



## ‘Some German officers forced Claire to sing to them with no clothes on’

been in prison in France for two years and arrived in Auschwitz aged 18.

‘In January 1944 the orchestra was bolstered by the arrival of another unusual talent, a classically trained Parisienne cabaret singer who became known as Fania Fénelon (née Fanja Goldstein),’ writes Sebba. Aged about 35 when she was deported, Fania had started to learn the piano as a child. She was arrested and tortured by Gestapo officers who believed the cabaret where she worked was a front for intelligence gathering.

Another French singer, Claire Monis, was on the same convoy as Fania. Unlike the older Fania, Claire was an active member of the French Resistance. Although not classically trained she also came from a musical family. She was just beginning a flourishing career singing on the radio, as well as performing in Paris nightclubs, when she was arrested.

The two women had much in common in spite of the age difference. Both were in great demand from the SS officers and female overseers, who began visiting the music block and demanding personal performances. While Fania managed to keep her distance, the younger and prettier Claire was not so lucky. Soon after she arrived ‘her skills not just as a singer but as a sexual object were demanded by some German officers, who forced her to sing to them, with no clothes on, when she emerged from the shower’.

Whenever possible Alma chose Fania to perform rather than one of the more experienced classical singers, because she knew her easier cabaret style would please the SS officers. High-ranking Nazis in the audience for Sunday concerts included the most notorious SS doctor Josef Mengele, the so-called ‘Angel of Death’.

On one occasion Mengele walked into the music block and asked Anita to play Schumann’s *Träumerei*, an exquisitely beautiful and simple piece about dreaming.



Clockwise from far left: Fania Fénelon in 1979. She died aged 75 in 1983. Hilde Grünbaum-Zimche on her 100th birthday in 2023. She passed away six months later. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch with the MBE she was awarded in 2016

Anita recorded in her memoirs: ‘Surviving the next day was all we thought about. Allowing myself to feel anything was an unimaginable luxury.’

Alma tried to rescue as many women as possible, and some who could barely play an instrument were recruited and trained daily, almost note by note. She did not survive Auschwitz herself.

As Russian forces advanced on Auschwitz, in October 1944 the AWO was evacuated to the Bergen-Belsen camp in northern Germany, from where the musicians were liberated six months later. Alma’s actions had saved many of them, including Hilde, who had managed to hold on to the red music case and some of Alma’s possessions. These are now held in the Yad Vashem Holocaust Remembrance Centre in Israel.

‘While some of the women, such as Hilde, turned away from playing music after 1945, others continued performing and passed on their love of music to their children,’ says Sebba. ‘One of them, the violinist Violette Silberstein, reinvented herself as a nightclub singer.’

Anita Lasker, who is now 99 and lives in the UK, married the concert pianist Peter Wallfisch in 1952. Their son Raphael is a prize-winning cellist and his three children are all professional musicians. As Anita once said: ‘Whatever else they killed, the Nazis could never kill music.’ ■

◆ *The Women’s Orchestra of Auschwitz: a Story of Survival* by Anne Sebba is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, price £22