

## National

# Cellist son of Holocaust survivor honours the dead with Jewish music

Raphael Wallfisch and his conductor son Benjamin dedicate CD to lost relatives

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Arts correspondent

It is because of her skill as a cellist that Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, 88, is able to sit in her home in west London, smoking a cigarette and talking about her remarkable life. Without music she would have been killed at Auschwitz.

In 1943, she was made part of the concentration camp's women's orchestra. "If they wanted an orchestra they would have been rather silly to put us in the gas chamber," she said. "It was quite logical. It gave us more time."

Lasker-Wallfisch survived both Auschwitz and Belsen and made her way to London where she married the pianist Peter Wallfisch and helped found the English Chamber Orchestra.

Her son, the cellist Raphael Wallfisch, this week releases a CD of Jewish music that, understandably, means a lot to him. He has dedicated it to his many relatives, including his grandfather and grandmother, killed in the Holocaust.

"It's a very small thing to do, but I do it because this music means a tremendous amount to me, as a person and as a musician," says Wallfisch.

The release comes shortly before Holocaust Memorial Day, on 27 January, and follows a concert that mother and son gave at the Konzerthaus in Vienna in November to mark the 75th anniversary of Kristallnacht. On that day in 1938, the

world changed for so many, including Lasker-Wallfisch and her family. Her father, a lawyer, had refused to move his family from their home and life in Breslau (now part of Poland) despite the rising tensions, she recalled.

"My father was a very devoted German, that is the ridiculous thing. He could not believe that the Germans would be so stupid - 'This will pass, they can't be that mad.' And when he realised they were that mad, it was too late."

Her parents were taken to their deaths in 1942; soon after, the 16-year-old Anita Lasker was arrested by the Gestapo at Breslau railway station. She



**The 12-year-old Anita Lasker playing the cello in Berlin, in 1938. Her musical talent was to save her life at Auschwitz**

soon ended up in the horror of Auschwitz, quickly followed by her sister. "You just hoped to be alive the next day," she said.

Under the direction of Alma Rosé, a niece of Gustav Mahler, she played the cello in marches intended to stir the forced labour or entertain amid the genocide.

Rosé was an exacting conductor who clung to musical values, and that was a good thing, said Lasker-Wallfisch. "She had a terrible job to make something acceptable from this group of idiots. She was very strict and kept us concentrated on the music rather than what was happening outside ... it was very clever of her. We were so scared of her, of



**Anita Lasker-Wallfisch and her son Raphael, whose childhood memories of records played at home inspired his choice of music on the new CD**  
Photograph: Sarah Lee for the Guardian

playing the wrong note, it helped. Later I realised it was a fantastic thing."

Being in the band saved the Lasker girls, who thought every day that they would die when they were transferred to Belsen, where there was no music.

"Belsen was the end," said Lasker-Wallfisch, whose memoir, *Inherit the Truth*, published in 1996, has been reprinted four times and published around the world. The sisters were there for six months until the liberation. "We didn't quite believe it was ever going to happen, because we'd heard rumours that the camps would be blown up. We suddenly heard strange noises and then English voices. Then came the realisation that we belonged nowhere."

Later that year, she met Captain Hanns Alexander, a German Jew who was a British soldier. He offered to drive the girls to Brussels - from where they eventually made it to England.

Alexander, who was in the team hunting down the worst Auschwitz criminals, helped capture camp commandant Rudolf Höss. "It was very difficult to find these people, but he was very insistent. He was a very nice man."

The CD is a family affair, Raphael's son, Benjamin Wallfisch, conducting the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. Items include Ravel's *Kaddish*, André Caplet's *Epiphanie*, and works by Ernest Bloch, including one of Wallfisch's favourite pieces, his *Schelomo*.

"I've known the piece since I was nine when I used to listen to 78s. I was absolutely crazy about this piece. It drove everybody mad."

*Raphael Wallfisch's CD of Jewish music is released by Nimbus*