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Thoroughly researched and well presented, the tale of Alma Rosé’s life unfolds like a soap opera; minus the happy-ending. Geographically, the title suggests that her life followed a simple trajectory but nothing could be further from the truth.

Born in Vienna into a prodigious musical family, Alma Rosé’s early life appears to be quite charmed and privileged. Her father, Arnold, and her uncle, Gustav Mahler, were celebrities in the music world and she was determined to follow in their path. The authors, Richard Newman and Karen Kirtley, do a solid job of bringing the Rosé household to life, while also addressing the realities of the tumultuous socio-political environment of the times. With the outbreak of World War I and the de/reconstruction of Europe, the rising tide of anti-Semitism, and the advancement of the far-right, the authors explain the lingering effects that this war had on the general population while stressing the point that music allowed the Rosé family to maintain its truly insular perspective.

From her early childhood, to her difficult marriage to the “Czech violin virtuoso Váša Příhoda” (60), to the creation of the Wiener Walzermädeln (an all-woman ensemble) in 1933, and then to her divorce in 1936, music appears as a balm for all personal and political problems. However, with the annexation of Austria, as the authors make clear, music could no longer be a salvation for Alma Rosé and her family as Jewish artists could no longer perform publicly. In addition to the crushing political situation, the Rosés’ tragedy was also personal as Justine Rosé, mother to Alfred and Alma, sister to Gustav Mahler, husband to Arnold, passed away in 1938. Thus personal misfortune was compounded with socio-economic oppression and it is no wonder that Alma wrote the following, “[s]ometimes I would love to simply pitch everything away and leave, never to return. Amazingly, I have no desire to play” (107-8).

Fiercely devoted to her father, Alma appears to be torn between wanting to live life despite all the restrictions and finding a way out of Vienna. Traveling to England and Holland in an attempt to garner financial as well as psychological support, Alma was described as being in a state of “mental upheaval” (110). Her trip was successful and with remarkable stamina, planning and determination, Alma managed to get both herself and her father to England. Yet, as much as she was loved by her father, friends had difficulty with her tempestuous and spontaneous behaviour. Alma’s moods, like the political situation, appeared to have been in a state of flux. On the one hand, biographers explain, she was devoted to her music; yet, her romantic life appears to have been in shambles. Domestic chores only added to her sense of frustration and entrapment as they took her...
away from her music.

Accepting a musical engagement at The Hague, Alma left London and became successful - too successful. Postponing her return to England due to musical engagements, Alma was no longer permitted to return to England after May 2, 1940 and on May 15, 1940 the Germans officially captured Holland. Stuck in Holland, she was miserable and alone and clung desperately to the correspondences between herself, her father and her brother. Snippets of letters indicate her failing morale as well as the family speculation about her motivation for staying in Holland. Yet, despite the increased restrictions and limitations placed on Jews, Alma managed to maintain her strength and sense of determination and as Millie Spanjaard, her friend and landlady said, “She [Alma] had an extreme will to carry on” (153). And she did.

Playing all over Holland, Alma put herself a great risk and yet her determination and professionalism, at least within the public eye, was steadfastly upheld. Desperate to find a solution, Alma’s Dutch friends proposed that she marry; a marriage of convenience, one which would buy her time. On March 4, 1942 Alma Rosé married and in the summer of that year, the Germans temporarily arrested her. As one friend remarked upon seeing her immediately after her release, “Alma was hysterical. She had seen her own death for the first time. She had never cried as she did that day. Like a drowning person…” (183) Desperate to avoid deportation, Alma furtively escaped – the details remain fragmented and contradictory. According to Martin, her traveling companion, they went from Holland to Belgium and then to France. Arrested on December 19, 1942 on a train about to depart to Switzerland, Alma and Martin were separated. Yet, what happened in France is subject to debate and various versions; an aspect of testimonies and biographies that Newman and Kirtley acknowledge and honestly present.

In Drancy, a holding camp, she “became an anonymous cipher […] she was 18,547” (199). A letter between friends indicates that in Drancy Alma had been ill; her friends speculate that she tried to commit suicide yet as biographers point out “[…] this is only a surmise. The facts of her brush with death and recovery are unknown” (203). Deported from there to Auschwitz, Alma became inmate 50381, and was selected for medical experiments. One eyewitness wrote that “at first Alma seemed stunned. Then, from deep in her being, she summoned a rare strength” (221). With the help of other inmates, Alma was able to procure a violin and by playing the violin in Block 10 that night, Alma was able to save herself and, eventually, so many others.

The biographers go into great detail about who was selected to be in The Women’s Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau and what musical instruments these women played. Two elements are very striking: the first is that Alma appears to have demonstrated tremendous compassion towards the women in the orchestra and the second is that the SS officers esteemed culture with the same ferocity with which they worshipped Hitler’s
ideology. As one eye witness exclaims, “[s]uddenly an SS woman could ask for Chopin, hear it, and upon leaving, kick an old grandmother…” (266)

Snippets of other testimonies are included within the chapters dealing with the female orchestra. Thus, it is not only the musicians who get a voice, but other women prisoners as well. Included in these chapters is a quotation from None of Us Will Return by Charlotte Delbo. She appears to find the orchestra obscene – perhaps because it represents a way of life that has no place in the concentration camp universe or perhaps out of a sense of jealousy. Either way, the reader is presented with several points of view regarding the “benefits” and the reception of this orchestra.

Alma’s personality has also been scrutinized within these chapters. Her desire to attain perfection becomes almost surreal under such horrific conditions. Despite being venerated by some, others are very critical of her; yet, this is an internal debate or tension between the women in the orchestra. For those of us who are reading about the situation from a safe place and space, we do so with interest but must reserve judgment for, as one orchestra member explains, “[t]he camp atmosphere at its best was always threatening, and even in the shelter of the Music Block there was stress” (273). These women played for their lives and Alma, as their leader, was responsible.

Ultimately, this is a very impressive biography from both a personal and an historical perspective. The research is extensive and the number of sources most notable. Alma appears to be presented in the fairest way possible; shrouded in her complexities and exalted in her triumphs. A family tree, pictures, postcards, musical programs, maps, deportation records and medical records all add to the historical element as well as to the private sphere. An alphabetical list of The Women’s Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau is provided, as are the names of the musicians organized by instrument. Direct quotes from eye-witnesses, letters and numerous testimonies enhance the biography as Alma Rosé is presented as a multi-faceted individual. Her life was tumultuous in both matters of the heart and as a result of political upheaval. Testimonies about her are often conflicting; yet her devotion to both her father and her craft are beyond speculation. One cannot help but admire this woman as both an artist and a daughter. While the authors do insert momentary flights of imagination, the biography is very well grounded and documented. One does not need to be a lover of music in order to appreciate Alma Rosé and her biography.