

A Brief History of “The Pavel” Violin



Pavel Lustig was born in 1904 in Domazlice, Czechoslovakia.

As a young man, before World War II, Pavel had become an accomplished violinist. Among other things, he played with the Pilsen Volunteer Symphony.

On March 15, 1939, Pavel escaped to Prague, ahead of the Nazi advance into Czechoslovakia, and shortly after he was able to send for his family. By this escape, he managed to delay their internment at Terezin (Theresienstadt,) which probably saved his life and the lives of his wife and son. Most of the Jews where he had been living died there or in Auschwitz. But arrest and interment was inevitable.

On September 12, 1942, Pavel received notice that he and his family would be sent to Terezin, which they were not long afterwards. They lived together in Terezin for two years, somehow managing to survive.

On September 1, 1944, Pavel was transported to the death camp of Auschwitz, in Poland. At the time, no one at Terezin (or almost anywhere else) knew about the mass executions in Auschwitz, and thought it was a labor camp. But because of his health and organizational talents Pavel was chosen for work detail rather than extermination. This was another in a string of fortunate chances that allowed him to avoid death several times.

As the Russian Army crossed Poland westward in 1945, Death Marches were organized out of Auschwitz to other camps further west. The prisoners were not simply executed as the Nazis retreated, as at some other camps. Pavel survived the death march by the chance of having better than average boots and coat. The prisoners were abandoned in an empty camp as the Russians caught up with the march, and for several days they sat in the camp with the Nazi and Russian front lines exchanging artillery fire overhead.

When the fighting moved on, Pavel and the other prisoners were able to escape, and make their way back to friendly lines, first with the Russian Army and then after a few days a Czech unit. There Pavel became a truck driver in a Transportation unit. (An irony, because the travel to Terezin and Auschwitz were called “Transports” by the Nazis.) Because of his public speaking and performance skills Pavel was made “Cultural Officer” (though a sergeant) to help the Czech soldiers remember and affirm their nationality.

During all this, Pavel’s brother Fred, (aka George Lenda) was serving in a Slovak partisan unit in northern Carpathians (Tatra Mountains.) Early in 1945 Fred joined the Czech Army as a Medical Officer with the

rank of Captain. In the spring of 1945 they were moving over the Carpathian Mountains into Slovakia, crossing paths with Czech units.

Fred began to look for Pavel among those units, in hope that he had escaped and survived.

Shortly after, Fred found Pavel, with four other Jewish Czech soldiers from Pavel's Transportation unit, sheltering in a small farmhouse near the front lines, and they had a joyful reunion.

As Fred was leaving, he asked Pavel if there was anything he needed. Having lived for over three years in concentration camps, and then on the front lines, Pavel had learned to get by on very little. But he told Fred the one thing he would really like to have was a violin, because he had missed the music so much. "A not so new but nice violin arrived some time later" (Spring 1945.) Fred had perhaps obtained it through the Black Market from an unknown Russian soldier, but the actual history of the violin is unknown before Pavel.

For the remaining months of the war Pavel played the violin and drove an ammunition supply truck for the Czech artillery. After the war, Pavel would keep that violin with him and play it for many years. It was a fine copy of a Jacob Stainer model, Stainer being one of the first great violin makers, even before Stradivari. The maker, place, and year of its production are unknown, but likely in the last decades of the 19th century somewhere in Bavaria or Czechoslovakia.

On May 25, 1945 Pavel returned to a liberated Terezin, and reunited with his wife and son, and was to live another forty years in Czechoslovakia.

Pavel died in Prague in 1985. But before he died he gave his violin to his cousin Lucy, she being the only other musician in the family at the time.

Lucy had the violin refurbished, and brought it with her to the United States, ending up at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. In 2015 she took on a new student, Will Melnyk, who was taking up the violin at age 68, and had Slavic family members of his own – grandparents who were born in the old Austrian province of Galicia, and had immigrated to the United States a few years before the start World War I.

In 2015 Lucy passed the violin on to Will, who now played it for several years with great reverence and of pride. Will convert to Judaism in 2018. In 2023 Will, along with Pavel's granddaughters Hana Kern and Helen Lenda, donated Pavel's Violin to the Holocaust Center for Humanity in Seattle, Washington. Their father, Pavel's son, Tom Lenda (Tommy Lustig) was a speaker at the Holocaust Center for Humanity for several years. His father's violin, "Pavel's Violin," now finds a home at the Holocaust Center where Tom shared so much of his family's experience in Terezin.

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References:

Children on Death Row, by Tommy Lustig

Pavel's Violin, by Walter William Melnyk