

palgrave▶pivot

**THE TRUTH ABOUT
FANIA FÉNELON AND
THE WOMEN'S
ORCHESTRA OF
AUSCHWITZ-
BIRKENAU**

Susan Eischeid



The Truth about Fania Fénelon and the Women's
Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau

Susan Eischeid

The Truth about
Fania Fénelon and the
Women's Orchestra of
Auschwitz-Birkenau

palgrave
macmillan

Susan Eischeid
Department of Music
Valdosta State University
Georgia, USA

ISBN 978-3-319-31037-4 ISBN 978-3-319-31038-1 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-31038-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016944236

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2016

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made.

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG Switzerland

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank the following individuals for helping to make this study a reality. Lidia Jurek: stunning linguist, treasured friend; I cannot imagine being on this journey without you. The wonderful translators who aided in finding true shades of meaning in multiple languages: Kenneth Kirk, Elana Keppel Levy, Eva Kalousova, and David Lupo. Maria Szewczyk, who tirelessly aided with logistics in Poland. Dr. John K. Roth, who graciously and thoroughly read early versions of this study and provided valuable feedback. My husband Charles Johnson, always my greatest support, who patiently accepted the time spent on the study and distractions of the writing period. To him I owe a large debt of gratitude. And most especially, the sons of three survivors of the women's orchestra: Arie Olewski, Olivier Jacquet, and Philippe Khan. Thank you for sharing your precious memories and documents. I know your mothers loved you infinitely, and proudly, and I hope you believe their voices have now been heard.

CONTENTS

1	The Truth About Fania Fénelon and the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau	1
2	The Auschwitz-Birkenau Women's Orchestra	5
3	Fania Fénelon and the Inception of <i>Playing for Time</i>	11
4	Problematic Aspects of Fania Fénelon's Testimony in <i>Playing for Time</i>	17
5	Goals for Exposing the Inconsistencies in Fénelon's Holocaust Memoir	21
6	Key Issues of Distortion and Embellishment in Fania Fénelon's <i>Playing for Time</i>	25
7	Other Issues of Distortion and Embellishment in Fania Fénelon's <i>Playing for Time</i>	45
8	Key Issues of Fénelon's Personal Biographical Embellishment in <i>Playing for Time</i>	71

9	Scholarly, Educational, and Commercial Treatment of <i>Playing for Time</i> by Fania Fénelon	77
10	The Response of the Other Survivors and Press Response to <i>Playing for Time</i>	87
11	The Television Movie Based on Fania Fénelon's <i>Playing for Time</i>	99
12	The Artistic Influence of Fénelon's Memoir: The <i>Playing for Time</i> Phenomenon	117
13	Memoirs by the Other Survivors of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Women's Orchestra and the Second Generation Legacy	127
14	Addressing the Revisionists Regarding Fania Fénelon's Holocaust Memoir	133
15	Coda in a Minor Key: The Legacy of Fania Fénelon	137
	Bibliography	139
	Index	147

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Since 2000 the author has had the privilege of interviewing many of the surviving members of the women's orchestra at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Several of these initial encounters burgeoned into ongoing correspondence and ultimately into friendship. Without exception, the women expressed great anger, hurt, and despair over the portrayal of their orchestra as presented by Fania Fénelon in her Holocaust memoir, *Playing for Time*. Many have fought valiantly for years to rebut this memoir and to counteract its influence. As time passed the survivors, advancing in age, began to die. In the meantime, although inaccuracies in Fénelon's account are increasingly noted in the scholarly arena, the overall influence and ubiquitous presence of her book continues unabated. After visits to several prominent Holocaust research facilities, and examination of dozens of resources, the discovery that the Fénelon memoir is still actively recommended, sold, praised, and cited validated the author's decision to move ahead with this project. Two of the remaining survivors, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch and Helena Dunicz Niwińska, have contributed greatly to every facet of its development. It is to them, their courage, and their ongoing and unceasing quest for truth that this study is dedicated.

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN NOTE CITATIONS

AC	Annotated Copy
ALW	Anita Lasker-Wallfisch (used only in reference to Lasker-Wallfisch's personal papers)
APMO	Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum
CGQJ	Commissariat general aux questions juives (General Commissariat for Jewish Questions—Vichy regime)
FNDIRP	National Federation of Deported and Imprisoned Resistance Fighters and Patriots
HN	Helena Niwińska (used only in reference to Niwińska's personal papers)
IPN	Institute of National Remembrance, Poland
ITS	International Tracing Service, Bad Arolsen
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
RSHA	Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Security Main Office)
UDA	Union of Auschwitz Deportés
USHMM	United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
ZAPK	Krakow City Archives

LIST OF IMAGES

Image 6.1	Alma Rosé, publicity photograph 1930s	28
Image 6.2	Alma Rosé and her orchestra, the Wiener Walzer Mädeln	32
Image 10.1	Letter from Fania Fénelon to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, August 30, 1977	90
Image 11.1	Letter from Arthur Miller to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, October 19, 1979	104

The Truth About Fania Fénelon and the Women’s Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau

Abstract In this introductory chapter, Eischeid provides the context and rationale for her comprehensive rebuttal of the 1976 Holocaust memoir *Playing for Time* by Fania Fénelon. Fénelon’s book has become a cornerstone of Holocaust scholarship, selling thousands of copies. Sadly, large parts of her memoir are now understood to be embellished or manufactured. Although the scholarly community acknowledges this in a minor way, Fénelon’s memoir continues to be utilized in all aspects of Holocaust commemoration. Eischeid gives voice to the other survivors who rebut Fénelon’s account and—while not criticizing scholars or institutions who champion her work—uses this study as a “call to arms” to effect change in the way that work is utilized.

Keywords Fania Fénelon • *Playing for Time* • Introduction • Holocaust memoir • Impact of Long term legacy

INTRODUCTION

“I have learned the lesson that he who is first to write his memories, can rewrite history. After he does, others have to react and deny it from a worst position.¹”

Arie Olewski

Son of Rachela Zelmanowicz Olewski, survivor of the Auschwitz-Birkenau women's orchestra

“To my dismay, my worst fears have come true and Fania Fénelon's book on the women's orchestra in Auschwitz has become the material which is used by people who are interested in this particular subject.² I just hope that it is not too late to do anything about destroying her completely misleading account of what really happened.³”

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch

Survivor, Auschwitz-Birkenau women's orchestra

In 1976 a female survivor of the Holocaust, Fania Fénelon, published a memoir of the time she spent in the women's orchestra at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Titled *Sursis pour l'Orchestre*, and later in English *Playing for Time*, Fénelon's book became an overnight success. In 1979 the memoir was adapted as a CBS television movie with a screenplay by noted American playwright Arthur Miller and has further inspired multiple and ongoing stage, musical and theatrical productions. Through these varied incarnations and multiple printings in many languages, *Playing for Time* has reached an international audience of millions. Now, some 40 years later, it is time to re-evaluate the impact and legacy of Fénelon's memoir.

For many people, *Playing for Time* was and is their first introduction to both the Holocaust and to the topic of music in the Holocaust. It is cited in multiple sources as an accurate portrayal of this orchestra and of musical activities in the camps. Both the book and the movie hold a prominent place in Holocaust libraries, Holocaust museum bookstores, and other memorial site or commemorative bookstores which feature Holocaust writing and scholarship. Lesson plans for younger students have been built around the memoir and continue to be utilized and distributed via the internet. As an active performer and lecturer on Holocaust music since 1987, the author notes that Fania Fénelon is always the first person audiences recognize or about whom they ask questions.⁴ At the time of writing *Playing for Time* is listed as a resource for further study, or used as a primary source of information about music in the camps and the women's orchestra, on the websites of many respected Holocaust institutions including Yad Vashem, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, and the United States Holocaust