

## Raphael Wallfisch remembers practising the cello with his mother in 1963



This is a very rare photograph of my mother and me playing together, with my father in the background. I was about 10. My parents were both busy professional musicians and I didn't usually practise with them – I was only just starting out on the cello at this stage, and you can tell by my face that I was a bit reluctant. We were in our tiny, tiny flat just off Portobello Road in London, when it was still a slum, but it was a place my parents were very proud of, because they were both refugees from Germany and this was their home.

My parents had met briefly as schoolchildren but my father, Peter, emigrated to Palestine when he was 14 with his mother, and they only met again in Paris after the war. My mother, Anita, had a very different experience. She was arrested with her sister as they tried to escape to France, and sent to Auschwitz in December 1943. But she heard that they needed a cellist for the women's orchestra, whose job was to play to the camp guards or as accompaniment when they marched in and out of the camp, so it saved her from being eliminated. Later she was transferred to Bergen-Belsen, and there she just survived by luck until the British liberated the camp. After the liberation there was a whole year where people were helped back to normality. During that time my mother met a very dishevelled Italian prisoner called Giuseppe Selmi, who was a celebrated cellist. He had a very battered cello and helped my mother get her fingers going again. Years later, in 1977, I won a big international cello

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competition in Florence, and the prize was to play with the Maggio Musicale orchestra in Florence, whose principal cellist was Mr Selmi. I introduced myself as Anita Lasker's son and it was an unbelievably emotional moment.

I found out about her story only very gradually. When I was young she would say, 'I was in prison for a bit', and leave it at that. She was too busy living in the present. She and my father were both famous in their own right – my father was a well-known concert pianist. He looks a bit disgruntled in this picture, and at that time he wouldn't have played with me – he wanted me to learn with my contemporaries. But later, when I was more established, he and I would play professionally together quite regularly. Recently I've been doing the same with my own family – my three children and wife all played with me on stage at the Wigmore Hall for my 60th birthday concert last month, which was a very special moment. **Interview by Jessica Salter**

*Raphael Wallfisch is performing at the BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall on July 24 (bbc.co.uk/proms)*