. With this material Alma set out to make a real orchestra with standards where only perfection was acceptable.
>
> She threw herself into this task with a fervor which seemed absurd under the circumstances. Let us not forget that outside our little world the gas chambers were working non-stop.
>
> Alma gave us punishments for playing wrong notes. I myself was the recipient of such punishments, and I would be dishonest were I to say that I loved her for this at the time. BUT, 35 years later, I have long come to understand what Alma was about, and I view her attitude with nothing less than the greatest admiration.
>
> What she achieved with this iron discipline was to focus our attention away from the smoking chimneys outside to an F which should have been an F#. It was her way of trying to keep sane, and she involved us all in this quest for the perfect performance of the rubbish we were playing, (and it was because of this) that we managed to keep sane ourselves. We owe her the greatest debt of gratitude.[66]

## The Cruel Depiction of Claire Monis

Claire Monis was a gifted French musician who was 21 years old when she entered the camp. As portrayed by Fénelon through the character "Clara," Claire was selfish, physically unattractive, obese, constantly exchanging sex in the camp (with both male prisoners and the SS) for favors or food,

and possessed of loose morals. Claire's portrayal in the television movie is also exceedingly negative. Although in the film representation Clara is not obese, she *is* presented as aggressive, belligerent, selfish, a bad singer, and not at all talented.

From her very first appearance in the book and thereafter Fania denigrates Claire's physical appearance: "[Clara was] a girl of about 20 with a ravishing head set upon an enormous, deformed body."[67]

In a description of their initial processing into Auschwitz when prisoners were forced to disrobe Fania states, "Poor Clara! Pitiable with her enormous breasts flopping down on her fat stomach, she looked like an apple balanced on two matchsticks."[68] Later, upon entry into the orchestra block, she remarks, "my Clara, waddling like a duck, flabby and fat, so fat."[69] Later still, after a few months in the orchestra, Fania notes that Clara "had become frighteningly selfish, she would do anything to get food. In the middle of all these painfully thin girls, her obesity was a wonder, a most effective lure for men, who paid court to her in butter and sugar."[70]

Before the war an adolescent Claire had been cast in a series of ingénue roles in French cinema and theatre. Photographic stills from 1938 reveal a beautiful young girl with a radiant face, lovely smile, haunting eyes, and a normal and well-proportioned body.[71]

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch notes that Claire "was certainly not obese, but I seem to remember that she was somewhat swollen. Another hunger symptom. She was certainly very pretty!"[72] Helena Niwińska concurs with the assessment of Claire's beauty and additionally comments that Claire did have a fairly rounded figure, but that she was merely plump and in *no way* obese.[73]

Niwińska later elaborated that "Claire Monis had the very pretty face of a young woman. Of course, the camp took its toll; still, her facial features were indicative of great beauty. As regards her figure, one can say that she belonged to those few who, despite the hunger, kept a full, fairly rounded figure. The clothes we had in the camp, and first of all no brassieres, meant that the sight of us was—for sure—pathetic. If a woman was rather short and plump before the war, in the camp a woman's figure lost any charm whatsoever. Breasts without bras looked saggy and unattractive."[74]

It is probable that Claire suffered from a condition known as hunger swelling,' or starvation edema. This condition is defined as a disorder of nutrition due to a long lasting dietary deficiency of protein and/or calories, and marked by edema. Individuals experiencing starvation lose

substantial fat and muscle mass as the body breaks down those tissues for energy in order to keep vital systems such as the nervous system and heart muscle functioning.[75] Because of this, vitamin deficiency is a common side effect and often leads to anemia and other physical manifestations such as the swelling Claire may have experienced. Other prisoners in Auschwitz also suffered from starvation edema.

In addition to the recurring criticisms of her physical appearance, Fania continually denigrates Claire's morality. Citing incidents in which the Clara character exchanges sex for food, Fénelon summarizes: "Swinging her hips, complacently offering her pallid fat, she would go towards the highest bidder, steering a course between her two main concerns, guzzling and singing."[76] Fénelon also accuses Claire of becoming a brutal Kapo in Bergen-Belsen, drunk with power, noise and violence, and often beating the other female prisoners in a "sexual frenzy which verged on the obscene."[77]

After publication of *Playing for Time* several survivors expressed concern for Claire's memory and for her son, while many made note of Fania's sick and obsessive jealousy towards the young musician. The women were horrified about Fania's portrayal of the young woman and came quickly to Claire's defense. Anita indignantly stated: "The worst distortion was that of Claire, who was no longer alive when the book came out. [But her] son was still alive!!!"[78] And in an interview: "Absolutely UNFORGIVEABLE is the portrayal of the girl who becomes a prostitute. It is not only tasteless but UNTRUE!"[79]

Helena Niwińska continued her defense of Claire.

> It is unpleasant in Fania's book that she shows nearly every girl in an ugly way. Especially her companion from France, the very good singer Clara. On every occasion she is embarrassing Clara, defaming her, discouraging (prejudicing) the reader to this girl. In reality, Clara was a winning, modest, and good girl and very, very good singer. Fania must have been very, very jealous of Clara. Clara was young—about 20—while Fania was around 30, and had a ruined voice although she was a very good musician.[80]

In a subsequent interview Helena spoke once again about Claire:

> She was very young. Had an amazing voice. The story about the SS man is ABSOLUTELY not true! Such a lie! Fania had a sick (abnormal, chronic, obsessive) jealousy towards Claire![81]
>
> I remember Claire as a nice young girl with a very fresh complexion. She was a silent girl. Should [would have been] 20–21 years old. Maybe

> a little older because she was already an excellent singer. In the camp she [sang] a very well-known tune by Alabiev—"The Nightingale." Very, very nice! I was enchanted by her performing. I don't know who [could have been] her friend, she was rather isolated I think. But she was a little closer to Fania because they entered the band the same day. Possibly they spent time together in Drancy. I don't understand Fania's abuses against Claire. I only suspect that Fania was very jealous of her. To make her bad opinion known in the free world was very abominable.[82]

Violette Silberstein Jacquet indignantly rises to Claire's defense several times in her annotated copy of the book. "I defy anyone to find proof of the allegations of 'fucking' sessions on the part of Claire!," and later: "The disgusting passages about Claire are false, **false, FALSE!**"[83]

Claire's portrayal is, perhaps, the most egregious mischaracterization in Fania's memoir. Details of her life story were also misrepresented.

The French Shoah Foundation in Paris documents Claire's birth and deportation dates, revealing that she was born on February 10, 1922 and was 21–22 years old when imprisoned in Auschwitz.[84] Records from the Vichy government in France also reveal that Claire underwent repeated interrogations about her religious status.*[85] Once Claire was determined to be "100% Jewish," she was arrested, detained in Drancy, and then placed on a transport list to Auschwitz.[86] It was on this transport that Claire first met Fania Fénelon.

The International Tracing Service at Bad Arolsen, Germany, confirms that Claire was deported to Auschwitz through Drancy on January 20, 1944[87] and transported back to Paris, France from Bergen Belsen on May 17, 1945.[88] In the epilogue to *Playing for Time,* "What Became of Us," Fania states the following about Claire:

> Clara too did not have long to live. Her behavior as Kapo closed the doors of the Federation of Deportees to her. She achieved nothing of her dreams of fame; she married and had a child, who died a terrible death by suffocation. She had a brief moment of glory as producer of a TV program, then she died.[89]

Every part of Fania's statement about Claire is manufactured and false. The Federation of Deportees (FNDIRP) referenced above by Fénelon has no record at all of Claire Monis in their archives.[90] She never approached them for aid, neither was she turned away because of alleged

Kapo activities during the war. A recent investigation has found Claire's son, alive and well.

Additionally, Claire had a wonderful post-war career as manager of the French National Radio and as a pioneer in the French television and film industry. She worked as executive producer and manager on several movies including *Trois chambres à Manhattan* (1964)[91] and a popular television series about Robinson Crusoe, which was produced by a French cinema company and aired in France and England in the 1960s.[92]

It was also revealed after the war that Claire had been actively involved in the French Resistance, achieving the level of Lieutenant, and was designated a member of the "Livre d'Or de la résistance," a select group of resistance fighters.[93]

Claire's son describes her as a modest and talented person who was kind and considerate, always positive and upbeat. She was an independent single mother, a very modern woman, and a successful professional.[94] He notes that:

> I never heard her say anything bad about the times in the camps. She said that she helped as many as she could the best that she could and I know she had many friends. She was a great singer.
>
> She taught me not to say negative things about others and many times I heard her say that the ones who published sensational memoirs about their time in the camps were probably projecting onto others what they did themselves. She felt more pity for them than anger. Probably because she was a happy and successful person. She made me proud.[95]

Although Claire's life did end prematurely, she survived the war by 22 years. Claire died in 1967, the victim of a pedestrian automobile accident from which she never regained consciousness.[96] After her death Claire was accorded a military funeral as someone who had "died for France" because of her stature in the French Resistance.[97]

In many ways Fania Fénelon seems to have assumed Claire's identity. Claire was everything Fania wanted to be; young, talented, beautiful, selfless, professionally successful, a mother, and a legitimate heroine in the Resistance. Obviously aware of Claire's premature death, Fania could safely assume that she would never be challenged about the veracity of her portrayal of Claire and, with impunity, could adopt for herself aspects of Claire's real life persona.[98]

## Notes

1. Helena Niwińska to Susan Eischeid, 18 April 2014, Personal collection author.
2. Niwińska, *One of the Girls*, 107.
3. Zofia Cykowiak, "An Outline History of the Women's Orchestra in Oświęcim-Brzezinka," Krakow, 1985, APMO Wspomnienia, +190, ss. 1–19, inw. 173518.
4. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch to Susan Eischeid, e-mail message to author, April 16, 2014.
5. Helena Niwińska, interview, 2014.
6. Helena Dunicz Niwińska, *One of the Girls in the Band*, 99.
7. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, compilation of material concerning *Playing for Time* sent to CBS News, October 31, 1979, Personal collection Anita Lasker-Wallfisch (ALW).
8. Ibid.
9. Arie Olewski, email message to author, February 22, 2006.
10. Inga Deautchkron, "The Auschwitz Women's Orchestra," *Maariv*, Israel, March 26, 1987.
11. Irit Nahmany, "Madame Butterfly in Front of the Crematorium," *Davar Hashavuaa*, April 3, 1987.
12. Werner Grossert, "Berichtigung und Ergänzung," (über Sylvia und Carla Wagenberg), *Dessauer Chronik* , personal collection HN. This was a joint interview with Esther Bejarano. Although Bejarano was deported to another camp in Germany in 1943 (before Fania's arrival), she was included in this interview to speak of her own experiences in the orchestra and of the interpersonal relationships between the women at that time.
13. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch to Mrs. Brantz, May 9, 1992, Personal collection ALW.
14. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, compilation of material concerning *Playing for Time* sent to *CBS News*, October 31, 1979, Personal collection ALW.
15. Helena Niwińska to Susan Eischeid, April 18, 2014, author's personal collection.
16. Rachela Olewski, *Crying is Forbidden Here!* (Tel-Aviv, Israel: Olewski Family), 35.
17. Arie Olewski to Susan Eischeid, e-mail message to author, March 2014.
18. Irit Nahmany.
19. Fabry-Francy.
20. Zofia Cykowiak, "Recollections of Alma Rose." September 1985. APMO wsppomnienia + 190. Ss 1–19, Wsp./Cykowiak/1021, 1735–18.
21. Fénelon, 95.
22. Jacquet AC.

23. Niwińska interview, 2014.
24. Ibid.
25. Helena Dunicz Niwińska, "Truth and Fantasy," 65.
26. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Letter to the Editor, *London Sunday Times*, January 11, 1980.
27. Fénelon, 116.
28. Fénelon, 90
29. Ibid, 90. Helena Niwińska responds that, "I have asked some musicians about such an event. NOBODY has any memory of this." (Niwińska , 2014) Anita Lasker-Wallfisch remarks that "Alma's speech about the Berlin Philharmonic and Furtwängler as an excuse for hitting us is ludicrous." ( Lasker-Wallfisch to CBS News, rebuttal statement, 1979, Personal collection ALW).
30. Helena Dunicz Niwińska, annotated copy *The Musicians of Auschwitz*, compiled June–August 2014 (referred to subsequently as Niwińska AC).
31. Niwińska AC.
32. Rachela Zelmanowicz Olewski, annotated copy *Playing for Time*, compiled between 1980 and 1986 (referred to subsequently as Olewski AC).
33. Jeff Bradley to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, telegram, January 12, 1981, Personal collection ALW.
34. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to author, 2014.
35. Irit Nehmany.
36. Jacquet AC.
37. Knapp, "Music as a Means of Survival," *Feministische Studien*, English translation, 1996, 6.
38. Heinz Höhne, "The Horror Avoided," *Der Spiegel*, March 12, 1981, 206.
39. Zofia Cykowiak, *Recollections of Alma Rosé*, September 1985, APMO.
40. Zofia Cykowiak, interview, 2003.
41. Cykowiak, *An Outline History*, APMO.
42. Fénelon, 39–40.
43. Niwińska, *Truth and Fantasy*, 65.
44. Violette AC. Ala Gres was one of the orchestra's copyists, from Russia.
45. Olewski AC.
46. Inga Deautchkron, "Auschwitz Women's Orchestra," *Maariv*, Israel, March 26, 1987.
47. Niwińska, *Truth and Fantasy,* 65.
48. Fénelon, 55.
49. Niwińska interview, 2004.
50. Fénelon, 103.
51. Fénelon, 121.
52. Bradley, telegram to Lasker-Wallfisch, 1981.
53. Olewski AC,
54. Helena Niwińska, e-mail message to author via Lidia Jurek, June 6, 2015.

55. Lasker-Wallfisch, CBS News rebuttal statement, 1979.
56. Fénelon, 206.
57. Jacquet AC.
58. Fénelon, 208.
59. Ibid.
60. Niwińska AC.
61. Cykowiak, interview with author, 2004.
62. Cykowiak, *Recollections of Alma Rosé*, September 1985, APMO.
63. Alyn Shipton, "When the Music Stopped …," *The Times*, February 23, 2004, 18.
64. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, *Inherit the Truth* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 85.
65. Newman, 323.
66. Material compiled concerning *Playing for Time*, television program with Ludovic Kennedy, 1979, personal collection ALW. See also *London Sunday Times*, Letter to the Editor, January 11, 1980.
67. Fénelon, 12.
68. Fénelon, 18.
69. Fénelon, 28.
70. Fénelon, 106.
71. *La Chaste Suzanne*, Theatre Municipal de la Gaite-Lyrique, Paris, France, 1937.
72. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to author, March 2, 2015.
73. Helena Niwińska, e-mail message to author, via Lidia Jurek, March 5, 2015.
74. Helena Niwińska via Lidia Jurek, e-mail message to author, March 8, 2015.
75. "Starvation Edema," Medical Lexicon, accessed March 3, 2015. http://www.medlexicon.com/medicaldictionary.php?t=87323.
76. Fénelon, 189.
77. Fénelon, 244–245.
78. Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail to author, 2014.
79. Lasker-Wallfisch, statement prepared for CBS News rebuttal, October 31, 1979, Personal collection ALW.
80. Helena Niwińska to Susan Eischeid, April 18, 2014, Personal collection author.
81. Niwińska interview, 2014.
82. Helena Niwińska to Susan Eischeid, October 17, 2014, Personal collection author.
83. Jacquet AC.
84. Shoah Holocaust Memorial, Paris, France, Reference Number 32353489. http://www.memorialdelashoah.org.
85. Laurent Joly, Vichy dans la "solution finale," (France: Grasset, 2006), 558–559. *As in other countries occupied by the Nazi regime, many Jewish per-

sons in Paris came under the scrutiny of the government because a person's fate and status was often determined by the amount of Jewish blood in their family. Claire's deportation records state that Claire's mother was Jewish. Initially her father's status was listed as non-Jewish, thereby classifying Claire a "demi-juive." Subsequently a magistrate named Emile Boutmy took over the position as Director of the Status of Jewish Persons Division for the Commissariat general aux questions juives (CGQJ), a bureau of the Vichy Regime. Boutmy was noted for the enjoyment with which he re-opened and denounced the decisions of his predecessor. It was because of this that the inquiry into Claire's family status was re-initiated. In September 1943 Boutmy stated that he believed Claire's father to also be Jewish, despite there being nothing specifically 'Jewish' about the name Monis. Boutmy's officials threatened Claire with deportation if she could not supply them with a copy of her father's birth certificate. Since Mr. Monis was born in Russia, this was no longer possible and she was unable to procure the document. Boutmy then sent Claire a threatening message, which has survived: "You have not yet complied with my request, so I consider that you are experiencing some anxiety and some difficulties in producing this document. I grant you an 8 day delay, after which I will make my decision." On December 22, 1943 the CGQJ notified Claire that she had now been classified as "100% Jewish."

86. Joly, Ibid.
87. MONIS, Claire 1.1.9.1/11183847: Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei Frankreich, ITS Digital Archives, Bad Arolsen.
88. MONIS, Claire, 1.1.3.1/3396435: Concentration Camp Bergen-Belsen, Lists of Survivors, 1945, ITS Digital Archives, Bad Arolsen.
89. Fénelon, 261.
90. Irene Michine, Fédération Nationale des Déportes et Internés, Résistants et Patriotes (FNDIRP), e-mail message to author, March 1, 2015.
91. Philippe Khan, e-mail message to author, March 31, 2015.
92. "The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe," Franco London Films (FLF Television Paris), 1964–1965. http://www.davidsemporium.co.uk/crusoe5.html; http://www.unifrance.org.
93. Philippe Khan, e-mail message to author, March 22, 2015.
94. Philippe Khan, e-mail message to author, March 24, 2015.
95. Philippe Khan, e-mail message to author, March 20, 2015.
96. Ibid.
97. Philippe Khan, e-mail message to author, March 21, 2015.
98. Fénelon, 261.

CHAPTER 7

# Other Issues of Distortion and Embellishment in Fania Fénelon's *Playing for Time*

**Abstract** In this chapter Eischeid continues her exposé of the many issues of distortion and embellishment contained in Fénelon's Holocaust memoir *Playing for Time*. Topics addressed include rehearsal hours and night work, the controversy over Fénelon's age and its significance, false repertoire claims, fear of retribution for bad performance, false portrayals of Josef Kramer and Josef Mengele and the sexualization of the SS, embellished or manufactured details about major camp events, the inaccurate portrayal of Oberaufseherin Maria Mandl, and the untrue representations of other Auschwitz prisoners including Zofia Czajkowska, Fanny Birkenwald, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Hélène Scheps, Violette Jacquet Silberstein, and the Ovitz dwarf family.

**Keywords** Fania Fénelon • Holocaust memoir • *Playing for Time* • Other issues of distortion • Night work • Age controversy • False repertoire claims • Fear of retribution • Mengele/Kramer portrayals • Sexualization of the SS • Anti-Polish prejudice • Major camp events • Maria Mandl • Controversial portrayals of individuals

Apart from the issues described in the previous chapter, there are many other "grey areas" of dubious veracity in Fania's memoir. These are stories or characterizations which have been widely cited and accepted as truth in multiple sources, even those which acknowledge that Fénelon can be an unreliable witness.



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## Night Work/Rehearsal Hours

Several of the Fania's colleagues take issue with her description of "night work," or playing regularly at night when the SS officers came in "to relax after their 'hard' work."[1] "Every day, and often several nights on end, the SS came to our block to demand endless musical desserts."[2] Violette Jacquet has no recollection of having played for any SS officer on more than one night,[3] and never visits by the SS several nights in a row to hear music."[4] Hilde Simche and Sylvia Wagenberg state that the SS didn't come at night, "they were asleep."[5] Anita Lasker-Wallfisch concurs, saying that the SS officers visited during the day, and "we only played one concert on Sundays."[6] Helena Niwińska says simply about the night concerts, "It isn't true!"[7]

Fania speaks often about purported periods of intense activity for the orchestra. "We had never played so much: there were two–three concerts every Sunday."[8] Elsewhere in the book Fania quotes Alma as saying, "I insist on order in everything; in dress, in work—seventeen hours a day."[9] Fania also says that occasionally Alma rehearsed the orchestra to the point of exhaustion and beyond. "Then we went through a period of hell; some days we worked for twenty hours at a stretch, deadened, faltering, on the verge of collapse. Alma's implacable baton hypnotized us, conducting us with a frenetic beat we could no longer follow."[10]

Most of the women agree that Fania was exaggerating when she described the orchestra rehearsing or "doing music" for 17–20 hours a day.[11] Violette remonstrates: "We never rehearsed 20 hours at a stretch," and also notes that, "Never two or three concerts per Sunday. Only one. Alma's attitude was never the way it is described here. It is exaggerated in all respects, and one could probably reduce it by a factor of 10 without harming the truth."[12] Helena simply responds: "What rubbish!!"[13]

There is, however, some variation among the women over the number of hours that the orchestra did practice daily. Helena states that, "It was impossible. Mostly ten hours. Those are Fania's inventions."[14] Anita Lasker-Wallfisch simply notes that, "We rehearsed for many hours. All day long."[15] Today, an average rehearsal for a professional symphony orchestra runs from 2.5 to 3 hours. It is worthwhile to note that any of the scenarios described above required considerable physical stamina and concentration on the part of the musicians and the conductor.

## Age Controversy

One of the highlighted moments in the book is when Clara "shockingly" and dramatically discovers that the new hair growing back on Fania's shaved head has turned "white, all white."[16] It is implied that this happened suddenly and was caused by physical shock, precipitated by Fania's discovery of the terrible realities of Birkenau and the gas chambers. Helena believes rather, that since Fania had always prevaricated about her age, the new hair was simply growing back in its natural color. "Clara [Claire] had known Fania only when she still had her black, and colored, hair. When the new hair grew in, and without access to hair dye, it simply came in Fania's natural color, which by then was grey or white."[17]

As previously noted, Fania was, in reality, about 10–15 years older than she represented herself in the book and throughout her life, making her 36–37 years old during her time in Auschwitz.

Certainly, it is no crime to lie about one's age and many women throughout history have done this. However Olivier Jacquet, Violette's son, has some thoughts about the significance of this falsehood for the orchestra women.

> Fania played a VERY important role at the heart of the orchestra, but NOT in the way that she claims. She embellished facts, and she preferred to misrepresent reality whenever it did not give her a grand role! Fania lied about her age. Even today it seems that the birthdate given for her on the web is incorrect. Fania was older! And that was important!!!! Fania was 5, 7, 10, 12 years older than the other girls in the orchestra. She was an accomplished woman who already had a career behind her. To Mother, who was barely 18, she was almost a surrogate mother, or at least an example of someone who had already experienced LIFE before being taken out of it. Fania was a mythomaniac and coquette! And she never wanted this fact to be known, so it has not been recognized that she was a mother or older sister, a woman who could furnish dreams, to these young girls of 18 or 20 years who knew nothing of life![18]

## False Repertoire Claims

Several significant untruths about the orchestra's repertoire are presented in Fénelon's memoir. She begins one chapter "Pa-pa-pa-*pam*. It wasn't London, but our orchestra rehearsing the first movement of Beethoven's *Fifth [Symphony]*, which I'd rewritten from memory." (original emphasis)[19]

From a musical standpoint, it would have been highly challenging for an orchestra with the composition and experience level of the Birkenau women's orchestra to successfully play this movement. Professional orchestras grapple with its technical challenges. Additionally, heroic implications of spiritual defiance are often ascribed to Fénelon's purported performance of this work.[20]

In reality, the orchestra never did perform Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. Helena Niwińska states categorically: "We didn't play Beethoven's Fifth Symphony![21] Anita agrees firmly,[22] while Violette says simply, "The Fifth Symphony? And why not '*God Save the King*' while we are at it!"[23]

In another instance, Fania describes herself writing out the Mendelssohn *Violin Concerto*, a piece which was forbidden by the SS because Mendelssohn was Jewish. Fénelon claims that the orchestra played it anyway, banking on the fact that "none of them is bright enough to notice."[24] This story is also debunked by the others. Violette says: "Never the Mendelssohn violin concerto, the less so because as everyone knows that pieces by Jewish composers were completely forbidden. The Germans are and were musicians. Who could believe that they could hear such a well-known piece without recognizing it?"[25] Helena says simply: "Rubbish!! We never played that concerto!"[26] Anita says firmly: "We never played the Mendelssohn Concerto in front of the German officers."[27]

## Fear of Retribution

At many points in her memoir, Fania describes a climate of fear in the orchestra and implies that if the women made a mistake in performance, or had a bad day, they would be sent to the gas chamber. Fénelon states through the character Jenny: "'If your Kraut mate Mandl doesn't like your so-called simple accompaniment, she'll send us all to take a death shower.' Not to please—that was what we all feared."[28] Later, when describing the aftermath of a concert ostensibly for Heinrich Himmler, Fania quotes Alma exploding with the comment, "You played badly, abominably out of tune! Of course he didn't like it! He'll gas us all. (And quite right too," one could almost hear her adding pettishly)."[29]

The other women heartily disagree with this portrayal. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch simply states: "NONSENSE!" when asked if the musicians lived in fear of making a mistake.[30] Rachela concurs and states that no one was ever sent to their death because of lack of professional knowledge.[31] Hélène Scheps and Fanny Birkenwald commented that:

> Another thing, even worse. According to Fania we were supposed to have lived every minute in fear of death. This is not true. On the contrary, we were sustained by a youthful ignorance, and often we even laughed like schoolgirls. We were 16, 17, 20 years old. What did we know? Yes, we were hungry, but less than the thousands of other unfortunates in the camp. We didn't live in filth and we were clothed almost decently.[32]

Violette states indignantly: "It is completely false to say that we feared the gas chamber at any slight misstep. And if it is true that we had no hope of ultimate escape, we didn't fear being sent there because of some false note or small mistake."[33]

## The Portrayals of Josef Kramer and Josef Mengele and the Sexualization of the SS

Many of the women take umbrage at the humanization and characterization of Josef Kramer, Kommandant of the Birkenau camp. In one chapter, Fania describes a visit of Kramer to the music block during which he sits down in a chair and requests Schumann's *Träumerei*. She describes him, a notoriously cruel man, relaxing and connecting deeply to the music. "I noted in wonder that his codlike gaze was moist with tears. He had delivered himself up to his emotions and was allowing tears as precious as pearls to roll down his carefully shaven cheeks."[34] None of the other orchestra women remembers Kramer crying in this moment.[35] Anita additionally states: "This is the usual complete nonsense. No tears … He just left the Block, and this was all."[36]* Flora Schrijver Jacobs, an accordionist with the orchestra, was later commandeered by Kramer to act as a nanny for his children. As such, she had closer contact with him than just about any other prisoner. Rather than the emotionally moved man described by Fénelon, Schrijver instead remembers Kramer as a brute who kicked women to death and was responsible for the death of thousands.[37]

Multiple women, including Violette, Helena, Rachela, Anita, Fanny, Sylvia, Hilde and Hélène, took great offense at Fania's descriptions of the infamous doctor Josef Mengele and their supposed sexual attraction to him. Fania remarks upon the doctor's good looks ("a sort of Charles Boyer") and details a visit to the orchestra block by Mengele.

> Handsome, Goodness he was handsome. So handsome that the girls instinctively rediscovered the forgotten motions of another world, running damp-

> ened fingers through their lashes to make them shine, biting their lips, swelling their mouths, pulling at their skirts and tops. Under the gaze of this man one felt oneself become a woman again.[38]

Violette states simply: "Lord! What an imagination! What indulgence!"[39] Hélène said: "Fania had an imagination. [We had] Little or no contact with Mengele."[40] Rachela said: "What appreciation Fania has for him!"[41] Helena vehemently denies that the women "bit their lips to make them more red and moistened their eyebrows with saliva."[42] Sylvia Wagenberg and Hilde Simche note that "no one had a libido any more. Due to the horrible conditions, the musicians couldn't even *think* about sex." (original emphasis)[43]

Fanny Birkenwald remarked that ""Fania always had lots of imagination. I only saw Mengele one time, as he got off the train, and I am certain that he had no interest in the orchestra whatsoever after that. Anyway, we didn't have any contact with the SS officers; we were careful not to talk to them at all."[44]

Helena Niwińska notes: "Most curious is her attitude towards the German authorities! The SS men. UNBELIEVEABLE stories!! Like when the SS men came, that the women would make themselves more pretty—moistening eyebrows etc., which she used as an example of her 'courage.'"[45] She later states that Fénelon's descriptions of eroticism and of the women's excitement at the arrival of men in the block were patently false.[46]

> How could she have written such a thing?? There were too many "We's!" She should not have written it as "We!" She should have said I! I was attracted to Mengele, not we! *She* was attracted to German men! INCREDIBLE, UNBELIEVEABLE STORIES! (original emphasis)[47]

Niwińska further states: "Would that she had refrained from expressing her own feeling of that kind, but she presents them in the name of all the group. If Fania wanted to show in her book all the sexual depravity in the camp, she surely could have woven it into the broader background of the camp and not forced these untruths into the history of her own commando. Simple honesty demands this."[48]

## Anti-Polish Prejudice

Some of the longest lasting hurts inflicted by Fania on her former colleagues concern the negative and unjust characterization of the Polish women as brutal and egotistical anti-Semites. Indeed, Fania's exception-

ally hateful anti-Polish attitude is apparent and explicit in many demeaning accounts. Fénelon rarely misses an opportunity to denigrate, prefacing one incident by saying: "Once again the group of Poles, both Aryan and Jewish, struck me as the most fanatical and odious. Was I going to become a racist, here where that was the most monstrous of sins?"[49] In another instance she describes a group of Polish women sitting at a table. "Their bestiality had something stereotyped about it which made them particularly disturbing. They're monsters, pigs, and they're all anti-Semitic."[50] She also stated: "I felt a swell of anger rising within me, a violent desire to pursue, to destroy. 'If I ever get out of here, I'll kill a Polish woman! And I'll see to it that all the rest die; that shall be my aim in life.'"[51] In 2014 Anita Lasker-Wallfisch commented that, "It is incomprehensible to me how a serious publisher could even allow to print the hurtful outpourings of Fania concerning the Polish contingent."[52]

One of the most devastating passages describes a purported instance in which the character "Zocha" (described as "big and fat—a monster! One would be hard put to find any human traits in her at all!")[53] dumps some milk out in front of the starving women, milk that she has been brought by her family who Fania says live on a farm outside of Auschwitz. Helena, a good friend of "Zocha" (Zofia Cykowiak),[54] states: "Only inventions and lies! Her parents didn't live 30 miles from Auschwitz (rather in Poznań). She couldn't get any milk!! In our Block the windows were placed very high, under the roof. Once couldn't go to the window and press."[55]

Niwińska further notes: "For example, relating to the hunger. The Jewish women did not get packages, so they were envious when the Polish women did (and would not share). We *would* share, but among ourselves! In Poland during the war there was abject poverty. Penury. There was no food, people even sold furniture. The families would sell whatever they had in the house just to send something to the people they knew in the camp. Even in Bolshevik times, they had to sell their silver [including dishes, etc.]" (original emphasis)[56] "A barrier rose up between us Poles and the Jewish women, but its foundation was not anti-Semitism; rather, it was the brutal strength of hunger that, in the German camp, defeated the ideal of universal solidarity, humanity, and empathy."[57]

Fania continues her slander of the Poles by describing an alleged altercation between three thinly disguised women.[58] "In the Music block the only homosexuals I knew of were a strange and repugnant trio, Wisha, Marila and Zocha." Fania relates "details" of this altercation in the most demeaning terms: "mad yowls erupted from the Polish corner," "[h]efty legs," "that fat, shapeless cow," "big, black-nailed hand," and so on, and

describes it as a "lover's quarrel."[59] Helena indignantly states: "This is Fania's INVENTION too! They were very good friends who were helping one another but that IS ALL!"[60] She also notes that "Zocha [Zofia] was very ill in her spine and sometimes she fell into depression.[61] Wisia tried to heal her in different ways (making massages, talking, cheering her up, etc.)." Likewise, the character "Wisha" fell victim to Fania's anti-Polish prejudice. In reality, Jadwiga (Wisia) Zatorska was a kind and gentle woman who welcomed Helena Niwińska into her home and family after liberation.[62]

Niwińska remarks that, in daily life, the Polish women really had very little contact with Fénelon. "During rehearsals when she wasn't singing, she was sitting at the table with the other copyists and we were sitting at our stands. We played, had rehearsals all day, so were not in touch with other members of the ensemble."[63]

Near the end of her memoir Fania vividly and devastatingly describes her favorite fantasy:

> I personally did not want to die without pissing on the head of a Polish girl, and this made me want to laugh. I found it very funny; I called Florette, Anny and Big Irene and told them to get me a Polish girl so I could piss on her. … I don't know if I managed to satisfy that incongruous desire, but I often imagined it, and so intensely that I really felt better for it.[64]

It is with this tone of derision, so deeply wounding and so casually presented, that Fénelon moves beyond an embellishment of events into overt cruelty. When Helena Niwińska repeats these words, tightly and bitterly, forty years after they were written, her voice gets higher and breaks with indignation and anger. This is obviously a very deep and long standing hurt. Her eyes look down in her lap, she sighs, and subsides into silence.

## Embellished and Manufactured Details About Major Camp Events

In a chapter titled "Music for Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler", Fania describes a visit to the camp by Heinrich Himmler. In reality, the "bigwig" who visited the camp was not Himmler, but Adolf Eichmann.[65] He came in February 1944 to tour the Czech family camp and to discuss arrangements for the arrival of 500,000 Jews from Hungary who were slated to arrive in May. As part of that visit, Eichmann stopped by the women's music block briefly for a performance.[66]

Another chapter relates an extensive version of the story of Mala Zimetbaum and Edek Galinski. The relationship, actions and fate of these two heroic individuals has been well documented in other sources.[67] Fania describes secret visits and trysts by the pair which took place in the music block. Violette, Helena and Anita all emphatically deny that these meetings took place in their barrack. It is, as Anita says simply, "Nonsense!"[68] Anita also states that Mala was never in Block 25, as described by Fania,[69] while Helena disagrees with Fénelon's statement that before Mala and Edek no one had managed to escape and tell the truth about Auschwitz. "The whole world got the news about the Holocaust in Auschwitz earlier from the Polish Underground Organization!"[70]

Memories vary among the women about the exact chronology and details of Mala's execution and if the orchestra was taken to watch as a group. Many took great exception to Fania's ending for the Mala/Edek chapter when she claims that serious resentment against the couple had spread through the camp.

> [A]lready people were jibbering at the idea of the reprisals that would inevitably follow this escape. There was no shortage of criticism. "We're the ones who'll have to pay!" The girls spoke disapprovingly of their thoughtlessness, their impulsiveness, some even dared to say "stupidity."[71]

Violette disagrees strongly with this statement: "We all, without exception, approved of Mala's escape and regretted that they could recapture her, and we never vilified her as described here in the fear of reprisals. Here I really feel like using coarse language."[72]

## The Portrayal of SS Oberaufseherin Maria Mandl

Throughout *Playing for Time* Fenélon embellishes and distorts, not only the characters and representations of other women in the orchestra, but also of the German and Austrian guards. The largest and most extensive portrayal was of Maria Mandl ("Mandel" in Fenélon's book),[73] Oberaufseherin (Head Overseer) of the Auschwitz-Birkenau women's camp and founder of the orchestra. Mandl had entered camp service early, beginning at the Lichtenburg camp in 1938 and continuing at the Ravensbrück camp in 1939. She was sent to Auschwitz in 1942 to take charge of the women's camp, functioning there as the highest ranking officer in the female auxiliary arm of the SS.

Survivors' remembrances of Mandl are admittedly mixed, combining terror at her memory on the part of some, anger and disdain on the part of others, and in the rest a general ambivalence at her creation of the vehicle which saved their lives. In the film *Bach in Auschwitz*, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch somewhat angrily makes a comment about another well known female camp guard, the notorious Irma Grese: "One is more interested in the pretty lady than in us."[74] Incontrovertibly a valid observation and certainly, the memories and experiences of the survivors must take precedence. Nonetheless, like Grese, Mandl was a both 'pretty lady' and additionally a seminal figure in the orchestra and an understanding of her place and personality is relevant.

Fénelon describes Mandl rather elegantly—this on their first encounter:

> She was under thirty, very beautiful, tall, slender, and impeccable in her uniform.
>
> Mandel, hands elegantly on hips—long, white, delicate hands which stood out against the grey cloth of her uniform—stared at us, her hard blue china eyes lingering searchingly on my face. She took off her cap and her hair was a wonderful golden blond, done in thick plaits around her head. I noted everything about her: her face, without a trace of makeup (forbidden by the SS), was luminous, her white teeth large but fine. She was perfect, too perfect. A splendid example of the master race: top-quality breeding material—so what was she doing here instead of reproducing?[75]
>
> Maria Mandel was the perfect representative of the young German woman depicted in propaganda. She had a lovely Dietrich voice, guttural in the low register.[76]

In reality, in 1944 Mandl was 32 years old. She was not particularly tall (164 cm/5 feet 4 inches), not particularly slender (60 kg/132 pounds),[77] was muscular rather than willowy, had strong and stocky hands with normal length fingers, and was attractive and self-assured rather than classically beautiful.[78] Descriptions of her hair color range from dark blond to golden blond.[79] Zofia Cykowiak noted wryly: "Although, indeed [especially] in comparison with the others, her looks were good."[80]

Throughout the book Fania presents herself as Mandl's favorite, getting special treatment and being accorded the pet name of "Meine kleine Sängerin. ["My little singer"]."[81] Helena notes that "Fania shows herself as the favorite of Mandl, saying that Mandl called her "meine kleine Sängerin, mein Schreiberin." We never heard that!"[82] Anita Lasker-Wallfisch states

indignantly: "The mere fact that she pretended to be a favorite [of Mandl] … Unbelievable idiocy! Complete rubbish! She [Fania] was a complete also-ran!!"[83]

Fania also states that Mandl frequently requested an aria from *Madame Butterfly,* during which she would listen transfixed.[84] Violette notes that this happened only once at 8:00 a.m., and that to her knowledge, Fania only sang *Butterfly* 4–5 times in total for the SS.[85] Hilde Simche and Sylvia Wagenberg stated that "Fania was not asked to sing *Madame Butterfly* over and over—rather a popular tango."[86] Rachela concurred with this.[87] Zofia Cykowiak agrees that Mandl's favorite pieces were the *Jalousie Tango* and a sentimental balled called "mein Peterle," rather than *Butterfly.*[88]

Several survivors take issue when, in Fénelons memoir, Oberaufseherin Maria Mandl orders that Fania and Clara be taken to Kanada, the warehouses where the plundered possessions of prisoners brought to Auschwitz were stored, to find some clothes in their size. "Only Fania's invention!"[89] Helena, Violette and Margot Vetrovcova all strongly deny the incident when Mandl ostensibly seeks shoes for Fania, "Have you no shoes for my little singer?" and then becomes angry when they have difficulty finding shoes for her in a small enough size.[90] Violette states flatly: "There were thousands of pairs of shoes, including some infant shoes. It was not difficult to find a pair [of Fania's size]!!"[91]

In response to Fania's statement that Mandl herself placed the shoes on her feet, there is universal condemnation and derision.[92] Violette says: "I have absolutely no recollection of the highly unlikely episode of 'bootees!'" Helena: "Never took place!!" Anita: "Complete rubbish! Unbelievable idiocy! Nonsense, a fantasy!" Rachela says simply, "In her dreams!"[93] Margot Vetrovcova: "This is terrible that she is writing things, like she [Mandl] tying laces, some shoes, but this was not done by her!"[94] Hilde Simche: "This couldn't have happened!"[95] Helena is certain: "The Mandl shoe incident never took place!"[96]

Although Fania's portrayal of Mandl often veers into theatricality, there are certain stories which contain an element of truth. Near the end, at one of Fania's "dramatic highpoints," she devotes a whole chapter to "Mandel and the Child". This scene is also featured prominently in the movie. In it Fénelon describes the fall of 1944 after Alma's death. "The SS needed space. Selection followed selection, and they were expecting more convoys. … The heavy smoke above the crematoria indicated that they were full to capacity. In all the blocks rumors were rampant and "There were some who 'knew' and claimed we were all going to be gassed."[97] Later,

the orchestra was giving an outdoor concert and people from a recently arrived transport were milling about, including a lot of children.

> Our most faithful supporter, Frau Maria Mandel, so spruce in her uniform, came towards us, marched among those scattered bodies, those crouching women, as one would walk through a snake pit: furious and disgusted. In the sun her hair looked as if it were spun out of the gold of wheat. Arms outstretched, a marvelous little child toddled towards her, a ringleted angel of two or three. He ran up to her, clutched her boots, pulled at her skirt. My heart dropped; she'd surely send him flying with an almighty kick. But no, she bent down, took him in her arms, and covered him with kisses. The scene was so sensational that for a moment we stopped playing; Mandel, her blue eyes hard, went off carrying the child in her arms.[98]

Over the next few pages Fania describes Mandl bringing the child with her to rehearsals, dressing him in expensive clothes, playing little games with him, sitting in the music room with the child on her knee, puffing with pride, and spending the next week "parading the child proudly through the camp."[99] Then one day, "abnormally pale" and with "inexplicable anguish in her eyes," Mandl came alone and shortly thereafter word reached the orchestra that Mandl herself had taken the child to the gas chambers.[100]

Several survivors remember this story differently, but most concur that it did happen in some form. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, when asked about the story of the child, remembers it "vaguely". "In the film it seems strange to me." However, she denies the part in the book when Fania says that Anita's sister Renate, was the one who told the orchestra that Mandl had taken the child to the gas chamber. "The Renate part—absolute rubbish! In the book, if you were a psychologist [you would say] she took over Alma's role. Complete madness!"[101]

Zofia Cykowiak remembers that:

> It took place … It was already fall … She came with a boy, a few years old. It was a lovely child, very trusting towards her, very open. She listened to some light piece of music. It didn't last long. The child, under the influence of the music, indeed, started to … dance … move … as children do … and what's interesting, the child kept holding her hand. I remember it. I remember it because after a while, I can't say how long it took, I saw her on the road at the rail siding leading to the crematorium and that paralyzed me. I kept asking, how is it possible? How is it possible?[102]

Yvette Assael Lennon, one of the few Greek survivors, also remembers this incident.

> They left one of the little boys inside of the camp with us, with one of the Nazi ladies, and she took the boy with her and she brought it into the Block where we were living. And she sat and she made us play music and she was dancing with the little boy, and after she danced she said she loved that little boy so much, and she was dancing with the little boy, jumping and dancing. Then at the end she did what she had to do—she sent him to the gas chamber.[103]

Israeli survivor Sylvia Wagenberg described a memory in which she heard that Mandl cried when she sent the child to the gas chamber.[104]

Helena Niwińska comments:

> I remember the incident vaguely. She came with some boy, maybe 4 years old, nicely dressed. I think it was during the Warsaw Uprising. A child brought together with a number of Warsaw women after the uprising, in August or September 1944. Only that she came, listened to the music for a moment, stood there and the child stood there too, and nothing else.[105]

Survivor Helen Tichauer, who worked in the camp office and also played mandolin with the camp orchestra, questions whether this incident could have happened.

> That business with the child is not possible. It could not have been a Jewish child—they were gassed before they even had a chance to enter. The only children were Polish children who arrived with their mothers. If they were a girl they had to be in the Roll Call in the women's camp. Boys up to the age of five were kept administratively in the men's camp. If you arrived with a couple of kids, the boys over five were sent to the men's camp. They HAD to take the daily roll call report. In our camp there was no counting except by these tallies.
>
> That must have been a non-Jewish child if it happened. It COULD NOT have been a Jewish child, not into that system. It could just have been a Polish child she "killed."[106]

Mandl is well documented in the camp as having a predilection for children. Several survivors who were not in the orchestra remember other instances of Mandl playing with or temporarily "adopting" children.[107] So it is quite possible that this incident did indeed happen, most likely as Tichauer notes, with a non-Jewish child.

Some stories concerning Mandl ring true in the light of her personal life and actions. The best example of this is the shoe incident described earlier, in which Fania claims that Mandl sought and tried on shoes for her

"kleine Sängerin." Mandl, the daughter of a shoemaker, did indeed have a shoe/foot fetish—most often demonstrated when she was at Ravensbrück and forced the women prisoners to endure daily roll calls in bare feet in freezing temperatures and upon sharp rocks.[108] However, since this incident is vehemently and universally denied by all the survivors, it must be considered false.

## Inaccurate Portrayals of Specific Survivors

Many of the women who were singled out to have prominent places in Fania's book took frequent exception to their portrayal.

In the first edition of the book *Sursis pour l'orchestre*, Fania includes an entire chapter titled "La grande Irène."[109] Irène was loosely based on Hélène Scheps, the concertmaster of the orchestra, and the chapter largely consisted of a discussion between Fania and Hélène about early loves. Hélène succeeded in having Fenélon delete the entire chapter from most subsequent editions.[110] Hélène was a French speaker living in Belgium who had some contact with Fania after the war. It is likely that this personal access enabled Hélène to put continued pressure on Fénelon until the chapter was dropped. Violette, who read the original version, notes only: "The story of Hélène is full of errors, embellished, and distorted."[111]

Violette Jacquet ("Florette" in the book) disagreed at many junctures about Fania's portrayals of her character, vocabulary, and actions. When Fania described the upcoming visit by "Himmler," she stated that: "A rumor spread around the market, the Kanadas, and the lavatories: we were going to be visited by a top SS man. 'A supershit,' commented Florette."[112] Violette wryly remarked: "Note the term 'super-shit' attributed to me. Was that a current expression at the time?"[113] Chapter 10 begins with a quote by Florette: "Elle est terminée leur foutue voie ferrée!"[114] ("They've finished their fucking railway!"). Violette writes indignantly: "I have never in my life used the word 'fuck!.' It is a word I detest even for use in anger. And then, as I feared, Fania made me out to be some kind of out-of-control hysterical. Do I seem crazy to you?"[115]

In the chapter titled "Marta", Fania relates a reciprocal romantic crush on the part of the characters "Marta" (Anita Lasker-Wallfisch), and "Little Irene" (Hélène Rounder/Diatkin).[116] Fania presents herself a mother-confessor figure, accepting confidences from both girls and ostensibly supporting them in a non-judgmental way. Fania quotes Little Irene as stating that Florette (Violette) also had a "rather childish admiration for her,"

that she adored her.[117] Violette notes simply that "I felt a great liking and much tenderness for Hélène (Irène). I also admired her refinement. She was three years older than me, a lot at that age. Not that she represented everything I wished to be, but clearly between Fania and Irène there was no choice. This explains why."[118]

In general, the Marta chapter has been rebutted by the other women who are protective of Lasker-Wallfisch. Hélène Scheps wrote in a letter to Anita in 1977: "Regarding the chapter in which you can be easily recognized, since you were the only 'elite' of German origin and sister to Renate cited by first name in the book. Fania describes you in an inflammatory and inaccurate manner that I find intolerable. I hope you will be able to stop the English translation."[119] Helena Niwińska remarks that in a similar situation, she would have sued Fania for defamation of character.[120] After *Sursis pour l'orchestre* first appeared, Anita did manage to have some details changed in later editions of the book. She noted in 2014: "Whatever was changed in the book happened via my lawyer. I did not ask Fania's permission."[121]

Fania seems generally ill-disposed towards the German women, although not quite to the extent she evidences towards the Poles. At one point, when describing Marta's re-entry to the block after a bout of typhus, Fania states: "Alma appeared on the scene. Though different physically, they were members of the same haughty and superior race."[122]

Fanny Birkenwald also challenged the veracity of one of Fania's stories featuring her character, the thinly disguised "Anny." Fania describes a large transport of people into the camp being selected en masse for the gas chambers and rumored to be Belgian.

> "You know," remarked Anny, "they really look Belgian!" Then violent, irrepressible, a strangled shriek rose in her throat: "*Maman*! It's my mother, my sisters!" She threw herself forward. Down there on the ramp, her mother and sisters didn't look round. Brutally Florette planted her hand over Anny's mouth. Anny struggled desperately, wrenched away Florette's hand, shrieked, "Let me go! I want to go, I want to see them—to die with them. *Maman, maman*!" (original emphasis)
>
> We took turns mounting guard beside her. She cried all night and fell asleep at dawn.[123]

Fanny later described the true situation: "she gives a detailed description of the arrival in the camp of a group of Belgian Jews in which I was

supposed to have recognized my mother and two sisters. False through and through! I only had one sister, and all my other relatives were executed on their arrival."[124]

Fénelon is particularly cruel when describing Zofia Czajkowska, the first conductor of the orchestra. She refers to her former colleague as "that filthy Tchaikowska," categorizes her as a musical idiot, and describes her conducting as totally inept (taking marches in triple time, waltzes in duple time, etc.).[125] Helena Niwińska, responds: "[It's] only lies! It's true she wasn't a good conductor, but she knew the principles of music."[126] Other survivors concur with Niwińska's assessment of Czajkowska and several credit their survival and continued presence in the orchestra to the conductor, including violinist Hélène Scheps and accordionist Esther Bejarano.[127]

Richard Newman, Rosé's biographer, notes that it took courage for Czajkowska to introduce Polish folk songs into the orchestra's repertoire.[128] Zofia Cykowiak remembered how meaningful those songs became when played to the sick and dying women in the camp Revier. "It even happened that women who were sick and couldn't move otherwise would get up from their beds, and touch us and the instruments to be sure that what they were hearing was not a dream."[129]

It is also worthwhile to note that, had Czajkowska not been willing to cede the conductor's baton to Alma Rosé without drama or complaint and to help Rosé establish herself in the orchestra, the group might never have truly "gotten off the ground" and become the vehicle which saved their lives.[130]

Cykowiak spoke eloquently about Czajkowska's character in a statement to the Auschwitz Museum in 1985. Given Fènelon's negative depiction of Czajkowska , it is worth quoting here.

> Czajkowska was arrested in 1940. She went through a brutal interrogation in a prison in Tarnów. She arrived in Brzezinka with the first transport of Polish women in 1942. She belonged to the so-called "Old Häftlings." She was one of the few who managed to survive the hell that Brzezinka was at that time. In this period the camp was one mud bog, with no electricity or water. There was no medical care. The camp was administered by SS men and German women criminals [and] was extremely harsh. The terror was exceptional.
>
> This period influenced Czajkowska's psyche which showed damage (deviations). It manifested in her excessive movements and emotional

> agitation, excessive hyperactivity and short-temperedness. Therefore, she was not easy to get along with. It should be stressed however, that she simultaneously tried to admit to the orchestra as many women as possible, even those not playing well and especially young girls, wanting in this way to help them survive the camp. She would divide the food fairly. She did not steal from the packages or food rations, which happened in some other blocks. Despite a severe ban [on the practice], on her own responsibility she would tolerate contact between the orchestra women and women from other blocks and the hospital. She did not report a single woman to the command, even in cases of marked subordination, which would have exposed her to punishment by the SS if she were caught.[131]

Zofia Czajkowska survived the camp and died in 1978, two years after the publication of *Playing for Time*.[132]

## Untrue Representations of Other Auschwitz Prisoners

In the German edition of *Playing for Time*, Fania includes an extra chapter titled "Happy Birthday." It is here that Fénelon grossly mischaracterizes some of the other prisoners in Birkenau, in this case the Ovitz dwarf family.

The fascination of Josef Mengele with dwarfs and twins has been well documented. In the "Happy Birthday" chapter Fénelon describes a concert involving the Ovitz family and the women's orchestra, ostensibly organized by Mengele and specifically scheduled to coincide with and detract from the Jewish holiday Tisha B'Av. In Fania's account Mengele ordered the orchestra to prepare a special concert for which he himself selected the program: military marches, circus music, waltzes, and the fox-trot. Fania further states that Mengele ordered a special platform built for the performance so that the "dignitaries," of which Mengele was the center, could have the best view, and that the orchestra had to arrange extra rehearsals for the concert.

Fénelon describes the beginning of the concert:

> We start with a fox-trot, Mengele waving his hand, the dwarfs filling the stage, some couples dancing, other participants managing only a kind of grotesque depressing twist … These creatures emit joyful sounds, trying to sing along with Clara, Lotte, and me. They have high, shrieking voices. The orchestra plays a march, and they accompany with clapping and stamping. There is something unreal and awful about the fifty tiny hands covered with

> rings, the bracelets clicking on their little arms, the little legs stamping … The SS men burst out laughing. The young girls present at the scene start to tremble with fright at the uproar, the music, the dwarfs, the masquerade.[133]

Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev, authors of *In Our Hearts We Were Giants: The Remarkable Story of the Lilliput Troupe—A Dwarf Family's Survival of the Holocaust*, cite further Fénelon descriptions of the dwarfs as "jumping, doing acrobatics, shrieking at the top of their voices; … a banal scene of clowns, their chubby little hands slapping ridiculously, what a pathetic sight."[134] Koren and Negev note that, Fania's stereotyping notwithstanding, the Ovitzes were *not* circus performers: "The Lilliput Troupe's style in performance was, by necessity as well as choice, far removed from clowning—their bowed legs and short, weak arms, prevented them from doing any acrobatics whatsoever."[135]

One survivor of the troupe, Perla Ovitz, remembers that she and her family were taken by Mengele to an open air concert but she adamantly maintains they did not appear or perform onstage. Rather, she insists, they watched the entire performance from their stools in the audience. Also the musical program that Perla recalls was entirely different: romantic, melancholy German songs that moved her and her sisters to tears.[136]

When asked if she remembers this specific concert, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch replies, "I have absolutely no memory of such an event. If it had taken place, I think I would remember. The Kapelle [orchestra] in its entirety certainly was NOT there! Just another Fania Phantasy!"[137]

Likewise, when asked about this purported concert, Helena Niwińska responded, "I can't say anything. I have never heard about it in the camp." Helena surmises that if it did happen, it must have been in some other part of the camp, but she is sure that the three singers mentioned—Fania, Lotte and Claire—could not have taken part in it and that *most certainly* the entire orchestra did not. She concludes, "It is still one of Fania's phantasies."[138]

Records show that in 1944, Tisha B'Av fell on July 30–31.[139] These were busy days in the camp. An incoming transport of Polish Jews from the Radom district was processed, after which 1298 men and 409 women were admitted to the camp after selection. The remaining people were killed in the gas chambers.[140] Five prisoners escaped from Auschwitz and were pursued, two of whom were shot and killed during the pursuit. The other three were captured the next day and sent to Birkenau to be put on display at the entrance of the men's camp, along with the bodies of

the two men killed the day before. Two other large transports of Jews were processed; 3000 Jewish men and women again from the Radom District, and then another large transport from Blizyn, an auxiliary camp of Majdanek, from which 1614 Jews were admitted to the camp.[141]

Since Mengele was usually involved in selections on the Birkenau ramp, it is highly likely that he was busy working with at least some of these transports. Since July 30 fell on a Sunday in 1944, it is probable that what Fania described in her memoir was an embellished version of a normal Sunday afternoon concert. In that case, it is quite possible the dwarfs attended as part of the audience and that some of the described repertoire—which was standard for the orchestra—was performed. Many other prisoners in the women's camp's general population likewise remember attending the regular Sunday afternoon concerts presented by the orchestra.

Other inconsistencies in the "Happy Birthday" chapter include inaccurate descriptions of the dwarf's demise. Indeed, as Koren and Negev note, Fania Fénelon is one of the Birkenau survivors who "describes the death of the dwarfs in great appalling detail."[142] The dwarf family was regularly submitted to blood tests and other medical experiments administered by Dr. Mengele and his staff. After some of the Ovitz male dwarfs were taken to Mengele's lab for testing, Fania noted "the handsome doctor … crossing the camp, followed by his merry, squeaking army of dwarfs." Mengele is portrayed as a Pied Piper, proudly marching in front, with the dwarfs—joyful, self-assured, apparently unworried—behind him. "Who would dream of exterminating such tiny creatures, always joyful and happy? Mengele laughs with them, he seems quite amused, he so enormous ruling over such small ones."[143] Fénelon later reports that Mengele returned alone, his hands in his pockets, having proved himself capable of the unimaginable—murdering the dwarfs. Fania concludes "La Commedia è Finita!"[144]

The only problem with this account is that none of these dwarfs were killed and the entire Ovitz dwarf family survived Auschwitz.[145]

Fénelon also states as fact, inaccurate assessments of the number of dwarfs held by Mengele in Birkenau.[146] After Auschwitz was liberated by the Russians one of the survivors, Ludovit Feld, confirmed the number of dwarfs in Birkenau to be ten (five men, five women). Fénelon wrongly inflated that figure. "Mengele [was] surrounded by around 50 dwarfs who informed us he had removed them from the convoys being sent to the crematorium."[147] In an interview for the CBS newsmagazine *60 Minutes*,

Fénelon differently places the number of dwarfs at 20.[148] Although a few other survivors also believed there were more than ten, the clear majority of witnesses corroborate that there were no more than ten dwarfs involved in Mengele's ongoing research in the camp at any one time.[149]

It seems telling that Fénelon chose to delete this chapter from the best-selling and later English translations of her memoir.[150] Undoubtedly, the story of the dwarfs and the Ovitz family is a dramatic one, well-suited to Fania's hyperbole. But perhaps even she had second thoughts about allowing many of her outright fabrications about the dwarfs to be dispersed on a wider platform. By 1978 Fania was already beginning to contradict herself publicly in matters related to the dwarf performers and Josef Mengele.[151]

## Notes

1. Fénelon, 55.
2. Fénelon, 124.
3. Jacquet AC.
4. Ibid.
5. Nahmany.
6. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to author, June 7, 2014.
7. Niwińska, AC.
8. Fénelon, 124.
9. Fénelon, 120.
10. Fénelon, 182–183.
11. Fénelon, 55.
12. Jacquet AC.
13. Niwińska AC.
14. Niwińska AC.
15. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to author, June 7, 2014.
16. Fénelon, 84.
17. Niwińska, interview, 2014.
18. Olivier Jacquet, e-mail message to author, April 27, 2014.
19. Fénelon, 106.
20. Doris Bergen, "Music of the Holocaust," *The Holocaust; Introductory Essays* (Burlington, VT, 1996), 142.
21. Niwińska AC.
22. Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail to author, June 6, 2014.
23. Jacquet AC.
24. Fénelon, 125.
25. Jacquet AC.

26. Niwińska AC.
27. Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail to author, June 2014.
28. Fénelon, 86.
29. Fénelon, 185.
30. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to author, June 8, 2014.
31. Olewski, *Crying is Forbidden Here*, 36.
32. Fabry-Francy.
33. Jacquet AC.
34. Fénelon, 92.
35. Helena Niwińska, e-mail message to author via Lidia Jurek, 22 January 2015. See also Olewski AC and Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, January 22, 2015.
36. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to author, January 22, 2015. *Anita believes rather, that it was Josef Mengele who visited the block and requested the *Träumerei*, not Josef Kramer (Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, *Inherit the Truth*, 79). Helena Niwińska believes it was Kramer who visited the Block at that time, "because he was such a solid and well-built man, like a bull" but again states she did not see any crying (HN to author, 22 January 2015). This story is often repeated in outside sources as truth. For example, see Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Moral Extremes in the Concentration Camps* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1996), 143.
37. Paul van Liempt, "*Flora Schrijver—Ik huil nooit,*" NCRV—gids dé tvgids met onderscheidende interviews, April 28, 2000. http://www.ncvrgids.nl/gids/interviews/66 Accessed June 16, 2015.
38. Fénelon, 159.
39. Jacquet AC.
40. Fabry-Francy.
41. Olewski AC.
42. *Truth and Fantasy*, 66.
43. Nahmany.
44. Fabry-Francy.
45. Niwińska, interview, 2014.
46. Niwińska, *Truth and Fantasy*, 66.
47. Helena Niwińska, interview, 2014.
48. Niwińska, *Truth or Fantasy*, 66.
49. Fénelon, 132.
50. Fénelon, 42.
51. Fénelon, 19.
52. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to author, April 16, 2014.
53. Fénelon, 132.
54. Although in the immediate post-war years Zofia became fairly stout, in old age in 2004 (and in 1944) she was, physically, the antithesis of the big, fat, strong as a man, monster that Fania described.

55. Niwińska AC.
56. Niwińska, interview with author, 2014.
57. Niwińska, *One of the Girls in the Band*, 101.
58. Fénelon, 145–146.
59. Ibid.
60. Niwińska, interview, 2014.
61. The author notes that, when interviewing Zofia Cykowiak in 2003 and 2004, the elderly survivor still had spinal issues and severe pain from a beating she received from the SS shortly after entering Auschwitz. Before that, she had been brutally interrogated after her arrest in Poznań and left with permanently impaired hearing and the loss of vision in one eye (Niwińska, *One of the Girls*, 109).
62. Before the war Wisia had been a kindergarten teacher and served as a courier for the Polish Home Army. After being arrested she was interrogated and tortured brutally, imprisoned, and then transported to Auschwitz in February of 1943. Before being placed in the orchestra as a violinist, she "passed through some of the worst commandos in Birkenau—digging drainage ditches, dredging out the fish ponds, and physically demolishing extraneous houses near the camp from whom the owners had been expelled." After the war, Wisia became a bookkeeper in Krakow and died in 1981. (See Niwińska, *One of the Girls*,108.) See also Cykowiak interview, 2004.
63. Helena Niwińska to Susan Eischeid, September 12, 2014, Personal collection author.
64. Fénelon, 254–255.
65. Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle 1939–1945* (London: I.B. Tauris Ltd., 1990), 591.
66. Newman, 295.
67. Lorenz Sichelschmidt, *Mala, Ein Leben und eine Liebe in Auschwitz* (Bremen: Donat Verlag, 1995).
68. Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to author, June 8, 2014.; Jacquet, AC.; Niwińska, AC.
69. Ibid.
70. Niwińska, interview, 2014.
71. Fénelon, 168.
72. Jacquet AC.
73. Maria Mandl's family name is listed in many sources as "Mandel." Although "Mandel" was occasionally used as a deliberate mis-spelling (prisoners in the camps often used the derisive and diminutive "Mandelka" when referring to the Oberaufseherin among themselves), other examples of its usage are simply mis-spellings of the Austrian Mandl.

74. Michael Daëron, *Bach in Auschwitz*, film documentary (New York: Winstar TV and Video, Inc., 2000).
75. Fénelon, 30. Here Fania has inadvertently hit the nail on the head. Mandl entered camp service the same year as the Austrian Anschluss, shortly after her fiancé rejected her. Her lack of children (or perhaps her inability to have children) may have colored many of her actions in the camps.
76. Fénelon, 61.
77. Ze Zbiorów Archiwum, Panstwowego w Krakowie (Monte-223), Montelupich Prison records, Krakow, Poland, November 29, 1946.
78. Margit Burda, interview with Susan Eischeid, Munich, Germany, 2006.
79. Montelupich Records; Niwińska e-mail message to author, March 23, 2015.
80. Cykowiak interview, 2004.
81. Fénelon, 61.
82. Niwińska, interview, 2014.
83. Lasker-Wallfisch, telephone interview with the author, 2003.
84. Fénelon, 62.
85. Jacquet AC.
86. Nahmany.
87. Ibid.
88. Zofia Cykowiak, interview with the author, 2004.
89. Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail to author, June 8, 2014.
90. Niwińska AC, Jacquet AC, Margot Vetrovcova, interview with the author, tape recording, May 10, 2006, Karlovy Vary, Czech Republic. Author's personal collection.
91. Jacquet AC.
92. Fènelon, 35.
93. Jacquet AC; Niwińska AC; Olewski AC; Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, telephone interview with the author, London, England, September 9, 2003.
94. Vetrovcova interview.
95. Nahmany.
96. Niwińska, 2004 interview.
97. Fénelon, 224.
98. Fénelon, 225.
99. Fénelon, 227.
100. Ibid.
101. Lasker-Wallfisch, 2003 interview.
102. Cykowiak interview, 2004.
103. *Bach in Auschwitz.*
104. Zehava Mozes, "Music in the Shade of Death," *Al Hamaishmar*, April 24, 1987.
105. Niwińska interview, 2004.

106. Helen Tichauer, telephone interview with author, New York City, January 28, 2003.
107. Stanisława Rachwałowa, "Spotkanie z Marią Mandel," *Przegląd Lekarski* Tom XLVII, Nr. 1 (1990): 185–189.
Ella Lingens Reiner, *Prisoners of Fear,* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1948), 146–147.
108. Testimony by Irena Szydłowska, Maria Karska, Bronisława Markowska, Anna Pyzak, Janina Sobieszczańska, Maria Jaros, Teresa Domańska, Wanda Bargiełowska; Klub Ravensbrück 1947. Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w Oświęcimiu (APMO), Proces zasogi, f. 57, ss. 17–18/26–29/. Sygna D-ZOd/57, nr. inw. 20.
109. Fénelon, *Sursis,* 119–124.
110. Although, the chapter also appears in the first German edition, 1980, *Das Mädchenorchester in Auschwitz*, 89–100.
111. Jacquet AC.
112. Fénelon, 178.
113. Jacquet AC.
114. Fénelon, *Sursis,* 157.
115. Jacquet AC.
116. Fénelon, 142–151.
117. Fénelon, 150.
118. Jacquet AC.
119. Hélène Scheps to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, October 28, 1977, Personal; collection ALW.
120. Niwińska, interview, 2014.
121. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to author, June 8, 2014.
122. Fénelon, 130.
123. Fénelon, 170–171.
124. Fabry-Francy.
125. Fénelon, 37.
126. Niwińska AC.
127. Newman 233, and Helena Niwińska (regarding Esther Bejarano) to Susan Eischeid, June 27, 2014, Personal collection author.
128. Newman, 233.
129. Newman, 234.
130. Ibid.
131. Zofia Cykowiak, "An Outline History of the Women's Orchestra in Oświęcim-Brzezinka," September 1985, APMO 173518.
132. Helena Niwińska, Testimony to Auschwitz State Museum, April 25, 1986. APMO: Oświadozenia, + 116 ss. 22–39, Osw./Niwinska?2666, 168395.

133. Fania Fénelon, *Das Mädchenorchester in Auschwitz* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1981), 251.
134. Ibid., 240–256.
135. Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev, *In Our Hearts We Were Giants: The Remarkable Story of the Lilliput Troupe—A Dwarf Family's Survival of the Holocaust*, (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2004), 149.
136. Ibid, 165.
137. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to author, April 22, 2015.
138. Helena Niwińska to author, 25 April 2015, Personal collection of the author.
139. http://www.timeanddate.com/calendar/?year=1944&country=34 Accessed May 20, 2015.
140. Czech, 673.
141. Ibid., 674.
142. *In Our Hearts*, 180.
143. *Das Mädchenorchester*, 252.
144. *In Our Hearts,* 181–182.
145. Ibid., 181.
146. Ibid., 194.
147. Ibid., 194.
148. Fania Fénelon, "The Musicians of Auschwitz." Interview by Morley Safer, *60 Minutes*, CBS Television, August 27, 1978.
149. *In Our Hearts*, 195.
150. Fania Fénelon, *The Musicians of Auschwitz*, (London: Billings and Son Ltd., 1977).
    Fania Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, (New York: Atheneum, 1977).
    Fania Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, (Berkeley Books, Mass Market Paperback, May 1979).
    Fania Fénelon, *Playing for Time*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997).
151. *60 Minutes* interview, 1978, compare with dwarf testimony from *Das Mädchenorchester.*

CHAPTER 8

# Key Issues of Fénelon's Personal Biographical Embellishment in *Playing for Time*

**Abstract** Eischeid offers a fresh perspective into Fania Fénelon's background and her personal biographical claims in this chapter. Issues discussed include her purported time in the French Resistance, her alleged torture by the Gestapo, and smaller anomalies from her personal history.

**Keywords** Fania Fénelon • Holocaust memoir • Personal biographical embellishments • French Resistance • Gestapo torture

"If you do not tell the truth about yourself," writes Virginia Woolf, "you cannot tell it about other people."[1] Lawrence Langer also notes that we must establish the authenticity of a voice before we can respond to the reliability of the text.[2] Given Fénelon's casual regard for fact in the portrayal of her colleagues, it is illuminating to scrutinize her own biographical claims. There is a pattern of contradiction in Fania's remembrances, and in her obfuscation of significant facts, dates and circumstances, which—by her own hand—casts doubt on the veracity of her personal account. These anomalies range from small discrepancies later disproved by formal records (age claims, graduation claims, professional prizes, etc.)[3] to details of love and marriage,[4] to her fluid and often contradictory claims about her activities during the occupation.

In *Playing for Time* Fénelon describes her arrest and subsequent detention at the Drancy internment center. In that and in other post-war interviews and articles Fania spoke often of her interrogation and torture by



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the Gestapo and her Resistance activities.[5] In a recorded public lecture for the Montreal Public Library in 1980, Fénelon repeatedly stressed her youth, "I was *very* young!" (original emphasis) [she was 32 years old at the beginning of the occupation], described three-and-a-half years of covert activity in the Resistance ("I had a lot to do, it was very dangerous"), and detailed three separate arrests by the Gestapo during which all the other people in her resistance cell were killed. Fania stated that she was then taken to Gestapo Headquarters in Paris where she was interrogated and tortured for three months.[6] In her memoir Fénelon describes one session in which her back was beaten with an iron bar, and she later claimed that her fingernails were ripped out as part of the Gestapo torture.[7] Although there is no way to verify the former claim, it would certainly be in keeping with what we know about Gestapo interrogation techniques. The fingernail claim, however, contains contradictions from Fania's own testimony.

Fania vividly described her audition for the orchestra, which took place shortly after her arrival in Birkenau and not too long after the alleged torture. Although she noted being embarrassed over how dirty her hands looked on the keyboard, she had no difficulties in pressing down the keys and playing—something which would have been difficult, if not impossible, with mangled hands. ("Lovingly, my hands made the familiar contact with the black and white keys. I caressed the piano, it was my savior, my love, my life."[8]) Throughout her memoir Fania repeatedly mentions her prowess at orchestration, often being engaged in manually writing out parts or arrangements for new works ("My hand transcribed rapidly"),[9] again something which would have been very difficult with injured fingers. Although in some print interviews after the war Fania claimed to lacquer her remaining nails to give them structure,[10] in televised interviews Fania's hands appear perfectly normal—even in close-ups playing the piano.[11] When asked if she remembered the appearance of Fania's hands in the camp, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch replied, "Absolutely normal as far as I remember! If you are referring to pulled out nails by the Gestapo … FORGET IT!"[12]

Throughout her life Fénelon contradicted herself on other details of her alleged torture and interrogation. In the Montreal lecture Fania claimed that she was interrogated and tortured for three months, in a different interview a few months later she states that she was held for two months.[13] Likewise her accounts varied as to the length she was subsequently held in the detention camp at Drancy, from 9 months in her memoir,[14] to a very short period after which she was deported immediately to Auschwitz.[15]

Fania always stated that she was actively involved in resistance activities for three-and-a-half years before she was arrested and interrogated.[16] Given that time frame, assuming she started her resistance activities immediately after the occupation of Paris, it would have been physically impossible to have undergone three months of torture (or even two) and still had the nine months in Drancy she sometimes claimed before her transport to Auschwitz in January of 1944. Assuming Fania was indeed interrogated and tortured, the three-and-a-half years of resistance activities she described would have taken her through mid-December of 1943. Fénelon was deported to Auschwitz one month later. Therefore, within a one month period of actual time, Fania claimed two or three months of interrogation and torture, and nine months at Drancy.

Other details of her testimony also contain contradictions. In Montreal Fénelon confided to her audience that after her arrest, she told the Gestapo something they didn't know in order to stop the torture—that her father was a Jew. Fénelon continues, "They were surprised! ***I was a Star!*** Very well-known! They realized they had been applauding [in her cabaret performances] one of their worst enemies—a Jew—for three years! Now they lost interest in me and put me on a train" (original emphasis).[17]

Assuming that Fénelon was confused about her dates and was stating at least partial truth about her experiences, it is remarkable (although not impossible) that she would have been able to withstand the two to three months of Gestapo torture she claimed. For example, Jean Moulin, arguably the most prominent martyred hero of the French Resistance, was arrested on June 21, 1943, brutally tortured and interrogated daily, and died as a result of his injuries on July 8, 1943—seventeen days later.[18] The periods of interrogation and torture for other well known female arrestees, including Lise Lesevre, Ennat Leger, Catherine Roux, and Simone Lagrange, ranged from six to nineteen days.[19] It also seems unlikely that, if Fénelon was indeed held and tortured for three months, the Gestapo would have stopped suddenly simply because she told them she was Jewish.

Further explorations of Fania's Resistance claims circle back to her own statements, her own publicity, or her own memoir. It is possible that Fénelon was working under an alias, although she herself later stated that she maintained the stage name of Fania Fénelon in her resistance activities because of her reputation as a singer and because it allowed continued exposure as a performer in German cabarets.[20] She stated in her memoir that she also gave the Gestapo her real name of Goldstein because, "if I was going to die, I preferred to die under my father's name."[21]

Inquiries to the Archives of the Paris Shoah Memorial and Library reveal that Fénelon is not registered in any of their records, nor does she appear on their lists of French Jews involved in Resistance activities (although admittedly these are incomplete).[22] Additionally, Fénelon is not listed in the records of the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Deportation (FMD) which gathers information about political deportees and others arrested for resistance activities.[23] Likewise, searches of the National Archives Collection of Foreign Records Seized, "French Nationals arrested for espionage or resistance activities 1940–1944, enemy agents or members of the resistance, Paris, France, November 1940–April 1944," reveals no information or any record of arrests or resistance activities for Fania Fénelon, Fany/Fanny Goldstein, or Fania, Fany or Fanny Perla (her married name).[24]

Fénelon is certainly not alone in the possible exaggeration or even manufacture of her resistance activities. After the war claims of involvement in the French resistance were common, although estimates of actual participation are generally limited to 2% of the population, of whom few were women.[25] The post-war government of France officially recognized 220,000 men and women for Resistance activities[26] within the greater 1943 French population of approximately 39 million.[27] Judith Miller, in her landmark study *One by One by One*, categorizes the French Resistance as "the most miniscule of movements. Its numbers were small and its status obscure."[28]

It is possible that verifiable documentation of Fania's resistance activities will still emerge or has emerged in other forums, and it is not the intent of the author to slander or personally judge Fénelon who undoubtedly suffered deeply during the Holocaust period. Nonetheless, inconsistencies or embellishments in Fania's own biographical claims are worth noting because she altered or manufactured so many other details of her life in the camps, and about so many of her colleagues.

## Notes

1. http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/v/virginia_woolf.html Accessed June 9, 2015.
2. Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies; The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 58.
3. Mme LeGrand, Conservatoire de Paris.
4. Jacquet AC.

5. Fénelon, *The Musicians of Auschwitz*, 11–12.
6. "*Fania Fénelon Speaks About Her Life,"* Jewish Public Library, Montreal, Canada, January 29, 1980. http://www.ia902700.us.archive.org/17/items/FaniaFenelonSpeaksAboutHerLifeenglishJanuary291980/ Accessed March 11, 2015.
7. Fénelon, 15; See also Knapp, *Das Frauenorchester*, 282, and Niklas Frank, "Nach Mord Schumann's Träumerei", *Stern*, Volume 41, 1980, 280–283.
8. Fénelon, 27.
9. Fénelon, 53–54, 90.
10. Niklas Frank, "Nach Mord Schumann's Träumerei," *Stern*, Vol. 41, 1980, 282.
11. Fania Fénelon, "The Music of Auschwitz," interview by Morley Safer, *60 Minutes*, August 27, 1978.
12. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to author, April 21, 2015.
13. Karl-Heinz Kammertöns, Wir waren keine Menschen für sie, wir waren wie Läuse: Die Sängerin Fania Fénelon über das Mädchenorchester in Auschwitz," *Eiserne Lerche*, Vol. 4, 1980a, 26–27.
14. Fénelon, 11.
15. "Fania Fénelon Speaks About Her Life," Montreal.
16. Karl-Heinz Kammertöns, "Ensemble der Hölle. Das Mädchenorchester in Auschwitz—ein Gespräch mit der Sängerin Fania Fénelon," *Der Zeit*, October 3, 1980. http://www.zeit.de/1980/41/ensemble-der-hoelle Accessed March 31, 2015.
17. "Fania Fénelon Speaks about her Life".
18. Jean Pierre Moulin, *Todesanzeige*, http://education.nordnet.fr/jeanmoulin-ronchin/actedec.jpg Accessed April 21, 2015.
19. "Klaus Barbie: Women Testify of Torture at His Hands," *The Philadelphia Inquirer,* March 23, 1987, http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/Holocaust/barbie.html Accessed April 17, 2014. See also: Margaret Collins Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, inc., 1995), 139–144.
20. Karl-Heinz Kammertöns, "Das Mädchenorchester in Auschwitz—ein Gespräch mit der Sängerin Fania Fénelon," *Der Zeit*, October 3, 1980. http://www.zeit.de/1980/41/ensemble-der-hoelle/seite-5 Accessed March 31, 2015. See also Fénelon, *The Musicians of Auschwitz*, 14–15. See also Holly Burmeister, "Fania Fénelon 1909–1983," *Holocaust Literature*, Vol. 1, S. Lillian Kremer, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 335.
21. Fénelon, 15.
22. Valerie Kleinknecht, Documentaliste, Service Archives Memorial de la Shoah, Paris, e-mail message to author, April 7, 2015. http://www.

juifs-en-resistance.memorialdelashoah.org/recherche.htm Accessed April 7, 2015.
23. Valerie Kleinknecht, Paris Shoah Archive, e-mail message to author, April 7, 2015 citing http://www.bddm.org/liv/recherche.php Accessed April 7, 2015.
24. National Archives Collection of Foreign Records Seized, Record Group 242, Himmler Collection, "French Nationals arrested for espionage or resistance activities 1940–1944, enemy agents or members of the resistance," Records of the Reich Central Security Department (RSHA), Boxes 23, 24, 24a, 25, HMS Entry number: UD 23B, National Archives Identifier: 6981831, Location: 190/18/09/3, covering November 1940–April 1944. Searched by Alice Sara Prael, Digital Programs and Initiatives, University of Maryland, April 7–9, 2015, and May 26–29, 2015.)
25. Robert Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order 1940–1944*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 294.
26. Margaret Collins Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1995), 10.
27. http://www.answers.com>…>History>HistoryofEurope Accessed June 8, 2015.
28. Judith Miller, *One by One by One* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 142–143.

CHAPTER 9

# Scholarly, Educational, and Commercial Treatment of *Playing for Time* by Fania Fénelon

**Abstract** In this chapter Eischeid details major works which utilize or discuss Fénelon's memoir and explores its pervasive presence across all levels of Holocaust scholarship, writing, and research. Also included is a discussion of the greatest fallacies from Fénelon's memoir which are perpetuated in multiple highly respected resources and the use of Fénelon's memoir as a pedagogical tool. Its popularity in the non-academic arena and ongoing commercial sales of the work are also addressed.

**Keywords** Fania Fénelon • *Playing for Time* • Holocaust memoir • Scholarly treatment • Pedagogical impact • Commercial impact

Critical scholarly treatment of Fénelon's memoir has been uneven at best. One of the earliest explorations of the women's orchestra was written by German scholar Gabriele Knapp who published her study in 1996 as a book titled *Das Frauenorchester in Auschwitz*.[1] It was the first critical analysis of both the orchestra and Fénelon's work. Knapp interviewed seven of the approximately twenty women still living at the time.[2] These interviews comprise one of the most substantive efforts to contact and speak with the surviving women to that point. Additionally, since the Fénelon imbroglio emerged in the late 1970s, several survivors had already been publicly quoted or interviewed about the Fénelon book and movie.



S. Eischeid, *The Truth about Fania Fénelon and the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau*,
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With her study, Knapp provided a valuable scholarly cornerstone upon which further research into the orchestra could be based. She also uncovered some of the most useful biographical data about Fénelon's personal life, including interviews with a post-war personal friend of Fania's named Gerda Szepansky.[3] Dr. Knapp includes a significant section and discussion of the problematic aspects of Fénelon's memoirs in her book.[4]

Nonetheless, many of the survivors interviewed for Knapp's study remain ambivalent about her work. Helena Niwińska believes that Knapp, too, fell under the dramatic siren song of Fania's testimony, stating that it was "too juicy to resist." In 2004 and again in 2014 Niwińska stressed that:

> Almost every person interviewed and quoted in Knapp's book was anti-Semitic. I am CERTAIN that I told Gabriele Knapp that the book [Fénelon] IS false!! Because I warned everyone I could that the book is full of lies, of distortions of the truth.
>
> She was here twice, did interviews with us. She is under the influence of Ms. Fénelon. I saw a playbill [for the *Spiel Um Zeit* Vienna production] with Gabriele Knapp credited with helping. After the talks with her, there were only lies.[5]

And further, in a letter to Dr. Piper at the Auschwitz Museum:

> I wrote a letter to Mrs. Knapp full of bewilderment that such a play is being staged in Vienna and that she herself in a way takes part in the continuation of this false and harmful "legend" by Mrs. Fénelon.[6]

When asked about Knapp's book Anita Lasker-Wallfisch says simply, "I found her study very disappointing. We all gave her a great deal of time and she used it, in my mind, in unacceptable ways. I told her so by the way."[7]

Zofia Cykowiak, in 2004, stated that, although the book contained several errors ("which were probably unavoidable"), the errors were not essential to the whole subject matter and that it was the best source written to that point. She added: "One of the things I can't agree with is Ms. Knapp's interpretation, her attempt to explain from a psychological point of view, our behavior in the camp. I also can't agree with her interpretation of the characteristics of some of the girls, but all in all it is a well written book."[8]

Some standard and respected academic sources on the subject of the orchestra, and of music in the Holocaust, *do* note the controversies sur-

rounding Fénelon's work. One of these is Shirli Gilbert's *Music in the Holocaust:*

> Fénelon's account—the earliest published about the women's orchestra—is a controversial one. Many of the musicians have objected to her distorted portrayal of their behavior in the camp, and in particular to her embellished depiction of her own role versus that of Rosé in "saving" the orchestra. The book is written in a novelistic style, and fictitious names were given to those former members whom Fénelon believed were still alive at the time of publication. It is nonetheless a detailed and useful source for many of the orchestra's activities.[9]

Richard Newman's comprehensive biography of Alma Rosé devotes five pages to the controversy.[10]

Other sources present a more glowing picture of Fénelon and her work. The *Encyclopedia of Holocaust Literature* notes that "Fania's book is remarkable not only for its astute and vivid description of the concentrationary universe but also for its insightful portrayal of the women's orchestra in Auschwitz."[11] This article contains Fania's embellished information about her birth date, and two of her manufactured incidents regarding Auschwitz (the visit by "Heinrich Himmler" to the orchestra and Fania's hair turning white "overnight").

In *Indelible Shadows, Film and the Holocaust*, the movie is described as having been adapted by playwright Arthur Miller "from Fania Fénelon's magnificent autobiographical account. For the most part, *Playing for Time* succeeds courageously and admirably."[12] Fania is variously described as "a figure of extreme integrity," "a difficult risk-taker," and the incarnation of "the spirit that holds the orchestra together."[13]

In the two-volume work *Holocaust Literature*, Fénelon's book is described as "a Holocaust memoir that eloquently addresses many issues of surviving the death camps." The entry also notes that "critical attention has been on the author herself, not on her finely crafted story," and that "such emphasis might be better placed on the text itself, for *Playing for Time* richly rewards the careful reader."[14]

There is an emphasis in the *Holocaust Literature* entry on gender specific issues—many based on embellishments contained in Fénelon's original text. These include the incorrect characterization of the singer Claire Monis as a prostitute, the sexually explicit "Black Triangle's Party" (which several survivors later testified never took place),[15] and the alleged lesbian relationship between two of the characters. The entry also contains

information regarding aspects of Fania's embellished biography and the utilization of "abusive punishment" by conductor Alma Rosé.[16]

Additionally, under the "Music in the Holocaust" link on the website of the United States Memorial Holocaust Museum, there are recommendations for books which treat questionable sections of the Fénelon work as truth.

For example, in the "Music and the Holocaust" section of *The Holocaust: Introductory Essays*, several of Fénelon's problematic stories are included. These include the incident describing Josef Kramer crying, and the alleged performance of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* with heroic and spiritual implications.[17] Likewise, in *Remembering for the future: the Holocaust in an age of genocide*,[18] Fénelon's story is featured in a discussion of the women's orchestra and quotations and other inaccuracies from the book are cited, including the embellished "state funeral" given by the SS for Alma Rosé.

It must be stressed again that the inclusion of Fénelon's story and "facts" as presented by her in these otherwise excellent works of scholarship reveals no carelessness on the part of the writers. Rather, it demonstrates how ubiquitous Fania's story has become and how many details are accepted as truth.

A random search of a typical library collection of Holocaust writing will illustrate the pervasive presence of Fénelon's memoir in Holocaust writing. As is typical with Fénelon's testimony, some facts are true, many are not.

Fénelon citations range from accurate descriptions of suffering from typhus,[19] to the problematic over-sexualization of various SS figures including Josef Mengele.[20] Fania's description of Mala Zimetbaum and Edek Galinski meeting secretly in the Music Block has been presented verbatim,[21] as well as her literal depictions of dialogue between the two.[22] The multiple inaccuracies perpetuated against the Ovitz dwarf family also occur in various source materials.[23]

Fénelon's work is recommended in pedagogical resources[24] and offered in support of a discussion of special privileges given to inmates in exchange for special skills, such as Fania's singing.[25] In *Playing for Time*, some of Fania's descriptions about these privileges are accurate, many are not. Fénelon's story of Kommandant Josef Kramer crying during a concert is widely quoted and used to illustrate a larger discussion of the ability of Nazi perpetrators to identify with what they felt rather than what they did.[26] This is, undoubtedly, a valid discussion but in this case, it was based on a false story that Fania embellished.

Although online sources increasingly make note of the controversy, others, including at the time of writing the websites for both Yad Vashem and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, still contain incorrect information.

For example:

> A women's orchestra in Auschwitz-Birkenau was made up of 36 members and 8 transcribers under the musical direction of singer Fania Fénelon.[27]

This depiction of Fania as either primary or secondary conductor, inflating her position in the orchestra, also appears in other sources: "Alma Rosé, where she conducted an orchestra of young female players, including her deputy conductor, the singer Fania Fénelon."[28] "Fania Fénelon, who at one point was the conductor of the women's orchestra at Birkenau's camp for women."[29]

On some major websites at the time of writing, including that of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Fénelon's work is listed under the *Music and the Holocaust* section as a recommended resource for further study without any mention of the possible inconsistencies in her portrayal.[30] One of the best generalized websites, *Music and the Holocaust*, was compiled by World ORT.[31] World ORT describes itself as "[o]ne of the largest non-governmental education and training organizations in the world,"[32] and uses contributions by well respected Holocaust historians including Shirli Gilbert. Although this site does quote large portions of Fania's story, it also states from the outset: "Today it is generally accepted that Fénelon's text is in parts fictional; several of the historical dates and facts are inaccurate, and dissenting voices have placed into doubt many of her assertions. Despite these disagreements, however, Fénelon's memoirs remain one of the most powerful documents to emerge from the Nazi camps."[33]

Although some of the book stores at institutions dedicated to Holocaust memory no longer list or carry the book or film in their online sales (Yad Vashem,[34] the Simon Wiesenthal Center,[35] and the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum book shop),[36] other institutions still market the work. At the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum gift shop copies of the book and the movie are sold and displayed prominently,[37] and both the book and movie are available through the online shop for purchase.[38]

## Fania's Memoir Utilized as the Basis for Holocaust Education

Of equal if not greater concern is the utilization of Fénelon's book as a resource around which lesson plans for younger students are being built and taught in primary and secondary schools. A typical format can be seen in "Music as Survival, Alma Rosé and the Auschwitz Women's Orchestra,"[39] developed by a K-12 educator who was the recipient of a 2004 Teacher Grant from Cornell University to develop a lesson plan about the women's orchestra. Heavy emphasis is placed on the Fénelon book as well as the film *Playing for Time*. Although Lasker-Wallfisch's memoir and the Richard Newman book on Alma Rosé are also recommended, and some of the controversies are addressed in the suggested questions, Fénelon's work undoubtedly takes precedence. For a generation of students who are extremely visually and aurally oriented, the impact of including the film—with all its fallacies—cannot be denied. The modified lesson plan for this module is now available on an online site which markets (for a fee) lesson plans for educators.[40]

There are many other online lesson plans and pedagogical aids which utilize the Fénelon as a seminal resource.[41] Teaching units designed around Fénelon's work, referring to Fénelon's work, or steering the students towards supplemental reading recommending Fénelon as a reliable source, include a PBS series, "Who's Dancin' Now?",[42] designed for grades 5–12; "Eleanor's Story,"[43] presented by the Holocaust Teacher Resource Center, again designed for Grades 5–12[44]; a Holocaust Remembrance Unit and lesson plan formulated by the University of Minnesota and designed for 7th graders; and a site typical of non-Holocaust institution resources, developed by the Madison Public Library, which supplies educators with recommended lesson plans and resources for the development of courses and curriculum.[45] These examples stand for many.

## Fénelon's Story in the Non-Academic Arena and Ongoing Commercial Sales of Fania's Work

The options for finding accurate representations of Fénelon and her story in popular but non-academic resources—that is, places that tend to be a "first stop" for a lay person who is interested in reading more about the topic—are decidedly worse. For example, *The Online Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, talks about Fénelon with no mention of the controver-

sies and extensively describes the Arthur Miller play based on her book. The article never questions the Fénelon/Miller portrayals of the different characters in the book or Fania's presentation of herself as "the heroine of the story." The article closes with the statement, "She wishes to be a faithful recorder and firsthand witness to what went on in this place. This play is a testament to her victory."[46]

Fania's book and the DVD based upon it continue to sell and be popular with mass audiences. At this writing, Amazon.com offers multiple copies of various editions in various languages. The book routinely receives 4.5 out of 5 stars in the reviews section and attracts mostly glowing accolades from readers ("The Perfect Book!"), although increasingly mention is made of the controversies in the popular audience review section. To date, *Playing for Time* has sold hundreds of thousands of copies. The film, now available on DVD and BluRay, and on Netflix for live-streaming, has no note of any controversies in the comment section ("Gut wrenchingly good") and receives an unequivocal 5 Stars.[47]

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CHAPTER 10

# The Response of the Other Survivors and Press Response to *Playing for Time*

**Abstract** In this chapter Eischeid presents a thorough exploration of the response of the other survivors in the Auschwitz-Birkenau women's orchestra to the Fénelon Holocaust memoir *Playing for Time*. Materials from 1976 through to the present day are utilized, including personal correspondence between musicians, interviews by press and television, and documentary footage. This chapter also details the press response as the memoir expanded into the world market. Press reviews, both positive and negative, are explored, as are the initial television interviews with Fénelon on programs such as CBS television's *60 Minutes*.

**Keywords** Fania Fénelon • *Playing for Time* • Holocaust memoir • Responses of other survivors • Press response • Television coverage • Active fight against

It is both illustrative and overwhelming to realize how very hard and for how very long the other survivors fought and are still fighting to rebut Fania's portrayal of their orchestra, a struggle that began with the completion of her memoir.

In the beginning of *Playing for Time*, a preface by Marcelle Routier describes a romanticized description of a meeting between Fania and two of the Belgian survivors, Hélène Scheps and Fanny Birkenwald.[1] Rather than the misty, emotional reunion portrayed by Routier, the gathering was



S. Eischeid, *The Truth about Fania Fénelon and the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-31038-1_10

simply Fania's presentation to the other women of a fait accompli—she had written a book about the orchestra.[2]*

At this meeting, unlike the atmosphere that Routier describes, there was considerable uneasiness on the parts of Scheps and Birkenwald. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch says: "I was not there but remember that I was told about it. Everyone was already very worried about the book."[3]

Hélène Scheps, who had been concertmaster of the orchestra, described the meeting to Anita.

> After thirty years of silence, Fania has found Fanny and me, in Brussels, to tell us that she has written a book about the orchestra. So it was with much emotion that I met with Fania, who was accompanied by Madame Routier, the writer who had edited the book. Fania had promised to send Fanny and me the manuscript before the publication, especially the chapter about me, which was not done.
>
> It was therefore at the reading of this "novel" that I was profoundly disgusted. Fania prides herself on having written an eye witness account, thus a historical document, but it is nothing but a vulgar novel.
>
> I personally feel dirtied by such a book, but not being able to change anything I telephoned Madame Routier to express my disgust and pain. Since then I have not had any relations with Fania.
>
> Regarding the chapter in which you can easily be recognized, since you were the only "cellist of German origin and sister to Renate cited by first name in the book: Fania describes you in an inflammatory and inaccurate manner that I find intolerable. I hope you will be able to stop the publication of the English translation.[4]"

Anita also remembers that Fania telephoned her around that time and "told me she had written a book and proudly announced that she had written a whole lot about me. I found this rather disturbing, because one does not write about people without consulting them first. However, I told her I was coming to Paris and that she could show me the book then."[5] The survivors in western Europe immediately began to discuss ways of countering Fania's book. There was a second meeting in Brussels which included Anita, Violette Jacquet Silberstein, Helénè and Fanny, but which did not include Routier or Fania.[6] Anita notes: "We were all simply horrified."[7]

A flurry of letters followed. Violette wrote to Anita: "I wanted to write you right after I got back from Brussels to tell you how happy I was to see how you are. It pleases me greatly. Yes, you are right, the quality of feeling that we have found is inestimable and truly gratifying. In the last analysis I think maybe we should thank Fania Fénelon for having written this

dirty shit and bringing us together again!"[8] And then later, after an article appeared in the French newspaper *Le Monde* about the book:

> Now, sit down before reading the article about Fania. I fear the letter to "Le Monde," the most serious paper in this country, will cause different repercussions in you. I called Hélène, who has just returned from Germany, where she went to testify in a trial against an SS officer who had deported Jews from Belgium along with Fanny. She has read the article and is naturally outraged and ready to intervene, as we all are.
>
> What a misery this story is. It baffles me completely, and I think about it all the time. I can't read, I can't comprehend what I read, so I just give up.[9]

Violette also spoke directly with Fènelon several times, as well as with Marcelle Routier. Olivier Jacquet, Violette's son, remembers that, "Yes, Mother, who spoke openly, and sometimes harshly, was angry with her [Fania] at this time. She told her what she thought, and that she had done wrong."[10] Anita also contacted Fania directly and told her that she would intervene if there should be an English translation.

From Fénelon, there was seemingly little concern over the emotional furor she had set off among her former colleagues. In a letter to Anita, dated August 30, 1977, Fania rather blithely dismisses any ongoing issues.

> Dear Anita,
>
> I hope you are in good health and finding plenty of work. I spent the summer in Paris as I am writing a second volume. "Sursis" appeared in London the 17th of October. I was invited by the editor.
>
> I spoke about you. They would be very happy to meet you. Have you perhaps received a letter?
>
> We would understand completely if you did not want to participate in the broadcasts: radio, television, etc. The passage that annoyed you has been cut. The title in English: "The Musicians of Auschwitz."
>
> Affectionately,
>
> Fania[11]

Due to the constraints of the Iron Curtain, it took somewhat longer for the survivors of the orchestra in eastern Europe to come in contact with Fania's memoir. When it did reach them, they were equally horrified (Image 10.1).

Helena Dunicz Niwińska, now living in Krakow, Poland, notes that she first learned of the book in 1981 or 1982, but was only able to obtain a copy to read for herself in 1983. By then, Fania had died and *Playing for Time* had already been published in German and English, as well as

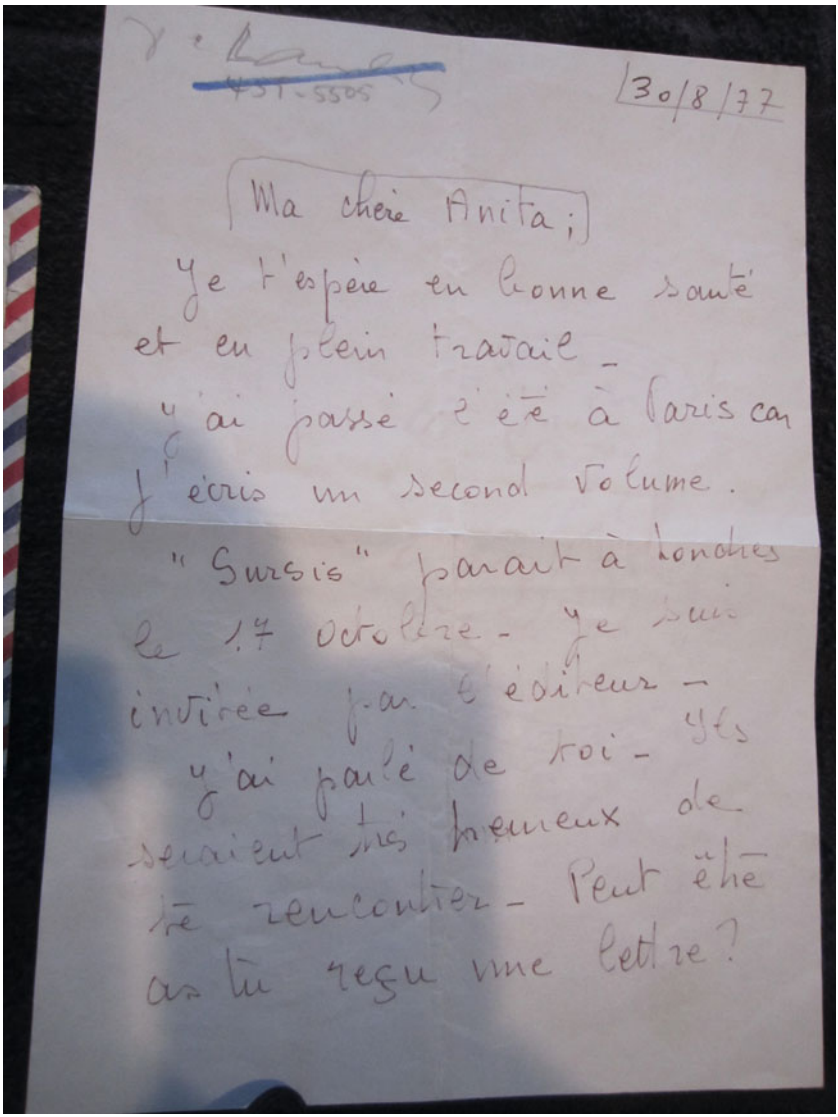


**Image 10.1** Letter from Fania Fénelon to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, August 30, 1977. Reprinted with permission from the private collection of Anita Lasker-Wallfisch

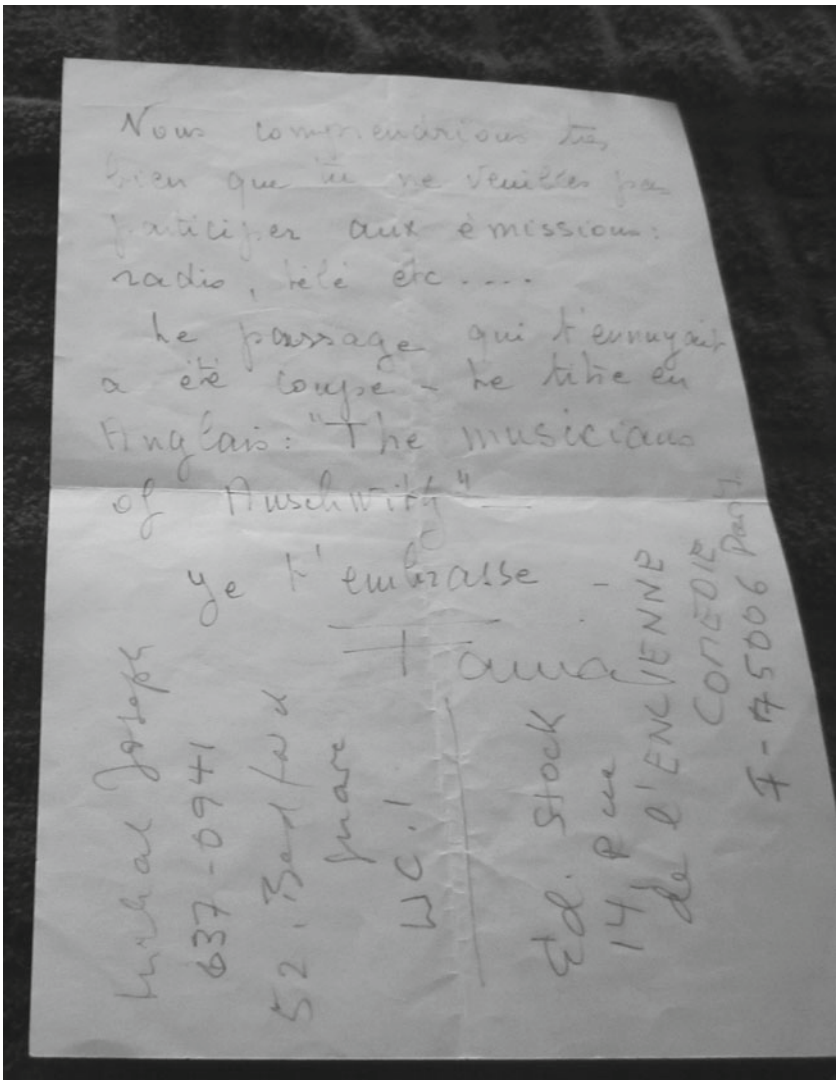


**Image 10.1** (continued)

French. Helena's initial reaction was sheer disbelief. "I could NOT believe it! How COULD she have written these things?"[12] "When I read Fania's book I became ill. The book is detestable and false."[13] "There was not a shred of decency."[14]

Afterwards Helena wrote to Anita and the others, asking why survivors in eastern Europe had not protested against the new editions in different languages. Anita responded that they *had* written to the publishers asking them not to republish and the publishers stated that they had a *right* to publish it.[15]

Niwińska, a talented writer and linguist, had been an editor with the Polish Music Edition Publishing House and subsequently wrote an essay for the museum at Auschwitz in 1996. Titled *Truth and Fantasy*, it was one of Niwińska's many attempts to "set the record straight."[16] Over the next several years Helena consistently tried to get her article published in places other than Poland, especially Germany, with no success. Correspondence from 1995 supports this fact.[17]

Niwińska's essay includes the following statements on Fania's book:

> I am one of the few Polish prisoners, members of the Auschwitz orchestra, who survived Auschwitz, and I feel it is my duty to speak about this—it has to be said straight out—awful book.
>
> Reading Fania Fénelon's book one has very mixed feelings—admiration for the author's lively memory and colorful language, but also astonishment and opposition to her overgrown fantasy, her free alteration of facts and expression of improbable ill-feeling towards her fellow sufferers.
>
> This is not a book about the orchestra, but about Fania Fénelon picturing herself as the orchestra's central figure. That point of view, however, is patently false, as the central and most outstanding figure in the orchestra was without doubt its conductor, Alma Rosé.[18]

Niwińska goes on to enumerate some of the greatest fallacies in the book, including Fania's false declarations of Alma Rosé's use of corporal punishment, the sexualization of the SS, the assertion that Alma could not conduct, Fania's characterization as an excellent singer and the controversy over her age, and her statement that she was the primary orchestrator for the ensemble.[19] Niwińska also expresses great outrage over the way women of different nationalities were presented in the book, especially the Polish prisoners.[20] Niwińska notes: "The reader is deceived by the picturesque and suggestive language and takes it all for truth. However, the reality depicted is false,"[21] and she closes by stating that:

> Thus, in the name of the orchestra members who survived Auschwitz, both Polish and Jewish women with whom I am in touch, I feel obliged to protest

> against the omissions of the truth and falsification of the facts about both the camp as a whole and the orchestra commando.
>
> I am disgusted by the author's deceits and appalled by the cultivation of baseless chauvinisms so many years after the war. Cui bono? [To whose benefit?][22]

Polish violinist Zofia Cykowiak, like the others, was negatively overwhelmed when she read the book. She found the portrayal of Alma Rosé especially hurtful: "She so terribly defamed her, oh God." She remarked: "We did raise so much commotion about it. Such sensational literary trash."[23]

Margot Anzenbacher Vetrovcova, a Czech survivor who played guitar in the orchestra, resisted reading Fania's book for some time, although Margot was one of the few eastern European musicians with whom Fania had interacted in the camp. After Helena Niwińska read the book, she wrote to Margot about it. Margot went to the store, saw the book on the shelves, but decided she did not even *want* to read it. That "knowing what Fania was like, I knew the book would be hostile, with a malevolent attitude."[24]

Over the next few years Margot steadily resisted reading the book although, to her dismay, visiting friends from western Europe often brought her copies of the book as a gift. "I thanked them, but did not accept it." When the book was translated into Czech, a local book shop offered to sell her a copy. "I refused to buy and read it for I hadn't a good opinion of Fania."[25]

In 1999–2000, when Margot was interviewed for a French documentary about the orchestra, questions about the Fénelon book once again came up. It was only at this point that Margot bowed to the inevitable and read *Playing for Time*. Margot's comments reveal her impression of what Fania had written. "She did disservice only to herself. It's not that Fania would just change things, it's that she really made up things herself."[26] Margot also described a conversation with the filmmakers during which they told her Fania remarked, when asked about the universally negative reaction of the other survivors, that she wrote it the way she did "because I wanted the book to be successful and I had to make up something."[27]

The eastern European survivors did everything in their power to countermand the effects of the book and all its incarnations but like the survivors in the west, were met with a stone wall.

Survivors who immigrated to Israel after the war had similar reactions. Arie Olewski, son of Rachela Zelmanowicz Olewski, a mandolinist with the orchestra, remembers that Rachela's daughter, his sister Jochi Ritz-Olewski, bought the book in French and translated it for Rachela. "Her initial reaction—She was very angry about Fania stealing the glory of Alma

and telling lies."[28] Rachela met with the other survivors of the orchestra then living in Israel, her friends Hilde Grünbaum Simche, Regina Bacia, and Sylvia Wagenberg. "They were furious about Fania. This meeting was full of shouts and emotions."[29] Rachela repeatedly stressed that there were untrue things in Fania's book and that Fania was jealous of Alma Rosé.[30]

Like other survivors across the world, the Israeli women were horrified by Fania's treatment of Alma. They reiterated that Fania glorified herself, that she presented them in an unfavorable light, that she was not accurate, and that she was *not* a hero. Irit Nahmany summarizes that"the book left Fania's friends amazed, insulted, angry, and with unanswered questions. Fania died before those questions could be presented and answered."[31]

Meanwhile, the European survivors of the orchestra continued in their campaign to be heard. In October 1978 Anita Lasker-Wallfisch was contacted by Henry-Louis de La Grange, author of a huge and definitive biography of composer Gustav Mahler. Alma Rosé was, of course, the niece of Mahler. La Grange had interviewed Fénelon on a radio program after publication of her book and wanted to clarify aspects of Fania's story regarding Alma Rosé.[32] Lasker-Wallfisch, also concerned about the characterization of Alma, wrote that:

> I found your letter on my return from a tour, and I must tell you that it pleased me greatly as I see that you have understood very well the essence of the issue. Thus I have the opportunity to do something for Alma that I consider very important.
>
> Since the appearance of "Sursis pour l'Orchestre" the few surviving members of the orchestra have broken all relations with Ms. Fénélon. It is clear that it is very difficult to write a book on such a subject, and if one undertakes such an enterprise thirty years after the fact, then one should take care to document meticulously. It is also necessary to decide whether to write a novel or an eyewitness account. In my opinion, furthermore, memory is a very delicate thing, and one that should not be completely trusted, especially after 30 years. Nonetheless, I have no doubt that Ms. F wanted to do something good, but as she completely lacks stature, now we have a book that will no doubt give people who did not live through this hell the general impression that it was indeed just that, a hell. But at a personal level she gave free rein to her vivid imagination, and as you say, to her dislikes and personal judgments to a point that has gravely wounded the handful of survivors as well as the dead, who cannot defend themselves.
>
> Having said that, I return to Alma. There were four of us who worked on this after the appearance of the book, to get an idea how our individual memories compared after so long, and if we saw things in essentially the same way. It is certainly not an accident that we are all of the same opinion on the extraordinary qualities of Alma and on the importance that she had for us.[33]

As the other survivors continued their battle against the memoir, the marketing and distribution of *Playing for Time* expanded into the world market. Reviews which were largely positive and sometimes, exuberant, began to appear.

In France, *Le Courier de' l'histoire* described Fénelon's memoir as a "beautiful book, earthy, heavy with humanity, tenderness and rage, and with a suffering that, assimilated, can lead to virtue." The writer further described Fania Fénelon as someone who "knew everything about the orchestra at Birkenau", praising her good memory and describing the characterizations of her companions as "portraits of the soul." Attention was drawn, once again, to Fania's portrayal of Alma Rosé and the writer asked, rhetorically, how Alma could, "solely in the name of music, strive for the perfection of the orchestra, even citing Furtwängler to justify striking the players." A poetic passage concludes the piece: "But always in the background the crematoria are full to vomiting, and the sky is dark at Birkenau."[34]

In a review which appeared in the *New York Times* in 1978, writer Susan Heller Anderson presented a generally positive synopsis of the memoir and of Fania's life. To her credit, Anderson was one of the few reviewers at the time who also questioned Fénelon's memory of events. "Miss Fénelon claims total recall, and *Playing for Time* has many lengthy verbatim quotes of conversations and comments. In one long quotation attributed to Alma Rosé, the Birkenau orchestra's conductor said that her father was first violinist in the Berlin Opera Orchestra. Her father, Arnold Rosé, was in fact, concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic for 50 years. Obviously memories dim in 30 years, but this lapse in a checkable fact raises some doubts about the accuracy of Miss Fénelon's quotes and attributions."[35]

Others also approached the book with caution. In a review which appeared in the same year H.W. Freyhan stated: "One approaches a book whose author is a survivor of Auschwitz with a degree of reverence. At the same time, the subject imposes obligations on the author. Fania Fénelon could have written a pure documentary which would have become an important historical source. She has not done this; instead she has chosen to produce an odd mixture of factual report and fiction. The problems which arise from such treatment are obvious, and they are not diminished by a degree of personal bias which clouds the narrative." Freyhan characterized Fénelon's portrayal of Alma Rosé as "hitting below the belt, and hitting somebody who died in Auschwitz and cannot answer back. Others, who are also no longer alive, have been treated in a similar fashion in the book and their memory has been tainted." Freyhan concludes that "it would have been a better and more valuable book if the author had

seen her way to adhere more strictly to the facts and exclude some biased comments."[36]

Fania continued to receive considerable interest from the press while other factors drew increased attention to her memoir. For example, in April 1978 ABC television aired a four-part mini-series called *Holocaust* which was one of the first attempts to attempt to express the reality of the Holocaust through film. Despite receiving mixed and often negative reviews from critics and survivors, *Holocaust* attracted a television audience of 120 million over its four-night run and received a 49% market share.[37] The popular and commercial success of *Holocaust* unlocked a wellspring of interest in Holocaust-related topics.

In August 1978, shortly after *Holocaust* aired, Fania's book caught the attention of producers at the CBS news magazine *60 Minutes*. Interviewed by correspondent Morley Safer, Fénelon appeared in a segment called "The Musicians of Auschwitz."

In the *60 Minutes* profile, Fania appears to be comfortable in front of the camera. Always conscious of where the cameraman is placed, Fania is direct, her eyes often boring into Safer's. She talks with her hands, uses lots of gestures, and speaks very good English with only a mild accent. Her grayish eyes, the color of light slate, are carefully outlined with make-up, enhanced by painted on eyebrows and lipstick. She wears a short coiffed wig, a fur trimmed coat, and lots of jewelry including a big knuckle ring. Her personality comes across as warm and very dramatic. There is no discussion of the controversy around her book, rather the *60 Minutes* producers seem to have made a conscious decision not to press Fénelon in any way. Unlike the hard-hitting interview style common to the show, the *60 Minutes* team presents a simple portrait of their subject. Fania accompanies the *60 Minutes* crew back to Auschwitz and there is an extended sequence of Fénelon playing Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* on the piano—with perfectly normal hands—while scenes of the camp are projected in the background.[38]

These interviews, of course, laid the groundwork for what was to follow—the creation of a television movie based on Fania's memoir.

## Notes

1. Fénelon, vii–ix.
2. Hélène Scheps to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, 28 October 1977, Personal collection ALW.
   *None of the other survivor's memories were solicited during the writing period and Marcelle Routier never called or met with Anita Lasker-

Wallfisch to clarify or confirm things as has been stated in other sources (Newman, 323). Fénelon did travel to Poland for a social visit with another survivor, Ewa Stojowska, but made no effort to contact the other surviving members of the orchestra in that country. Helena Niwińska speculates that Fania only approached Ewa because she was "of the gentry." "Ewa spoke French and was of 'better heritage.'" Niwińska believes that Fania had no interest in confirming her memories with people of—in her perception—lower social status (Niwińska, 2014 interview).

3. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to the author, April 17, 2014.
4. Hélène Scheps to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, October 28, 1977, Personal collection ALW.
5. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to the author, April 16, 2014.
6. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to author, April 17, 2014.
7. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, e-mail message to author, April 16, 2014.
8. Violette Silberstein Jacquet to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, March 3, 1978, Personal collection ALW.
9. Violette Silberstein Jacquet to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, March 3, 1978 and January 21, 1981, Personal collection ALW.
10. Olivier Jacquet, e-mail message to author, April 27, 2014.
11. Fania Fénelon to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, 30 August 1977, Personal collection ALW.
12. Niwińska interview, 2014.
13. Helena Niwińska to Thomas Kallenborn, July 19, 1992, Personal collection Helena Niwińska (HN).
14. Niwińska interview, 2014.
15. Ibid.
16. Helena Dunicz-Niwińska. "Truth and Fantasy," *Pro Memoria* Nr. 3–4, (Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1996), 65–67.
17. Helena Niwińska to Krystyna Oleksy (Editorial Board *Pro Memoria*), 6 April 1995, personal collection HN.
18. Niwińska, *Truth and Fantasy*, 65.
19. Niwińska, *Truth and Fantasy*, 65.
20. Ibid, 66.
21. Ibid, 66.
22. Ibid, 67.
23. Zofia Cykowiak (survivor, Auschwitz Birkenau women's orchestra), interviews with the author, tape recording, May 15, 2004 and June 10, 2003, Krakow, Poland. Author's personal collection.
24. Margot Vetrovcova, interview with the author, tape recording, May 10, 2006, Karlovy Vary, Czech Republic. Author's personal collection.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.

28. Arie Olewski, e-mail message to author, March 5, 2014.
29. Ibid.
30. Rachela Olewski Zelmanowicz, *Crying is Forbidden Here!* (Tel-Aviv: Olewski Family, Israel, 2009), 35.
31. Nahmany.
32. Newman, 10.
33. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch to Henry-Louis de La Grange, October 6, 1978, Personal collection of ALW.
34. J.-M. Th., *Le Courier de'l'histoire*, "Sous le ciel de Birkenau, Les Flonfons du Massacre" (Under the Sky of Birkenau—Musical Strains of the Massacre), 1976.
35. Susan Heller Anderson, "Memories of a Nazi Death Camp, Where a Musical Gift Meant Survival," *The New York Times*, January 7, 1978, 10.
36. H.W. Freyhan, *AJR Information*, "Ghastly Concerts, Musicians of Auschwitz," July 1978, 6.
37. Alf Ludtke, "Coming to terms with the Past: Illusions of Remembering, Ways of Forgetting Nazism in West Germany," *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 65 (1993), 544–546.
38. Fania Fénelon. "The Music of Auschwitz." Interview by Morley Safer, *60 Minutes*, CBS, August 27, 1978.

CHAPTER 11

# The Television Movie Based on Fania Fénelon's *Playing for Time*

**Abstract** In this chapter Eischeid details the inception and production of the CBS television film based on Fania Fénelon's Holocaust memoir *Playing for Time*. Major figures in its development are discussed, including executive producer Linda Yellen, and famed playwright Arthur Miller, who was engaged to write the screenplay. Additionally, the controversy over the hiring of actress Vanessa Redgrave to play the role of Fania is explored. Fénelon's subsequent rejection of the film and the way it presented her story is detailed, as is the premiere of the film and the subsequent emotional fall-out for the other survivors who had fought valiantly to prevent its broadcast.

**Keywords** Fania Fénelon • *Playing for Time* • Television movie • Arthur Miller screenplay • Controversy over casting • Vanessa Redgrave • Linda Yellen • Premiere • Fénelon's reaction

As writer Georges Fabry-Francy noted, "despite certain unlikelihoods and anecdotes manifestly sprung from the imagination of the author, *Sursis pour l'orchestre* would today be shelved among the 'historical novels,' no better or worse than many others if it were not for Fania's determination to build upon the success of her work."[1] Since an English translation of her work was being published in the United States, Fénelon flew to New York determined "to sell the rights to her story to a big film company or, failing that, to a television channel."[2] Ultimately Fania signed a contract with CBS



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Broadcasting, Inc., agreeing to a televised version of her story and to the hiring of famous playwright Arthur Miller to adapt the book for television.

As contracted, Miller wrote a screenplay based on *Playing for Time* in 1979, later revising it for the stage. Producer Linda Yellen was engaged to bring story and script to life. When accepting the contract with CBS, Fénelon signed away all her rights to have input on the script, casting and filming, a decision she later came to regret bitterly. In her 1980 Montreal interview Fénelon admitted that she did not read the contract for the film before signing it.[3]

After production started Fania claimed that Arthur Miller had not presented her character, or her story, accurately. "I was full of life, I was full of hope. I had a sense of humor. Miller's script is the opposite of what I was! What I *am*!"(original emphasis)[4] Producer Yellen disagreed, stating that Arthur Miller had given Fania's autobiography an appropriate framework and context which enhanced, rather than denigrated, the story.[5] Miller responded publicly to Fania's charges, stating: "I simply gave the writing shape, dramatic shape. I really didn't take many liberties. … I think I've been faithful to the context, to Fania's emotions, to her thought. There are not really radical changes separating her book from the television film."[6]

Miscommunications between Fénelon and the television producers followed. Fania wanted to receive a copy of the script, yet didn't return Yellen's calls when asked if she would like to visit the set.[7]

The greatest issue of contention, however, was the casting of actress Vanessa Redgrave in the role of Fénelon. Redgrave, famous for her activist politics, was a renowned Anti-Zionist and PLO supporter. Apart from the political ramifications, Fénelon and Redgrave were admittedly possessed of very different body morphologies; Fénelon, short and small and Redgrave, tall, willowy, older at 43 than the character in the book, much more reserved in manner and mannerisms while acting.

> Look at me and look at that woman—she is nearly six feet tall and weighs half again as much.
>
> She can't be me. That's horrible casting. This is my story, my book, my life. How can this "giant" play Fania Fénelon? Isn't that stupid?[8]

In a 1980 interview Fénelon is full of righteous indignation over the casting of the middle-aged Redgrave. By this point, the lies about her age have become automatic and she proclaims loudly and passionately that "I was [just] *a teenager*! (original emphasis)," when in reality Fania was 36 years old in Auschwitz.[9]

Redgrave's politics, Yellen's unwillingness to bend, and Fania's issues with the way Miller wrote the script, caused her to initiate a press campaign against the movie. Outside Jewish groups and institutions came to Fania's defense and added their support, including the Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies in Los Angeles which called for a US-wide viewer boycott.[10] Rabbi Marvin Hier of the Wiesenthal Center presented several press conferences with Fénelon and arranged to have more than a million postcards sent to CBS Chairman William Paley protesting CBS's decision to air the program.[11] The director of the civil rights division of B'nai B'rith insisted that Redgrave's participation "degrades all those who survived Hitler's death camps and those who died in them."[12] Fénelon also participated in some of the public protests arranged by journalist and activist Herb Brinn, who was mobilizing community opposition to the Redgrave casting decision.[13]

In August 1979 Fénelon once again appeared on *60 Minutes*, this time interviewed by correspondent Mike Wallace. Wallace was presenting a profile of Vanessa Redgrave, who comes across as vehemently anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian. *60 Minutes* included scenes from Redgrave's 1977 documentary film, *The Palestinian,* which showed her dancing with Palestinian guerillas holding a Kaleshnikov rifle over her head.[14]

At the end of the interview, Morley Safer joined Mike Wallace for a remote interview in which the producers have brought Fania and Vanessa together in a studio for the camera. The two women are sitting uneasily side by side on a couch. At this close range their physical differences are magnified. Redgrave is tall, willowy, not young. Fania is small, yet fully occupies her personal space, and her flirtatious demeanor is mostly gone. She is cognizant of the camera but is no longer playing to it. Vanessa is very respectful of Fania, always referring to her as "Madame Fénelon."[15]

The correspondents broach the subject of Vanessa's casting in *Playing for Time*. Fénelon speaks maniacally and directly into the camera to converse with Wallace and Safer.

"I don't accept it. I don't accept somebody playing me who is, in a way, an anti-Semite."

Redgrave responds strongly, "I am NOT an anti-Semite!"[16]

Both women begin to talk over each other. Redgrave continues to vehemently deny she is an anti-Semite, yet she sticks to her anti-Zionist stance. Safer asks Fania "as a performer," if politics can be used to deny an artistic role. Fénelon admits that Redgrave could be good in the role, but that for her personally it wouldn't work. "I was a young girl. I just cannot accept

it." Vanessa says she understands Fania's viewpoint but, when pressed by Mike Wallace on whether or not she would step down from the role under any circumstances, she says no. Fania is asked "Will you watch it?" She responds, "I don't know, I don't know."

The last shot in the segment is of Fénelon, agitated, as she sits back with a lit cigarette and perfectly manicured nails.[17]

Fénelon later stated that after the *60 Minutes* interview Redgrave offered to give her a copy of the Arthur Miller script, which she accepted. It was only at this point that Fania read the final version.[18]

For the other survivors, the prospect of a movie being made out of Fania's book was intolerable. They began to mobilize a new letter-writing and press campaign. As someone fluent in English, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch became one of the strongest voices advocating for and expressing their point of view. Early on, she communicated many of her concerns to the television producers. In a letter to CBS Anita objects that the film is being made at all and states that it is "impossible to portray" the realities of the orchestra and Auschwitz. "If however, you feel a duty to do so for historical reasons, great care has to be taken. [Use] documentation beyond the version of one person."[19]

> Far be it from me to diminish the role of Fania Fénelon. A person of immense qualities who made an enormous contribution to our spiritual survival. One of the primary concerns, as always, was to insure that the memory and reality of Alma Rosé be presented honestly. [The book is a] TOTAL mis-representation of Alma Rosé. If one uses a proper name, one should be sure of the facts. There [should be] room [in the film] to underline Alma's immense qualities. She deserved better than she got.

Anita further concludes:

> This story, if the telling of it (is to have) any value, should not be a vehicle for an ego trip. If you assembled seven survivors at a table they would all have different tales to tell—but on one point they would agree: that ALMA was the strength that kept us in one piece.
>
> This does not need to mean that Fania needs to be diminished by according Alma her proper place.[20]

Anita also wrote directly to Arthur Miller on behalf of four of the western European survivors; herself, Violette Jacquet, Hélène Scheps, and Fanny Birkenwald.

Dear Mr. Miller,

You will no doubt have received many letters concerning the forthcoming film based on "Playing For Time."

To the few of us who survive, the prospect of a film about this never to be forgotten period of our lives is a matter of very deep concern. In no way do we wish to prejudge, nor do we presume to give advice to someone of your integrity. Neither is it a matter of very great concern to us who plays whom. We simply want to ask you to bear in mind that "Playing For Time" is ONE person's conception and version, and since it involves many who can no longer speak for themselves and some of whom are still alive—we would ask you to restore to us some of the human qualities and dignity which have been denied us in the book.

We feel that since our private hell is about to become public property, we have a moral duty to those who died as well as to those who are still alive.

There are so many inaccuracies that it would be too tedious to enumerate them. To give just one example: Alma Rosé. Without any doubt, she played the most powerful role, and should be treated with the utmost respect, which she so richly deserves.

I have been chosen by my friends to write to you, because English has become my adopted tongue, but we all played in the camp orchestra and in the hope that you may wish to contact one or more of us, I append our names and addresses.

Yours sincerely,

Anita Lasker, Violette Jacquet, Hélène Scheps, Fanny Birkenwald[21]

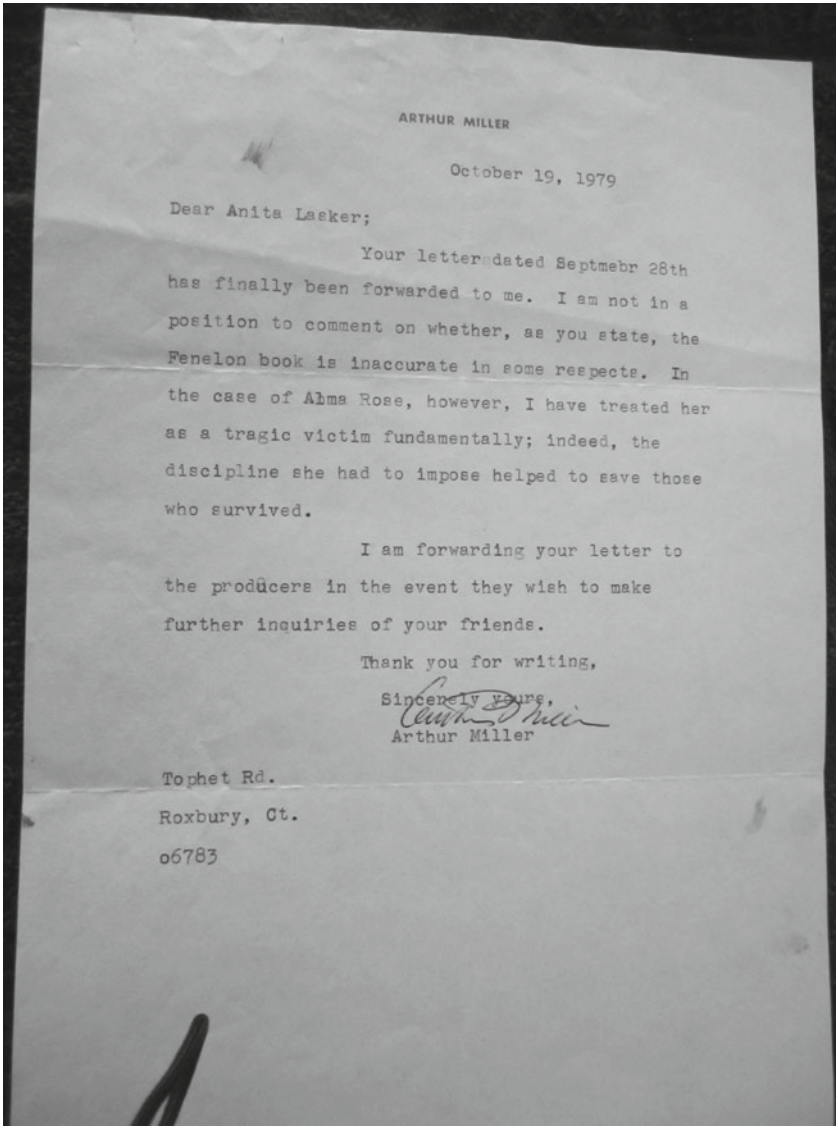
Fanny Birkenwald wrote to Anita shortly after this letter was posted, thanking her and reinforcing their point of view.

> Your letter is perfect, a lawyer could not have done better. I agree completely with the way you wrote it. Now there is nothing to do but wait for the response of Mr. Miller (if he responds!).[22]

Arthur Miller did respond to the women, although nothing they said changed his basic approach to the script. By that point Miller seemed committed to moving ahead with his vision of Fénelon's book regardless of their concerns. He never verified the accuracy or changed of any of the more problematic aspects of Fania's story.

Dear Anita Lasker,

Your letter dated September 28 has finally been forwarded to me. I am not in a position to comment on whether, as you state, the Fénelon book is accurate in some respects. In the case of Alma Rosé, however, I have treated



ARTHUR MILLER

October 19, 1979

Dear Anita Lasker;

Your letter dated Septmebr 28th has finally been forwarded to me. I am not in a position to comment on whether, as you state, the Fenelon book is inaccurate in some respects. In the case of Alma Rose, however, I have treated her as a tragic victim fundamentally; indeed, the discipline she had to impose helped to save those who survived.

I am forwarding your letter to the producers in the event they wish to make further inquiries of your friends.

Thank you for writing,

Sincerely yours,

Arthur Miller

Tophet Rd.

Roxbury, Ct.

06783

**Image 11.1** Letter from Arthur Miller to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, October 19, 1979. Reprinted with permission from the private collection of Anita Lasker-Wallfisch

her as a tragic victim fundamentally; indeed, the discipline she had to impose helped save those who survived.

I am forwarding your letter to the producers in the event they wish to make further inquiries of your friends. Thank you for writing,

Sincerely yours,
Arthur Miller
Roxbury, CT[23]

Lasker-Wallfisch later indignantly stated, "Of course he isn't [in the position to comment], but I am because I was there![24] (Image 11.1).

In an interview published in the *Boston Globe* on the day the movie was released, Miller reinforced his pride in the final product.

I wrote the script rather quickly, in 6 weeks, and that was long before the Vanessa controversy, or *any* controversy. Now there has been so much flack, so much emotional hysteria, that I have to rely on the television event itself, the actual showing of *Playing For Time* rather than what people have said about it. I hope—I *pray*—that what we've put on the screen will be seen by the public for what it is. The over-reaction to Vanessa as a political activist is almost as frightening as her politics, but the honest-to-God gut truth is that the reaction has nothing to do with *Playing For Time*. ***Nothing!*** (original emphasis)[25]*

Miller arrogantly concludes:

In all modesty I say the film is the most important statement that's ever been made about Hitler's plan to exterminate the Jews. And thank God it has not just been left to me to say that. Everybody who has seen it—almost everybody—feels the same way.[26]

The other survivors from the orchestra obviously did not feel "the same way." Indeed, Miller, at many times throughout the year preceding this interview, had chosen *not* to use his very public platform and celebrity when he could have easily shared with a larger audience the concerns raised by Anita and others about the veracity of Fania's account. The *Globe* interview was published almost exactly a year *after* Anita's initial correspondence to him expressing concern.[27]*

Undaunted, the women continued their campaign to influence the film before its release. Anita maintained pressure on officials at CBS and asked the network to contact survivors other than Fénelon to verify the facts.

I am somewhat disturbed that no attempt has been made to contact survivors, but not altogether surprised. It is obvious that every one of us had a different

> relationship to the events and the people portrayed in the drama, but since it is about to be portrayed in a film, and will be the document that this generation will base its impression on, it is essential to adhere to some basic truth. I enclose a copy of what I myself have written about Alma Rosé some time ago. It may help guide whoever is directing the film in the right direction.
>
> I enclose a copy of my letter to Miss McCall [CBS employee]. The libel implications relate to the fictitious relationship between "Marta" and "Little Irene." All together the book is a "roman" [novel] rather than a "témoignage," [testimony] and many people have been gravely maligned. I hope that you managed to contact Mme Jacquet, who can in fact furnish you with a lot more details than I can, with special reference to the person called "Clara."
>
> You will appreciate that people who have had experiences like ours rarely talk about them. Not so much because it excites them too much, but because people do not dare to ask questions. If however anyone ever has the courage to ask, one feels quite incapable of bridging the gulf which exists between those who "know" and those who "don't know." Our experiences are essentially private, and by relating an episode here and there, one only confirms the impossibility of relating anything at all.
>
> However, there you are in LA about to make a story of it all. I beg you to refrain from turning it into an Orgy of Sex and Hatred.[28]

After that, Violette Jacquet Silberstein *was* contacted by representatives from CBS and wrote to Anita describing the conversation.

> Yes, I received a telegram from CBS asking me to telephone them (at their expense) and I did so. They—and I also—recorded the conversation and I had a translator, which I asked to have, my "broken English" being too uncertain.
>
> I spoke about Alma, about Claire especially, and about Fania's self-aggrandizement (mythomanie). I just wish that they would contact one of us and we could see to it that this film would not be such a Schweinerei!
>
> Regarding Alma, I was at pains to say that it was not fear of the SS that made her act brutally at times, and not more than other conductors whose rages and excesses we know about. I said that her importance to us was capital, and that the importance that Fania gives herself is exaggerated. I did my best.
>
> In any case one thing is certain, the film has not been started yet, and all hope is permitted. Maybe it will never be made? That would be the best we could hope for. Finally all this should put Fania in a good mood. They are talking about her, and that is what she wants, or at least it is possible.[29]

In the beginning of September 1980, *Los Angeles Times* critic Howard Rosenberg was given an opportunity to preview the film before it aired.

Rosenberg was generally positive stating that: "Though not without distracting flaws and blemishes, *Playing for Time* is a jarring three hours, a film utterly compelling, utterly bleak and grotesquely effective in its portrayal of evil."[30] Rosenberg was very impressed with Vanessa Redgrave's portrayal as Fania. "Moreover, one cannot imagine anyone better or more feeling as Fénelon than anti-Zionist Redgrave, though she is almost a foot taller and some 15 years older than Fénelon was at the time."[31]

Rosenberg described Fania as "a wee person, still feisty though and ready as ever to spit in your eye." He discussed the Redgrave casting controversy and noted that Rabbi Abraham Cooper, then working for the Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies in Los Angeles, feared that acceptance of Redgrave as Fénelon would make her anti-Israel politics more acceptable. "Whether she's good or bad is irrelevant."[32]

Rosenberg wryly noted at the end of the article: "Not by coincidence, meanwhile, Fénelon's publisher is releasing a new edition of her book close to the airing of the TV film. That means she will profit indirectly from a film she has fought against."[33]

Once Fania began to speak out against the film, and the full-blown controversy over Redgrave's casting emerged, the real concern—that of the other survivors about the actual veracity of Fénelon's story—was totally obscured. As every good promoter knows; any publicity is good publicity, scandal breeds interest, and by the time the film aired an audience of thousands was primed and ready.

## The Film Premieres

On September 30, 1980 the television movie *Playing for Time* premiered. The initial showing was not without incident. Vanessa Redgrave was burned in effigy outside Philadelphia's CBS affiliate while several bomb threats were received at CBS's Hollywood studios. A few hours after the show aired in Los Angeles, shots were fired through the front door of the network's radio affiliate on Sunset Boulevard, shattering the glass door but not causing any injuries.[34] CBS affiliates across the country received a flood of negative calls from viewers, including Holocaust survivors, during the show. The next day and thereafter, however, an equal or greater numbers of calls were received praising the show.[35]

Press reviews were almost uniformly positive, praising *Playing for Time* as "one of the best films ever shown on American television."[36] Other accolades included: "One of the most affecting broadcasts in television history," "unrelentingly grim but grippingly honest," "a challengingly complex, engrossing work of art," "a horror story/fable/parable for all

time," and "Arthur Miller's *Playing for Time* ranks with John Hersey's *The Wall* and Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* among the most memorably effective literary efforts to emerge from the Holocaust."[37]

Interestingly, journalist Albert Maltz, who at one time had considered co-writing Fénelon's memoir, published an article shortly after the premiere gently chiding Fénelon for her public objections to Redgrave's casting. Responding to one of Fania's statements to CBS that the film was a "fiasco," Maltz addressed Fénelon directly: "But my dear Fania, it was not a fiasco. The film is not only a true portrait of life in Auschwitz as you reported it, but it is a stunning achievement aesthetically. It is not without flaws but it is enormously powerful, deeply moving, and filled with scenes as unforgettable in the entire history of film."[38] Maltz later concludes: "What a complex and sad irony. CBS produced the very film Fénelon would have hoped to see—if only Redgrave weren't in it. And the Los Angeles Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies (which sponsored Fénelon's speeches at protest meetings all over the country), would today be embracing the film—if only Redgrave weren't in it."[39]

Vanessa Redgrave received glowing reviews, almost without exception, for her portrayal of Fania. The next awards season *Playing for Time* won a Primetime Emmy for Outstanding Made for Television Movie. Vanessa Redgrave won the Emmy for Outstanding Actress for her portrayal of Fénelon. Jane Alexander won as Supporting Actress for her role as Alma Rosé, and Arthur Miller won for Outstanding Writing. The film also won the 1980 Peabody Award which recognizes distinguished and meritorious public service by American radio and television. The Peabody committee noted that: "The story of how members of an all-women orchestra lives through the horror, indignities and degradation of a Nazi concentration camp and survives is a searing indictment of war's inhumanity to the individual. CBS Entertainment's worthy effort merits a Peabody Award."[40]

Subsequently the film was aired in Great Britain and Europe, and continued to generate controversy, usually involving Redgrave's casting and Fénelon's campaign against it. The other survivors once again found themselves in the center of a storm over which they had little or no control. In all parts of the globe where they now lived, orchestra members spoke out against the movie and its most egregious fallacies.

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch immediately published a letter of protest in the *London Sunday Times* when *Playing for Time* aired in Great Britain.[41] Anita detailed in greater depth her perceptions of the character of Alma Rosé and her role in the orchestra, specifically to counteract the misleading impressions created by the film.[42] Anita then reiterated her support of

and admiration for Alma Rosé and her anger at the misrepresentation of the interrelationships between the women in the orchestra.[43]

Fania continued to give interviews during this period, one of which was aired shortly before the broadcast of *Playing for Time* in France and Belgium. A friend of Anita in Antwerp sent her a letter about this interview: "I feel I have to report on the TV events of the last week. France 3 TV gave [presented] *Playing for Time*, with before an interview with Fania Fénelon, who seemed quite convinced that she was the 'ware Jacob'[44] (does not that expression exist in German?). She made no rectifications, and when asked, said she only knew a few survivors (in Belgium, one in England …?)"[45]

Orchestra survivors across Europe were asked for comments. Anita's same friend described an interview given by Dutch survivor of the orchestra, Flora Schrijver.

> Then on Dutch TV we got, after the film, an interview with (Flora) Schrijver. Quite a different cup of tea! She echoed what you four have said all along, but didn't mind laying straight out that most was a pack of lies and that nothing could attempt to represent a fraction of her four year-long nightmare.
>
> She had the same dignity you always have had about it all and it is a shame Madame Fénelon doesn't speak Dutch. She would well and truly have felt icily crushed. Well. There it is."[46]

As the film continued to air in Europe and abroad, other survivors reacted in a similar manner. Olivier Jacquet, son of Violette Silberstein Jacquet, remembers that, "We watched the movie together on television. Mother was quite upset. Having read the book she knew what to expect, but the film was even worse than the book!"[47]

Once the stage and television versions appeared Helena Niwińska wrote a lengthy letter of protest to *Die Zeit*, a German periodical which had published an article about the Arthur Miller play.[48] The magazine dismissed her concerns and told her it was too late to respond.[49]

As controversy continued to roil over the film Anita Lasker-Wallfisch championed, in any way she could, the truth of the story and the continued misrepresentations and perceptions as now exacerbated by the film version of Fania's story. After an exchange with writer Jeff Bradley, who worked for the Associated Press in the London Bureau, Bradley responded to her in this way: "Miss Lasker, I was very moved by our conversation (much more than by the film which would seem to prove your point) JB".[50]

Bradley's article bolstered the position of Anita and the other survivors. He agreed that the film and book "glorifies Miss Fénelon at the expense of the real heroine of the story, Alma Rosé, the orchestra's leader."[51] Like many other writers commenting on the film's aftermath, Bradley discussed the controversy over Redgrave's casting. He noted that Ms. Lasker also praised Redgrave's performance but said that the furor over the casting sickened her and that it was the portrayal of Alma as dictatorial and unfeeling rather than the casting of Redgrave which upset Anita.[52] He additionally notes that Anita took great exception to two stories: the scenes in which Alma slapped an incompetent player and blocked requests for food. "That never happened!" Bradley stressed that Anita was not criticizing Fania for writing the book, only how she wrote the book.[53]

Press reactions varied, occasionally noting the efforts of other survivors to contradict the film. In January 1981, Richard Ingrams commented in a television column: "There was a very good little interview on Saturday with the ECO cellist Anita Lasker who quietly pointed out that from a historical point of view, Arthur Miller's Auschwitz play, acclaimed by Dame Judith as 'deeply important,' was a load of rubbish, and, though she did not say so in as many words, an insult to the women like her who lived through the nightmare of Auschwitz and who are now expected to look on and see it made into the stuff of cheap TV melodrama."[54]

Shortly thereafter, seeking to add weight and credibility to her viewpoint, Anita wrote to Stephen Pile at the *London Times* and mentioned a letter she received from a man named Jozef Garlinksi. Garlinski was a survivor of Auschwitz and the author of a well-respected memoir titled *Resistance in Auschwitz*.[55] Anita told Pile she believed Garlinski's portrayal was 100% accurate and authentic, and suggested that the *London Times* contact Garlinski and solicit an article to provide a more balanced viewpoint.[56]

Garlinski subsequently sent a letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, commenting on the television show *Playing for Time*.

> From the psychological point of view of the heroine, with her mentality, well played by Vanessa Redgrave, would not have survived for more than two weeks in Auschwitz. Altogether, I am skeptical about accounts written so many years after the war, in which the writer presents him or herself as a hero. The heroes are all dead or prefer to remain silent.
>
> From the historical point of view, there were so many errors in the picture that it is impossible to enumerate them. The camp numbers, the barracks, cutting of hair, roll-calls, gas chambers, nationalities, the behavior of the Germans, the climate of the camp, all was wrongly presented.

> The picture was much too long, with numerous repetitions and drawn out scenes and finally, instead of achieving any emotional power, tired and bored the viewer.[57]

Richard Newman of the *Free Press*, in a review of the film, detailed some of these inaccuracies—also calling attention to the fact that the orchestra members were not adversarial and that they did indeed help each other out. He also notes that sex with the SS was not as prevalent as the film suggests, and that one character, the singer "Clara," (Marianne in the stage play) is wrongly accused of prostitution.[58]

In the perception of many readers, viewers, and other survivors, Arthur Miller *did* disproportionately embellish and exaggerate the elements of sexuality present in Fania's story. For example, in this exchange between the Clara character (Marianne in some versions) and a Nazi soldier, with Miller's staging notes.

> MARIANNE (CLARA): "How's it going soldier? (She waits a moment, then draws out his thigh and sits on it when he does not respond.) 'Cause wherever it is, I know how to make a guy forget his troubles. (She strokes his inner thigh)[59]"

Or simply in Miller's stage directions: "She bites into the sausage and chews sensuously."[60]

One French reviewer described the movie as "a three-hour film in which Fania Fénelon might well have difficulty finding her book and seeing herself in the features of Vanessa Redgrave, who was transformed for the occasion into a kind of Jeanne d'Arc and lit up like Broadway the night of the premier. But there was still worse in this ersatz of the Holocaust. Mr. Miller had taken such and such liberties with the story that the Holocaust itself became unrecognizable. … Miller didn't resort to half measures; he mixed sex in everywhere. His imagination transformed the 'block' into a sordid brothel."[61]

Two survivors, Fanny Birkenwald and Hélène Scheps , addressed this aspect of the film after the movie aired in Europe.[62] Both had been members of the orchestra in Birkenau for over a year and they remained close friends. Birkenwald and Scheps stated that American television made a sex scandal of the camp, and that the film presented a travesty of the truth—"this transformation of an immense human drama into a matter of sex."[63] The interviewer noted that, rather than appearing angry, the women were "instead immensely sad about this presentation and distortion of the truth of the situation as they remembered it. And they don't mince their words."

Intimate friendships? We were dead on our feet. It is simply just scandalous! In truth, we never noticed anything like this on the grounds of Birkenau. There were affections and friendships, but they never went further. We were frightfully thin, tired, undernourished. Well, believe me, there was no question of sexuality. Not in spirit and even less in act. I am not saying that it never happened in the camp, where there were tens of thousands of women, among them some German prostitutes condemned to prison and not death. It is possible. It is probable, but we never noticed anything in our block.

Excuse me, but I can't help myself. Why this fantasy of Fania's? She played piano so well and sang so badly; why did she have to embark on this slave's galley? She has always had lots of imagination but this time, frankly she has gone a little too far.[64]

## Notes

1. Fabry-Francy.
2. Ibid.
3. "Fania Fénelon Speaks About her Life," Montreal, 1980. http:www.ia902700.us.archive.org/17/items/FaniaFénelonSpeaksAboutHerLifeenglishJanuary291980/ Accessed March 13, 2015.
4. Judy Flander, "Artistic Coup for Redgrave," *The Washington Star*, September 30, 1980.
5. Knapp, 285.
6. Kevin Kelly, "Miller is Proud of the Product," *The Boston Globe*, September 30, 1980.
7. Howard Rosenberg, "*Playing for Time* Unveiled by CBS," *Los Angeles Times*, September 8, 1980.
8. Jerry Krupnik, "Redgrave is Superb in *Playing for Time*," *The Star-Ledger*, September 30, 1980.
9. "Fania Fénelon Speaks About Her Life," 1980.
10. Knapp, 286.
11. "*Fania Fenelon Raps CBS For Having Redgrave Portray her in TV Movie*," Jewish Telegram Agency, October 23, 1979. http://www.jta.org/1979/19/23/archive/fania-fenel-on-raps-cbs-for-having-redgrave-portray … Accessed June 8, 2015.
12. Arthur Unger, "Behind the Debate," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 3, 1980.
13. "Herb Brin, February 17, 1915–February 6, 2003," http://www.davidbrin.com/herbbrin/obituary.html Accessed April 2, 2015. Brinn had previously been instrumental in working with the Jewish Defense League to picket the Academy Awards ceremonies in 1978, when Redgrave won a

Best-Supporting Actress award for her role in the movie *Julia*. Controversially, Redgrave used her acceptance speech at that time to castigate the protestors as "Zionist hoodlums." (OTRC: Vanessa Redgrave Delivers a Controversial Speech—Oscar History," ABC News, http://abc7.com/archive/8545580/ Accessed April 2, 2015).

14. "Vanessa." Interview by Mike Wallace and Morley Safer, *60 Minutes*, CBS, August 19, 1979.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. "Fania Fénelon Speaks About Her Life," 1980.
19. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch to Miss Anderson, CBS Television, October 31, 1979, Personal collection ALW.
20. Ibid.
21. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch to Arthur Miller, September 28, 1979, Personal collection ALW.
22. Fanny Birkenwald to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, October 4, 1979, Personal collection ALW.
23. Arthur Miller to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, October 19, 1979, Personal collection ALW.
24. "How Arthur Miller Struck a Dischord with the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz," March 6, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015FridayMarch6,2015/mar/06/how-arthur-miller-struck-a-dischord.
25. Kevin Kelly, "Miller is Proud of the Product," *The Boston Globe*, September 30, 1980.
    *Arthur Miller seemingly viewed his adaptation of *Playing for Time* as a vehicle to exorcize other demons from his own life and past. When speaking about his work on the project Miller stated: "The absurd logic of terror stood always before my eyes like a meticulously fashioned book illustration from Dante's Inferno" (Arthur Miller, "Auschwitz und wir," Personal collection ALW), and he recognized that his Jewish heritage undoubtedly influenced his approach to adapting Fénelon's work. In an article published in the *Los Angeles Times*, Yellen is quoted as saying *Playing for Time* "is very much Arthur Miller's piece. He took a personal autobiography and gave it shape and context that goes beyond the personal story. Everything we wanted from the book was there. Arthur had wrestled with this subject for 35 years. To do this piece, we had to work from within, not without." (Howard Rosenberg, 1980) Rosenberg, Howard. "Playing For Time is Unveiled by CBS." The Los Angeles Times, Sept. 8, 1980.
26. Kevin Kelly, Ibid.

27. *Tellingly, in the years after the furor over *Playing for Time* subsided, Arthur Miller made a conscious decision *not* to write about *Playing for Time* in his autobiography. In 2015, when questioned about this, Lasker-Wallfisch states that "I think he was quite ashamed that he associated his name with that travesty of a film. I think it's quite disgraceful." ("How Arthur Miller Struck a Dischord")
28. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch to Miss Anderson, CBS News, October 31, 1979, Personal collection ALW.
29. Violette Jacquet to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, 14 November 1979, Personal collection ALW.
30. Rosenberg, 1980.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. "After Weeks of Controversy Capped by Angry Demonstrations Against …," United Press International (UPI), October 1, 1980, http:www.upi.com/Archives/1980/10/01/After-weeks-of-controversy-capped-by-angry-de … Accessed June 8, 2015.
35. Ibid.
36. Knapp, 286.
37. Arthur Unger, "Moving—and controversial—new Arthur Miller drama," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 3, 1980.
38. Albert Maltz, "The Dischordant Note in Playing for Time," *Newsday*, October 6, 1980, 41.
39. Ibid.
40. http://www.peabodyawards.com/.
41. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Letter to Editor, *Sunday Times*, London, England, January 11, 1980.
42. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, "Material compiled concerning *Playing for Time* for TV program with Ludovic Kennedy," 1979, Personal collection ALW.
43. Ibid.
44. Dutch slang expression meaning, true, real, "Mr. Right."
45. Henriette (Antwerp) to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, September 5, 1982, Personal collection ALW.
46. Ibid.
47. Olivier Jacquet, e-mail message to author, April 27, 2014.
48. Helena Niwińska to *Die Zeit,* 25 September 1997, Personal collection HN.
49. Niwińska interview, 2014.
50. Jeff Bradley, Associated Press, to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, telegram, January 12, 1981, Personal collection ALW.
51. Ibid.

52. ibid
53. ibid
54. Richard Ingrams, "Television Hold-Up," *Spectator*, Jan 24, 1981, 30.
55. Jozef Garlinski, *Fighting Auschwitz: The Resistance Movement in the Concentration Camp* (London: Juliann Friedmann Pub., 1975).
56. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch to Stephen Pile (London Sunday Times), 25 January 1981, Personal collection ALW.
57. Jozef Garlinski to Editor, *The Daily Telegraph*, January 12, 1981.
58. Richard Newman, "They're Still Talking about Playing for Time," *Free Press*, 1981, p. 32.
59. Arthur Miller, *Playing for Time* (stage adaptation), (New York: Dramatic Publishing Company, 1985), Act II, 86.
60. Ibid. Act 1, 7.
61. Georges Fabry-Francy, 1981.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid.

CHAPTER 12

# The Artistic Influence of Fénelon's Memoir: The *Playing for Time* Phenomenon

**Abstract** Fania Fénelon's Holocaust memoir *Playing for Time* continues to inspire a variety of artistic productions. In this chapter Eischeid details the productions inspired by Fénelon's work. She reveals how pervasive Fania's story has become and the ramifications of that exposure for presenting a true picture and remembrance of what the women's orchestra was really like. The further response of the surviving members to these new productions is explored, as is their continued dismay at the popularity of Fénelon's work. In every way these ongoing productions exemplify the problems inherent in the *Playing for Time* legacy: largely unconditional acceptance of the primary source, or the dismissal of any concerns of veracity in favor of an artistic vision.

**Keywords** Fania Fénelon • *Playing for Time* • Artistic influence • Stage plays • Musical productions • Opera • Pervasive influence • Continuing influence

In the years after Fania's death productions based on *Playing for Time* have continued to appear. These varied incarnations of Fénelon's memoir illustrate in what ways and how very extensively Fania's story has been presented to the general public. For audiences unfamiliar with the Holocaust,



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or unfamiliar with music in the Holocaust, exposure to Fénelon's story often becomes their whole frame of reference regarding the topic. Every time a new production is mounted, interest is generated once again in Fania's memoir. As a result, Fania's embellishments and fabrications are continually contributing to the ongoing and general misrepresentation of the orchestra—and of the Holocaust—to new audiences.

In 1987, four years after Fania's death, Israeli playwright Shmuel Hasfari adapted the book for presentation on the stage in Israel. His version of *Playing for Time* was featured at the Beer Sheva Theatre as its 100th production.[1] The Israeli survivors of the orchestra were appalled "at this latest horror," and about the play that Hasfari had written based on Fania's book. Arie Olewski remembers that his mother Rachela and the other Israeli survivors, Hilde Simcha, Regina Bacia, and Sylvia Wagenberg, met with Hasfari in Olewski's home in Ramat-Gan. "The 'girls' were so angry about him, that he had a meeting in our home, where he tried to explain his attitude, but in vain."[2]

It was at this point that the Israeli survivors began to speak out more openly against the play and against Fania's book. Before that, Sylvia and Hilde had admitted that they didn't like the book but avoided public criticism in order to prevent publicity which they felt the book didn't deserve.[3] Once the Hasfari play premiered and was on stage in Israel they started a press campaign against it.[4]

Israeli press reviews of the new play were mixed, ranging from "Play was bad. Not realistic and not scary and they felt like they were watching summer camp"[5] to "Big revenge for Hitler on Holocaust Day, Jews playing Nazis."[6] Zippi Pines, manager of the Beer Sheva Theatre, was quoted as saying Fania's memoir, although not good as a book, was a unique document and thrilling material for theatre.[7] Other Israeli reviews were negative and included comments such as: "A worse, inferior kitsch than the one Hasfari brought on stage is unimaginable. Hasfari's 'playing for time' is pornography because it diverts the major concern to narrow marginal aspects and takes them out of context. It is pornography because the play does not deal with the people, the relationship between them or even the sex but instead, it exaggerates the sexual elements."[8]

In an interview, Sylvia Wagenberg remarked that she understood the rights of a theatre to present a play as they see it, but that it is also a spectator's right to comment on the play. She noted that the surviving members of the orchestra offered to consult with the theatre on the scripts, and concluded that it was hard for them to believe that today, forty years after the events occurred, the truth would not be shown—particularly in

front of the eyes of the camps' survivors and their children. The reviewer concluded: "Sylvia and her friends felt anger and helplessness when they watched the play *Playing for Time*."[9, 10] "The story of their lives in the camp is tragic and terrible enough, therefore it doesn't require any mean kitsch as demonstrated on stage."[11]

Outside of Israel, artistic productions continued to be inspired by Fania's work. In January 1994, Arthur Miller's film screenplay was translated into German by Maik Hamburger for a production by Theater of the Youth in Vienna. In a generally positive review of the performers and play *Spiel am Zeit*'s critic Gerhard Kofler wrote: "In the dialogues there is conflict between culture and barbarism, ever of distressing, intensified timeliness and harrowing embodiment. Unlofty and yet deeply sympathetic, the women, who act and sing under cruel degradation, point to memories and respect, that is for the victims, that did not have a chance to make it to this life-prolonging play."[12]

An article in the *Wiener Zeitung* described the play as "greatly successful."[13] Neither piece mentions any controversies over veracity. German musicologist Gabriele Knapp is publicly thanked on the programs for these performances, crediting her work "which gave the decisive impulse to the staging."[14]

As each incarnation of Fénelon's work reached a new audience, the ever dwindling pool of survivors continued to fight valiantly to counteract its influence. After receiving a poster of the Vienna production of *Spiel um Zeit*, Helena Niwińska wrote to Dr. Franciszek Piper, then Head of the History and Research Department at the Auschwitz State Museum in Oświęcim. In her letter she reiterates—once again—that Fania Fénelon's book is full of fallacies.

> The idea itself of staging such a play in Vienna now, Alma Rosé's birthplace, is for us something absurd and shocking. The reviews of the play attest to the fact that the lies and fabrications being the creation of Ms. Fénelon are still being given credit.
>
> I turn to you for advice [on] what can be done to straighten out the "legend" of Fania Fénelon? Could the materials we prepared for the museum archives [Niwińska's reflections[15] and Zofia Cykowiak's portrait of Alma[16]] be published separately? (Perhaps as a brochure?)

> Does the museum have funds or would we have to publish it with our own money?
>
> Helena Niwińska[17]

Interest in the Auschwitz women's orchestra and the influence of Fénelon's *Playing for Time* continued into the twenty-first century. On March 21, 2000, French film director Michael Daëron released his documentary about the women's orchestra, *Bach in Auschwitz*.[18] Featuring eleven surviving members of the orchestra, the documentary provided a much better representation of their real experiences and memories. Although not discussed specifically in the course of the film, Fénelon's influence lingers in the background. When Greek survivor Yvette Assael Lennon is interviewed in the library of her home, Fania's book, facing out, is highly visible on a bookshelf behind her. The camera lingers on it for a minute, as if to emphasize its presence. Outside publicity incorrectly described the film as "this compelling 102 minute documentary that inspired the Emmy winning television drama *Playing for Time* starring Vanessa Redgrave."[19]

On September 16, 2006 an opera based on Fania's book by German composer Stefan Heucke premiered in Germany. Titled *Das Frauenorchester von Auschwitz* (*The Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz*), the production inspired an accompanying film documentary *Noten der Not* (*Notes of Despair*) about the creative process and inspiration behind the work.

When interviewed in 2015, Heucke described how Fénelon's book had ignited his interest in the topic.

> When I read the book by Fania Fénelon from 1979 (it had just been published in German), I was immediately overcome and, naturally, it never occurred to me to challenge whether it was true as written! I was 20 years old, very impressionable, and, naturally, I thought that what a survivor writes must be true in any case! I think since that time that Fania definitely deserves a lot of credit for being the first one to break the silence and for speak[ing] up on this topic at all. As one knows by now, she had a co-author and she surely had a hand in the matter that much in the book was opened up in a sensation-seeking and lurid way. Surely, she also packed into the book all of the different sorts of things that happened in the camp, which maybe (!) did not occur that way in the orchestra. Assuredly, Fania Fénelon stylized herself as the hero of the orchestra, which she was not. But, then again, she had to be the main character in an autobiographical novel.[20]

Heucke was dismayed when he discovered that other survivors had discounted Fania's story. He asked Anita Lasker-Wallfisch to proofread the libretto. She did so and recommended that Heucke not write an opera on this subject, that somebody who had not experienced it could not judge or understand it and that, in her opinion, this story was not suited to opera.[21] Also, because it was based on Fania Fènelon, it had no chance of reflecting the situation as it was.

Heucke describes thinking, "Now what do we do? If one of the last survivors has reservations, we can't just ignore them." He wrote back and asked Anita to correct any errors and requested permission to include a version of her letter as a prologue to the opera. She agreed.[22] In the subsequent documentary, *Noten der Not*, interviews with Lasker-Wallfisch about the controversy and the actuality are featured. Heucke additionally solicited input from Kazimierz Smolèn of the Oświęcim museum, and Gabriele Knapp.

News of Heucke's opera traveled around the world. In August 2006, the *New York Times* published an article about the upcoming premiere.[23] The opera had two full runs of performances, from September 16 to October 7 in Mönchengladbach and from November 26 to December 17 in Krefeld.[24] Reception was almost uniformly positive. Heucke was gratified that, on some level, he had achieved an appropriate tribute to the women and their orchestra.

> You have to imagine how this orchestra must have sounded. On no account could it sound laughable. That was my biggest challenge. It was wonderful to have a chance to try it out, and discover that it really sounds good. When you hear an aria from *Madame Butterfly* with guitar, accordion and mandolin, your heart stands still. Zubin Mehta was at the concert and he wept.[25]

In 2014, when reflecting on the entire experience of creating this work, Heucke summed up his feelings about Fénelon: "Despite a few reservations, I do not dismiss the book entirely and find that it is definitely worth re-evaluating and that it has value."[26]

On March 29, 2007, a new performing venue at the University of Michigan was named the Arthur Miller Theatre, dedicated to the playwright, and featured *Playing for Time* as its inaugural production. Ironically, the chair of the Theatre Department described the play—using Miller's own words—as "raising the truth-consciousness of mankind to a level of such intensity as to transform those who observe it."[27]

In March 2009 Ars Choralis, a community chorus and orchestra from Woodstock, New York, presented a concert titled *Music in Desperate Times: Remembering the Women's Orchestra of Birkenau* in New York City, Berlin, and the site of the Ravensbrück camp.[28] The program was a combination of selections played by the women's orchestra in Birkenau and choral music set to lyrics based on survivor memoirs, including and featuring Fénelon's. Press coverage quoted Fénelon's book extensively, making little mention of possible inaccuracies or embellishments, and perpetuating inaccurate information (for example, the Rosé funeral).[29] Two of the survivors interviewed by the *New York Times* about the production were ambivalent about this latest incarnation of Fania's work. Both Anita Lasker-Wallfisch and Esther Bejarano again credited the orchestra, and in Lasker-Wallfisch's case Alma Rosé, with saving their lives. Bejarano, however, stated that she found this revival of the music "distasteful" and that "I don't want to listen to this music, I don't want to be reminded. Never in my life do I want to hear it again!"[30]

From November 19 to 21, 2010, the Paley Center for Media in New York City sponsored multiple public screenings of *Playing for Time* in recognition of the film's 30th anniversary. Concurrently, the center invited guest panelists for an open discussion, including film producer Linda Yellen, actresses Vanessa Redgrave and Jane Alexander, who had played the role of Alma Rosé, and Pat Mitchell, CEO of the Paley Center.[31]

In a video excerpt of the panel posted on the Paley Center website, Vanessa Redgrave is the primary focus. Redgrave has lost none of her trademark personal intensity. Talking dramatically and balletically with her hands, long gray hair pulled back severely from her face and piercing eyes now covered by black-framed glasses, the actress dominates the conversation. Redgrave remarked that , in the years since her appearance as Fania Fénelon, she has thought often and obsessively about the essential nature of humanity and the moral and philosophical issues raised in the movie. "Ever since we did that film I've been thinking—if you're not with us, you're against us. Both true and not true. Inside all of us is the capacity to betray, to kill, to murder humanity—physically or spiritually, that capacity is in all of us."[32] She argued that we must recognize the humanity in everybody, both victims and perpetrators, and that recognizing it in the latter "is where we have trouble," stating that it had "not actually been considered that way before Arthur's script."[33]

In later commentary about the panel discussion, one audience member quoted Redgrave as saying that artists do projects like *Playing for Time*

because it's important for audiences never to forget and to have a better understanding of what *really* happened.[34] Sadly, there seems to have been little discussion about the actual *veracity* of Fania'a account and that "what really happened" was not what was presented on screen.

In March 2011, another special 30th anniversary screening of *Playing for Time* was sponsored by the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City. Again, a panel discussion about the film followed. Invited speakers for this presentation included producer Linda Yellen, casting director Lynn Kressel, and Terry Lawler, Executive Director of New York Women in Film and Television.[35]

Yellen was asked to speak about the controversy over Redgrave's casting.

> We all had death threats and the head of CBS had death threats. There was a lot of controversy because of the casting of Vanessa and how people felt about her political views. When we came to casting we didn't think about that. We were just thinking about who were the greatest actresses in the world who could possibly be part of this, and she was one of the greatest.[36]

Yellen further stated that this controversy became worldwide news and that pressure was brought on them to fire the actress. "CBS stood very strong against the firing of Vanessa and this is what we have to show for it."[37] Once again, the issue of Redgrave's casting totally overshadowed any discussion concerning the truth of the material, or the concerns of other survivors. The DVD of *Playing for Time* was newly released in 2010 as part of this "anniversary celebration."[38]

Between 2012 and 2013, performance artist and playwright Claudia Stevens presented multiple performances of her one woman show, *An Evening with Madame F*, in which she takes on the persona of an elderly Fania Fénelon reflecting back on her experiences in the concentration camp.[39]

New productions inspired by Fania's work continue today. In May 2014 Hasfari's play based on Fénelon's book was once again presented in Israel. This featured event at the Beit Zvi School of Performing Arts in Ramat-Gad, Israel, presented a young cast drawn from the school's students and directed by Razi Amitai.[40] Arie Olewski notes that *this time* his family was invited to be part of the discussion about the work. "Jochi, my sister, and I went to watch the young actresses, and we had a very moving dialogue with them."[41]

Another new production of Arthur Miller's version of *Playing for Time* was developed for the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield, England, with daily

performances through April 2015. Described as "perfectly timed to coincide with Arthur Miller's centenary and the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz," the production featured an 81-year-old singer named Sian Phillips in the role of Fania Fénelon.[42]*

In an interview the director of the production, Richard Beecham, was asked about the controversy regarding Fénelon's account. He stated that he had intentionally chosen to emphasize the haziness, subjectivity and one-sidedness of her story and claimed his production is about exploring the nature of memory. "I hope it provokes discussion and is a riposte to those who still claim it didn't happen, or happen in the way history tells us it did, and who don't want this conversation to be had."[43] In the same interview he expresses the wish that audiences will echo what one reviewer said of the original television play, "The various causes of uproar surrounding this drama are almost irrelevant after one has viewed it."[44]

In every way this 2014 production exemplifies the problems inherent in the *Playing for Time* legacy: largely unconditional acceptance of the primary source upon which it is based, or the dismissal of any ongoing concerns in favor of an artistic vision.

## Notes

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CHAPTER 13

# Memoirs by the Other Survivors of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Women's Orchestra and the Second Generation Legacy

**Abstract** In the years after the appearance of Fania Fénelon's Holocaust memoir *Playing for Time*, other members of the women's orchestra at Auschwitz-Birkenau began to publish their own remembrances. These served the dual purpose of providing more accurate representations of themselves and of rebutting the distorted elements in Fénelon's account. In this chapter Eischeid details some of these other memoirs, and gives an update on the women and their lives. Featured musicians include Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Helena Dunicz Niwińska, Violette Jacquet Silberstein, Esther Bejarano, Rachela Zelmanowicz Olewski, Hilde Grünbaum Simche and Flora Schrijver Jacobs. The emotional legacy of Fania Fénelon's memoir has also extended to the children of the other survivors and Eischeid additionally explores these longer term legacies.

**Keywords** Auschwitz-Birkenau women's orchestra • Second generation legacy • Lasker-Wallfisch • Dunicz-Niwińska • Olewski • Bejarano • Schrijver • Simche • Jacquet-Silberstein

One of the first memoirs by an orchestra member other than Fania Fénelon, *Inherit The Truth*, was published by Anita Lasker-Wallfisch in 1996. In it, Anita reiterates her assertion that: "It is a pity that Fania created such a misleading impression about the camp orchestra when she wrote her



S. Eischeid, *The Truth about Fania Fénelon and the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau*,
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memoirs, which were subsequently made into a film. For reasons best known to herself, she indulged in the most preposterous distortions of the truth about practically everyone who took part in this drama."[1]

Anita continues to passionately champion for truth in many aspects of Holocaust remembrance, and is a respected and much appreciated first person resource for many contemporary scholars and students.

Violette Jacquet-Silberstein published an autobiography *Les sanglots longs des violons* designed for children, in 2005.[2] Jacquet spent the last several years of her life speaking about her experiences to audiences in schools, colleges, and the general public, always stressing the good humor among the women which kept their spirits alive: "Even in the Blocks, the girls laughed and sang."[3] Violette died in January 2014.

In 2013 violinist Helena Dunicz-Niwińska published her memoir, *Drogi mojego życia, Wspomnienia skrzypaczki z Birkenau* and in 2014, the English translation—*One of the Girls in the Band; The Memoirs of a Violinist from Birkenau*.[4] At this writing, Helena Niwińska is 100 years old and lives in Krakow, tirelessly engaged in active correspondence and working to inssure that a correct and honest version of life in the women's orchestra is remembered for posterity. When asked why she survived the camp when so many others did not, Niwińska replied:

> Even in those inhumane conditions there were people who helped others to overcome that fate, or who brought some relief to the experience.[5]

Undoubtedly, Niwińska counts her closest friends from the orchestra among that number.

Esther Bejarano, a pianist and singer who played accordion in the women's orchestra, published her autobiography in 2005.[6] She published an additional book of memories in 2013.[7] After the war, Bejarano resumed her musical career and continues to speak widely to schools and general audiences, always advocating tolerance, and speaking publicly against the neo-Nazi movement. Bejarano has continued to be an active media presence as well, sharing her story in unique and noteworthy ways. In 2009, Bejarano began a collaboration with the Microphone Mafia, a hip-hop duo from Germany with Italian and Turkish roots.[8] Each of their performances begins with Bejarano reading portions of her autobiography, and continues with all the artists rapping about current societal problems. Bejarano's performances on the popular media platform YouTube have had thousands of views.[9]

In 2009, Rachela Zelmanowicz Olewski's children published a book based on her Hebrew testimony, as originally recorded by Yad Vashem in 1984.[10] In this document she mentions Fania in passing. After being asked

by the interviewer if there are incorrect things in Fénelon's book, Rachela responded strongly: "There are untrue things."[11] Rachela died in 1987.

Flora Schrijver Jacobs, a Dutch survivor, published her memoir *Het meisje met de accordeon* (*The Girl with the Accordian*) in 1994.[12] Flora died in April, 2013. Hilde Grünbaum Simche published her memories as part of a larger book of remembrances in 2010.[13] Hilde is completely convinced that her work in the orchestra saved her life and assured her survival.[14]

Fania Fénelon's emotional legacy has also extended to the children and grandchildren of the other survivors.

Olivier Jacquet, Violette Jacquet-Silberstein's son, remembers Fania quite well. Since both Violette and Fania were French speakers and lived in Paris, Olivier remembers that he and his siblings "had heard about Fania ever since they were little and we met her several times."[15] Violette gave up the violin after her time in the camps and began to sing on the Left Bank in cabarets. "Fania, who was also a singer, helped her find work sometimes."[16] Violette was one of the people closest to Fénelon after the war and viewed the book and subsequent film as a personal betrayal. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, who maintained a close friendship with Violette until her death remembers that: "She told me that most of Fania's stories, even before she arrived in the camp, were fantasy."[17]

Olivier notes that, although his mother recognized Fania's "mythomaniac traits" long before the book, she recognized equally her good qualities. "Fania was a friend and more than that. There was certainly a commonality of view and of life between people who have shared (the same experiences)."[18] Olivier summarizes: "Fania and Mother remained friends, *until* the appearance of Fania's book." (original emphasis)[19] "And although they remained in a relationship until Fania died, Mother told her the book was horrible! She wrote ten pages about the book, retracing all the mistakes, all the lies she wrote."[20]

Olivier was gradually introduced to the Fénelon book by his mother:

> I was very young, and I still didn't know the whole story very well. Mother was very wise, I think, to tell us about it, but in stages and not all at once. Reading the book I became conscious of an entire reality. Lots of things are false in the book, but others are true! And what was interesting to me was to discover a version of reality of an epoch that had been confusing to me.
>
> The book did not affect me [since] Mother had explained it to us so there was no chance that it would bother us. On the other hand, I was pained to see Mother so worked up and feeling wounded when she talked about the subject.[21]

Like Olivier, Arie Olewski , Rachela Olewski's son, was more disturbed by the way the book affected his mother than by feeling any personal hurt. Arie did not read the book until he was 30 years old. By then, he had observed the meetings that Rachela arranged with the other Israeli survivors to discuss Fania's work when it was published and made into a film, and also the meeting with Shmuel Hasfari after the play was written.

> Israelis are different from others because we always have to fight for our survival, also today. So we are busy in the present. But I was angry too because it made my mother angry, and she could not influence or delete the book or the movie or the show.[22]

Arie did not expose his own children to Fénelon's book, only to his mother's testimony. He is confident that they know the truth, backed up by the other Israeli survivors to whom they are and were close. Arie was called by the press in April of 2014 when the new version of Hasfari's play was presented, mostly to check on the status of the few survivors. "There is no more discussion [about Fania's veracity] but journalists find it interesting for new and young audiences."[23]

At the time of writing Regina Bacia's granddaughter, Sivanne Cohen, is working on a documentary film about Alma Rosé and the women's orchestra. Regina was a music copyist and block worker with the orchestra who moved to Israel after the war. Sivanne remembers that "[her] grandmother said that Fania lied about a lot of things and that she and Hilde and their friends were very angry about it, especially when the play came out."[24] Regina died on November 10, 2014.

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch notes simply that, "My children never read the book and there was no discussion about it at all. Any of the second generation of us would have been well-primed if they ever read the book."[25]

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CHAPTER 14

# Addressing the Revisionists Regarding Fania Fénelon's Holocaust Memoir

**Abstract** Whenever doubt is cast on the veracity of a Holocaust memoir, such as Fania Fénelon's *Playing for Time*, there is often a reluctance to challenge the account. However, if any areas of concern are not addressed, such accounts become fodder for historical revisionists who deny the Holocaust. In this chapter Eischeid examines several other prominent memoirs which have subsequently been discredited (Wilkomirski, Defonseca, Rosenblat), as well as respected memoirs such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* which have endured their share of criticism. Eischeid explores the similarities and differences in Fénelon's account to all these works, and thereby reinforces her critical examination of the memoir.

**Keywords** Holocaust memoir • Fania Fénelon • Addressing the revisionists • Wiesel • Fraudulent memoirs • Wilkomirski • Defonseca • Rosenblat

The decision to critically re-assess Fania Fénelon's Holocaust memoir has not been undertaken lightly. Such an action should always be approached with caution and with a sincere desire for truth, and rightly so. It can be as if, in the act of challenging any perceived discrepancies, one is attacking the very memory of the Holocaust—or the memories of all survivors.[1] The degree of truth in any historical testimony must be established, but this is especially true for Holocaust remembrances. If this is not done, such accounts can become fodder for historical revisionists who deny



S. Eischeid, *The Truth about Fania Fénelon and the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau*,
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the Holocaust. When questions or challenges arise, or when mistakes are found, it is imperative that all involved address those concerns openly and honestly and make changes whenever possible.

Survivor testimonies, even those which have been widely acclaimed, must never be taken at face value. For example, Elie Wiesel's respected memoir *Night* has also endured its share of criticism. Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, prolific speaker and author, Wiesel has been, arguably, the most prominent living face of the Holocaust. *Night* has sold millions of copies and become a standard text for high school and college classes about the Holocaust. His work is often paired with *The Diary of Anne Frank* and Wiesel himself stated that, "Where Anne Frank's book ends, mine begins."[2] Few who have read Wiesel's searing account of his time at Auschwitz and Buchenwald remain unaffected by his passionate remembrance and by what scholar Lawrence Langer describes as Wiesel's moral honesty.[3]

Yet criticisms remain. Wiesel has faced charges of universalizing and even Christianizing Jewish suffering through his use of crucifixion imagery,[4] and condemned for an intended slant towards non-Jewish readers.[5] Some critics have criticized Wiesel for placing his conscience before style and the demands of his craft.[6]

To Wiesel, however, these are compliments not criticisms. "This is what I demand from literature: a moral dimension. Art for art's sake is gone. We cannot allow it. Just to write a novel, that's why I survived? It would have been cheap, pitiful, to go through all my generation went through to go to cocktail parties, to enjoy sales of books, to get a good review. It would be absurd."[7]

Of lesser known Holocaust memoirs there is a great variety of content and quality. Certainly, Fania Fénelon is not the first survivor to embellish or manufacture her story. In the last 20 years several other prominent Holocaust memoirs have been discredited. These include but are not limited to Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*,[8] Misha Defonseca's *Misha: A Mémoir of the Holocaust Years*,[9] and Herman Rosenblat's *Angel at the Fence*.[10] Like Fénelon's memoir, all were touted as true stories and, apart from Rosenblat's, marketed commercially.

After 17 years, Defonseca's memoir was exposed as a fake and she was ordered to pay 22.5 million dollars to her publisher for misrepresentation.[11] Wilkomirski's memoir, identity, and biographical claims were initially lauded and embraced by the scholarly community.[12] Ultimately, however, both his work and his fictional identity were discredited.[13] Herman Rosenblat had in actuality survived the Holocaust, but invented a significant incident ("the

angel at the fence") which became the cornerstone for his memoir. Sadly, this manufactured episode drew attention and credibility away from the parts of his story which may have been true.[14]

Fénelon's memoir assumes a greater significance than these works because it has been around for a longer period, and because many portions are now accepted as fact across a broad spectrum of Holocaust research, scholarship, and writing.

Unlike Wilkomirski and Defonseca, Fania Fénelon was undoubtedly a Holocaust survivor. She lived under the French Occupation and was subsequently imprisoned in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Drancy, and Bergen-Belsen. Like all survivors, she suffered profound trauma from those experiences. These facts cannot be changed and their reality must be acknowledged. However, Fénelon also made a conscious choice to present her memoir as truth.

Respected scholar Ken Waltzer, one of the key figures who exposed fabrications in the Rosenblat memoir,[15] notes that: "All memoirs are constructed, written with varying degrees of embellishment, selectivity, imposed coherence, and subjective emphasis. Yet memoirs, as memoirs, make truth claims, and have an obligation to authenticity. When a memoir substitutes an invented story for a real one, when it claims false experience as real experience, it crosses a line.[16]

When asked if fabrications of personal history and of national history were equally egregious ("Are all inventions in memoirs equally galling?"), Waltzer responded that "inventions that subvert the authenticity of personal memoirs are galling, period, but those that operate to invert Holocaust experience are especially dangerous." He characterized the Rosenblat memoir as "not Holocaust education but miseducation."[17]

When asked which Holocaust memoirs he admired Waltzer cited Primo Levi's *Survival at Auschwitz*, Filip Müller's *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, and Fania Fénelon's *Playing for Time*. He described these writers as people who conveyed some of the difficult stuff of everyday existence in the camps, people with extraordinary powers of observation or writers who wrote with special honesty. "[They are] all very fine, very honest works."[18]

Tellingly, Waltzer's inclusion of Fénelon on this list shows how deeply embedded her memoir is in the collective Holocaust consciousness.

Perhaps it is time for the publication of a fully annotated critical edition of Fania Fénelon's memoir. Just as Anne Frank's diary was initially questioned and held forth by the Holocaust deniers and historical revisionists, so too must Fania's story be held to the same standard and the same scrutiny.

It is only by honestly and fully examining her memoir, and publicly and scrupulously addressing all of its inconsistencies, that the cause of true Holocaust scholarship and documentation will be served and the revisionists silenced.

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CHAPTER 15

# Coda in a Minor Key: The Legacy of Fania Fénelon

**Abstract** In this chapter Eischeid brings to a conclusion her study analyzing and rebutting the Holocaust memoir *Playing for Time* by Fania Fénelon. The final thoughts of survivor Helena Niwińska, are included, as are Fénelon's own words questioning the veracity of her portrayal in the television movie and her reflections on the choices she made in the portrayals of the other women in the orchestra. The closing words are expressed by survivor Fanny Birkenwald who gives voice to colleagues and friends long unheard.

**Keywords** Conclusions • Fania Fénelon • Helena Niwińska • Fanny Birkenwald

For the few survivors living today, Fénelon's book still holds the power to wound. When asked what she would like the world to know, Helena Niwińska, in her 100th year and 40 years after the publication of *Playing for Time,* cited her concern that new readers would accept unconditionally what Fania wrote. Niwińska stated firmly that Fania's book is unethical, hurtful, perpetuates outright slander against some of the women, and violates the dignity of the other members of the orchestra.[1] She reiterates her belief that it is time, finally, to put Fania's memoir to rest and to bring to a close the "unthinkable career of Fania's falsified memories" and their international propagation through mass media.[2]



S. Eischeid, *The Truth about Fania Fénelon and the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau*,
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In the 1980 Montreal interview Fania is full of righteous indignation at Arthur Miller's portrayal of her story in the television movie. When one woman in the audience expresses dismay that the Holocaust is being portrayed in a very inaccurate manner, almost a fantasy, Fénelon applauds and yells "Exactly! Exactly! That's good!" She later states vehemently that "*Nothing* is like my book! He invented a new concentration camp! He invented a new story! [It has] nothing to do with my book—the ***real*** story of the concentration camp! It's a completely different Holocaust that has nothing to do with what I know!".[3]

The orchestra's other survivors could, and did, claim the same thing about Fénelon's memoir.

Ironically Fénelon ended her book with the sentence: "I had placed friendship above all else, and my friends are ever faithful."[4] It is truly a tragedy that Fania's story, and her legacy, has proved so very hurtful to the women she considered her friends.

The closing words of this book, appropriately, are best expressed by one of the survivors—Fanny Birkenwald. She stands for all the women whose collective voices, after the publication of Fania's work, were so often *not* heard.

> I have marvelous memories of the friendships which existed between us, and especially of the brave, little gestures by which we obtained the necessary courage to hold out.
>
> The hope that each one of us gave to the other when there seemed no hope left.
>
> The bread we shared.
>
> We had remained human beings and for someone who has lived a life in the camps, it is a great thing to have retained one's dignity.
>
> I feel proud to have been part of the orchestra.[5]

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# Index





S. Eischeid, *The Truth about Fania Fénelon and the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-31038-1