THE ACKERMAN CHRONICLE

HOLOCAUST CANTATA: HISTORY AND MUSIC

A band begins to play, next to the entrance of the camp: it plays Rosamunda, the well known sentimental song, and this seems so strange to us that we look sniggering at each other; we feel a shadow of relief . . . But the band, on finishing Rosamunda, continues to play other marches, one after the other, and suddenly the squads of our comrades appear, returning from work. They walk in columns of five with a strange, unnatural hard gait, like stiff puppets made of jointless bones; but they walk . . . in time to the band.

Primo Levi, Survival in Auschwitz

SS officers running the camps would force prisoners to play in orchestras for their entertainment or distraction or for the work details as they came and went. At times, they would play to calm prisoners or to comfort them, giving them a sense of false security.

On March 8th, 2018, the Arapaho United Methodist Church in Plano hosted the event, “Holocaust Cantata: Songs from the Camps,” a collaboration between the Ackerman Center, Dr. Jonathan Palant, Director of Choral Activities at UT Dallas, and the School of Arts and Humanities.

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This event provided a rare opportunity to engage the public in a dialogue about the history and legacy of the Holocaust through an interdisciplinary fusion of the humanities.

Comprised of written testimonies, songs and sheet music that camp prisoners wrote, the cantata integrated melody with the recitation of eyewitness accounts. Following the opening performances, Dr. Nils Roemer spoke on the historical context for the concertos and testimonies.

Three different choirs delivered hauntingly beautiful refrains (top right), with several featuring vocal and instrumental soloists that left listeners in awe: UT Dallas University Choir and Chamber Singers, conducted by Dr. Palant; Garland High School’s A Capella choirs, directed by Riley McKay Worthen; and Arapaho United Methodist Church’s Chancel Choir, directed by Amanda Hollis. Between the musical performances, Dr. Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Professor Frederick Turner gave emphatic readings of camp prisoner testimonies (bottom right).

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To accompany the event, the Ackerman Center curated a special exhibit (left) that highlighted 18 pivotal moments in the history of the Holocaust.

Dr. Palant’s closing remarks challenged the audience to remember those who suffered during the Holocaust and the responsibility of every individual to speak out against hatred and discrimination.

*The tunes are few, a dozen, the same ones every day, morning and evening: marches and popular songs dear to every German. They lie engraven on our minds and will be the last thing in the Lager (camp) that we shall forget... When this music plays we known that our comrades, out in the fog, are marching like automatons; their souls are dead and the music drives them... when we happen to remember some of those innocent songs, our blood freezes in our veins...*

Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*

"Holocaust Cantata" has already inspired future partnerships between the Ackerman Center, UT Dallas’s choral ensembles and the participating choirs and musicians. Palant’s choirs will perform during the Ackerman Center’s Holocaust Remembrance Day event on May 2nd, 2019 in The Edith O’Donnell Arts and Technology Building.
Although 1.5 million Jewish children perished during the Holocaust, the British Parliament accepted only 10,000 refugee children as part of their Kindertransport program. Of all the Allied Powers, only Great Britain relaxed their immigration policy to allow Jewish children to flee Nazi persecution. The sheer lack of generosity remains significant given the ongoing humanitarian crises around the world.

On April 2nd, in conjunction with UT Dallas’s Giving Day Campaign, the Ackerman Center hosted special guest speaker Bert Romberg (left), one of the Kindertransport children who escaped Nazi Germany following the infamous Night of Broken Glass. Romberg shared the story of his family and the devastating separation they endured to survive the Holocaust that claimed the lives of 6 million European Jews.

Widowed and forced to sign all of her assets over to the Reich, Romberg’s mother, Sida, made the difficult decision to entrust the care of her children to the Kindertransport in the hope that they would survive. The transport divided Romberg from his sister, Maggie. Meanwhile, the British allowed Sida to immigrate to London on the condition that she accepted a position as a housemaid.

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Separated from each other for several years, the mother and son kept in touch through postcards.

Romberg stressed how swiftly the situation in Germany changed for the Jews. The rising anti-Semitism in politics rapidly led to the legislation that removed the legal and civil standing of Jews in Germany. He emphasized the importance of sharing his experiences to encourage dialogue about the past as he expressed uncanny parallels in his story to contemporary issues in the U.S., such as immigration and the rise of intolerance of minority groups. Romberg expressed his gratitude toward his rescuers and asserted the responsibility of every human to respond to the outcries of other humans — to raise a hand and tell them, "Here I am for you."

Romberg and his wife, Terry, generously matched donations the Ackerman Center received for Giving Day. We wish to thank them and our friends and supporters for their selfless contributions that allow us to continue to our mission of "Teaching the Past and Changing the Future."