
ALICE SOMMER-HERTZ

2010-06-13: [Holocaust survivor Alice Herz Sommer plays Chopin and speaks of how music helped maintain a sense of hope and humanity in the Nazi ghetto of Terezín](#)

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[Alice Dancing Under the Gallows](#)

Written by Edna Mor (Zaitschek) Former student of Alice
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Alice Hertz and her twin sister Mariana were born in Prague in November 1903. The sisters had two older brothers and one sister. Their father, Friedrich Hertz was the owner of a factory producing precision scales. Their mother was a well educated woman who read a lot and played the piano.

Alice was known for her optimistic, independent and active nature. She started playing the piano when she was seven years old and her first piano teacher was her sister Irma. A year and a half later she was able to accompany her older brother Paul who was a talented violinist. Among their regular visitors were Felix Weltsch, Franz Kafka and Max Brod. Felix Weltsch became a member of the family when he married Irma

At 12, Alice began to study piano with Vaclav Stephan, her sister's teacher. At 18 she was already performing in recitals and as soloist in concerts of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra. The critics wrote enthusiastically about the young and promising pianist.

Alice married Leopold Sommer who was also a talented violinist. He worked in an import-export business and traveled a lot. On 21.6.1937 their son was born and named Stephan after Alice's piano teacher.

Hitler entered Prague in March 1939. Alice and Leopold considered going to Palestine but did not do it because of several reasons: the responsibility Alice felt for her sick mother, their concern about Stephan's future and their shortage of money. Alice's sisters Irma and Marriane and their families managed to leave Prague on the night of Hitler's entrance to Prague. In July 1942, her mother Sofie Hertz was deported to Theresienstadt and then to Treblinka. Alice, Leopold and Stephan were deported to Terezin in July 1943.

Alice, who was a well known pianist by then, was to give a concert every week. Once Alice knew that she would be able to play every day and give a concert once a week, her confidence grew. She managed to keep her optimism in spite of the hard conditions and her son Stephan felt "she created a Garden of Eden for him in the middle of Hell". Among the pieces she played were Chopin's Etudes. The so called "Revolutionary Study" (op. 10, no. 12 in A minor) which acquired a special meaning in the ghetto.

Stephan who was 6 years old. took part in the children's opera "Brundibar". Later he became the "page-turner" for other musicians in the ghetto. His special musical talent was already apparent at this age. Alice's main wish was to protect Stephan, to supply love and warmth and prevent suffering. Every evening Leopold would join them until October 1944 when his name appeared on the transport list. He made Alice promise she won't be tempted to follow him, knowing what fate

was awaiting him and them if they follow him.

In the middle of June 1945 Alice and Stephan returned to Prague. About one month later, Alice was informed of Leopold's death. Alice started to give concerts. She appeared on the short-wave program in the radio and that's how her sisters in Palestine knew she had survived. After 4 years in Prague, Alice decided to leave Czechoslovakia which was governed by communists and an anti-Semitic attitude.

In the new state of Israel Alice met her sisters and their families. She lived in Jerusalem. Stephan chose the Hebrew name Raphael. Alice started teaching in the Jerusalem Conservatory. She continued to give recitals. She raised a new generation of Israeli pianists. Raphael became a well known cellist who won International prizes. He married a French pianist and moved to London where his two sons were born. Alice went back and forth from Israel to London until, In 1986, she decided to stay in London next to her son and two grandsons. Raphael died in 2001 while on a successful concert tour in Israel.

Alice Sommer-Hertz, today 106 years old, lives in London. She is still active playing the piano everyday. People from all over the world, relatives, friends, former students and new acquaintances come to visit her in the afternoons. She continues to be a very lively, optimistic person, always looking for the positive points of view. She reads and knows what is going on in the world in general and in Israel in particular, and shows personal interest in every person who is close to her.

We wish her many more years of health, creativity and happiness.
We are grateful for having met such a wonderful personality.

A book named A GARDEN OF EDEN IN HELL was written by Melissa Muller and Reinhard Piechocki about Alice Sommer-Hertz.

The book was written in German and translated to English.
MacMillan 2007.

Oil paintings of Alice and Raphael Sommer painted by Edna Mor, in an exhibition in Haifa, 2010.