



# ARIAS OF AUSCHWITZ

**By Tibor Krausz, *Bangkok***

A Thai composer has given an operatic treatment to an unlikely affair between a Jewish prisoner and a German guard

**I**N A little-known episode from Auschwitz, a young Jewish woman from Slovakia named Helena Citrónová came to owe her life to an SS officer who fell for her. Reflecting on the choices she had to make, Somtow Sucharitkul, a celebrated Thai composer who has written an opera about Citrónová, gets visibly emotional.

"It's not just a case of someone who would do anything to survive," Somtow, a Buddhist who once was ordained briefly as a saffron-robed monk, says in his bookshelf-lined study in his house in Bangkok. "It's not a case of Stockholm syndrome, either."

It is early afternoon, but the composer is still bleary-eyed and somewhat disheveled. He prefers working at night and rising late, he notes apologetically.

"Decades later Helena said that at certain points she did love him," Somtow explains, reclining on a sofa. "If that was the case, you have to wonder: what is love? Is what we mean by love even possible in this kind of circumstance?"

This question has intrigued him for years.

In 1942 Citrónová, then a fetching 20-year-old woman, caught the eye of Franz Wunsch, a young German guard. The notorious Nuremberg Laws of 1935





A scene from 'Helena Citrónová,' an opera by Thai composer Somtow Sucharitkul, during a performance in Bangkok

began warming to him when one day the German officer dashed off to save her sister, Rozinka, from being gassed, although he couldn't do the same for Rozinka's young son and daughter. The Nazi extermination machine at Auschwitz considered children who couldn't work to be instantly disposable. Both Helena and Rozinka survived World War II.

"Early on in their relationship Helena was summoned to his office and told to do his nails. She refused," says Somtow, who has read everything he could find on the two's unlikely love affair to write his opera's libretto, in English. "He pulled out his gun and told her, 'I could kill you right now and you won't even do my nails!'"

This act of defiance by the Jewish woman, who was at that moment facing the prospect of summary execution, riveted the composer when he first learned of Citrónová from British historian Laurence Rees's six-part 2005 documentary on Auschwitz for the BBC. "I realized that if she'd been killed there and then it would have been her own choice," he explains, his voice cracking with emotion.

An amiable, paunchy man with graying shoulder-length hair and large spectacles that accentuate his owlish mien, Somtow, 67, comes across as a casting director's dream of an aging enfant terrible. He has something of Liberace's flamboyance about his mannerisms and he's well-read, witty and articulate. These latter qualities have served him well in his parallel career as a novelist who has been specializing in science fiction, horror and magical realism with some 70 books to his name — or rather pen name, S.P. Somtow.

He speaks flawless English courtesy of an education obtained at Eton and Cambridge in the United Kingdom. Hailing from a well-heeled Bangkok family related to Thailand's royals (his grandfather's sister was married to King Vajiravudh of Siam),

Somtow spent years living in the US, his second home, where he hobnobbed with the likes of Isaac Asimov and *Psycho* author Robert Bloch, both of whom were Jewish and had an influence on his fiction. Somtow's father, a prominent lawyer, served as Thailand's ambassador to Israel in the early 1980s.

**"THE NAZIS** didn't just murder Jews. They wanted to destroy their humanity, their personhood. Yet Helena refused to give up her humanity," Somtow says. He pulls up his shirt to dab at tears that begin welling up in his eyes. "This meant that no matter what they did to her, she did not give up being a person," he elucidates. "That scene in Frank's office is in the opera and that to me was the reason I had to write the opera."

Somtow's "Helena Citrónová" debuted in late January at a Bangkok cultural center on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The performance was attended by the Israeli and German ambassadors. "This unique production, using the universal language of music, tells such a delicate story during the darkest period in human history," Meir Shlomo, Israel's ambassador to Thailand, noted in a letter to Somtow. "It was, for the Thai public, a rare opportunity to be exposed to the Holocaust, and to the daily lives of Jews in Auschwitz."

The opera has yet to be performed abroad, yet news of it has already been spreading beyond Thailand's artistic scene. A critic for the Financial Times has called Somtow's score "an eclectic mix of atonal themes and period popular music (punctuated by an on-stage klezmer band)."

The riotous tonal milieu was Somtow's calculated choice in the service of his opera's heroine and her conflicted emotions during her tribulations in Auschwitz. "There's a lot of twelve-tone technique in the opera and I used a tone row to represent Helena," he explains. "I rarely use serialism

prohibited relationships between ethnic Germans and "racially impure" Jews on punishment of death, yet Wunsch began courting Citrónová furtively, slipping love notes and bits of food to her in the barracks.

The SS man helped save the Jewish woman by ensuring she stayed assigned to a special female prisoners' unit, whose members worked in warehouses sorting the belongings of newly arrived deportees destined straight for the gas chambers. The women could let their hair grow, were treated relatively well and ate better thanks to food they took from pieces of luggage.

At first Citrónová, as she recalled decades later, rebuffed Wunsch's advances, finding him repellent for being an SS man. Yet she

in my work, but I wanted to represent the way the Nazis thought, reducing everything methodically to numbers. At the same time I wanted to be subversive so I underscored all these serial passages with sweeping romantic chords underneath.”

The opera’s onstage band of musicians, too, serves an important purpose. “I decided early on that I’d have a band on stage because in the concentration camps the Germans had these prisoner bands. Half the Vienna Philharmonic was in Auschwitz. They were great musicians,” explains the composer, who doubles as a conductor whose repertoire extends from Mahler to Wagner. As artistic director for Opera Siam, he routinely incorporates Thai and Buddhist elements into European compositions staged in Bangkok. Somtow is currently working on his musical magnum opus: a 10-part series about as many storied reincarnations of Siddhartha Gautama before he achieved enlightenment as the Buddha.

“I thought I would have that little band because professional musicians were forced to play music in Auschwitz accompanying the most ghastly things. And I decided that they would play happy music,” he elaborates. “So when the opera begins with people getting off the trains they hear this sort of café music even as other people are being killed horribly,” he adds. “I thought this was a way to show realistically in musical terms the whole insanity of Auschwitz. So I invented this 1940s-type pop music and I added a little flavor of klezmer.”

Melodic choices weren’t the only ones Somtow had to make in giving Helena’s story operatic treatment. Details of the concentration camp romance between the Jewish inmate and the Nazi guard remain sketchy with several unanswered questions, including their degree of intimacy within the camp. The affair is known from interviews conducted with Citrónová, in her eighties, before her death in 2007 in Israel, where she emigrated after the war.

Somtow was reluctant to fictionalize parts of their relationship for his opera, although the nature of the musical genre necessitated some poetic license. “I wanted to fill in as few blanks in their story as possible,” he stresses. That meant, however, that the composer ended up with an over-riding technical problem. Romantic operas are supposed to have love duets. Yet “based on the documentary record there was not much opportunity for them to be actually

together,” he explains. “I had to construct scenes where they had something like a duet, but they weren’t in the same room.”

In one poignant scene, the two lovers come under suspicion. As Citrónová (played by American diva Cassandra Black) is being tortured at one end of the stage, Wunsch (German baritone Falko Hönsch) is being interrogated at the other. The characters don’t share the same space but they share the same stage. This allows them room for a plaintive duet despite their seeming isolation — like a lovelorn Romeo and Juliet trapped in a death camp.

**AS WITH** Shakespeare’s doomed lovers, a happy ending isn’t coming here either. In the opera’s closing scene, after Auschwitz has been liberated, Citrónová and Wunsch part ways — just as they did in real life. After the war, Wunsch searched in vain for the Jewish woman, who decided not to continue the relationship. They would not see each other again until 1972 when she testified in his defense as he was being tried for war crimes in Austria.

Some camp survivors, serving as witnesses, described Wunsch as a sadistic brute, but Citrónová said she had never seen him act violently. Wunsch was acquitted of war crimes on technical grounds. “He said she had redeemed him, but I don’t know if that was really true,” Somtow comments. “Over time he could have selectively remembered what he wanted [about his time in Auschwitz].”

Despite her initial aversion to the SS man, Citrónová said she began to reciprocate his feelings for her. “There were moments when I forgot that I was a Jew and that he was not a Jew,” she said in an interview. “Honestly, in the end I loved him,” she added. “The fact is that my life was saved thanks to him. I did not choose this. It simply happened.”

In his opera Somtow introduces us to Wunsch by showing him murder an elderly Jewish man in cold blood right in front of Citrónová, who has just arrived in Auschwitz in a transport. The composer invented that dramatic scene. “I had to start from a position where Wunsch represented the worst aspects of the Nazis,” he says. “Otherwise there could be no journey of redemption. But the opera isn’t really about him. It’s about Helena. She’s in every scene.”

“Helena Citrónová” is one of only two



operas about Auschwitz, the other being “The Passenger,” which was composed by Mieczyslaw Weinberg, a Polish Jew, and debuted in 1968 featuring a group of Jewish women in the death camp struggling to retain their sanity and humanity in hellish conditions.

A Thai Buddhist may seem like an unlikely candidate for charting new artistic territory by writing an opera about the Holocaust. “It’s interesting that it ended up having to be a Thai person to do this,” Somtow concedes. “Perhaps I am sufficiently far removed from the events to have taken certain risks. I’ve been told by a German critic that a German composer would never have dared write this opera.”

The Thai man could approach the Holocaust culturally and emotionally unencumbered by the weight of memory because he is a descendant of neither victims nor perpetrators. Yet Somtow has long been “haunted,” as he puts it, by the methodical mass murder of Jews on an industrial scale. “All my life I’ve occasionally had nightmares about the Holocaust. It’s an odd thing,” he says. “I had dreams of waking up in Auschwitz as a prisoner. I don’t know why. This period of history seems somehow stuck in my mind. Since I finished composing the opera I haven’t had those dreams again.”

Yet oneiric relief didn’t come easily. Somtow composed his opera in what he calls “obsessive bursts” over seven years during





BANGKOK OPERA FOUNDATION

Thais play Jewish prisoners at Auschwitz during a performance in Bangkok of the new opera 'Helena Citrónová'

what proved to be an emotionally draining process. "The Shoah [Holocaust] is the defining event of the 20th century," Somtow argues. "So there was a certain burden and I often felt unworthy to tackle it. I would charge into it, but then I would have to put it aside for a while because the subject is so overwhelming. But writing the opera was a *mitzvah*. I believe that."

He refers to the Holocaust by its Hebrew name and he speaks of *mitzvot* — and these aren't one-offs. Somtow routinely uses Hebrew words and Yiddishisms, which lends his conversation a distinctly Jewish quality. Point this out to him, and he'll chuckle heartily. "Some Jewish people have asked me why I have so much Yiddishkeit, but culturally I've been very close to the Jewish community everywhere," he says. "Asimov said I was an honorary Jew. Maybe he thought so because I laughed at his jokes." The composer chuckles again.

Somtow's Judeophilia sets him apart in a country where most locals know, or care, very little about Jews, Israel or the Holocaust. So-called Nazi chic is pervasive in Thailand with swastikas and caricatured images of Hitler routinely printed on T-shirts. Nazi paraphernalia and pageantry are seen as "cool" by many young Thais who are taught next to nothing in school about European or world history.

At cosplay events in Bangkok some young participants dress up as Nazis, strutting around in Wehrmacht and SS uniforms and raising their arms in the Sieg Heil salute for photographs. "I love German uniforms from World War II," a Thai university student wearing the uniform of an SS officer told me at one such recent event inside a posh mall in central Bangkok. "They were designed by Hugo Boss," he added approvingly.

**SOMTOW, WHO** founded a youth orchestra called Siam Sinfonietta, has been seeking to educate young Thais about the Holocaust through music. Over the past years the Thai composer has staged several operas in Bangkok with Holocaust-related themes, performed by local musicians.

In 2015, after realizing his student musicians knew nothing about World War II, much less the Holocaust, he staged the children's opera "Brundibár" by Czech Jewish composer Hans Krása, which was first performed by Jewish children at the Theresienstadt concentration camp in German-occupied Czechoslovakia. He followed it up with "The Diary of Anne Frank," an operatic monodrama by Russian Jewish composer Grigori Frid, and "A Child of Our Time," an oratorio by British composer Michael Tippett, which was inspired by a young Pol-

ish-Jewish refugee's assassination of a German diplomat in Paris and the subsequent anti-Jewish violence during Kristallnacht in Nazi Germany in November 1938.

"At the first rehearsal for 'Helena Citrónová' I asked the young musicians in the orchestra what they knew about the Holocaust. They didn't know much," Somtow recalls. "So I decided to give them a history lesson. I started with the [future] emperor Titus destroying the Temple in Jerusalem (in 70 CE)." He laughs. "I told them about the story of the Diaspora because that is the starting point for Helena's own story. They were very interested."

Ultimately, however, he didn't write the opera just to educate his fellow Thais. He had a more ambitious goal: a piece of music dedicated to the memory of the six million Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust. "What I had with Helena's story was one way to talk about the Holocaust. We keep talking about six million victims, but my opera is about one person. I felt that in a sense I could make this one person speak for all those other people," he says.

Somtow turns somber again, a reflective stance stealing back into his mood. "I tried to create a character in Helena with a lot of ambiguity," he says. "If I have done my job well, the audience will identify with her and understand the difficulty of her situation." ■