Fiction

For The Leader, With String Music

Joseph M. Lipner

AT NIGHT ANDY PLAYED IN A ROCK-AND-ROLL BAND, BUT BY DAY HE PLAYED THE PSALMS OF DAVID. EVERY MORNING, BEFORE DAWN, AN OCEAN WIND LIFTED THE DRAW-CORD ON ANDY S DECREPIT venetian blind, brushing the cord's tip back and forth, back and forth, against the ridged white wood of the window-casing. Andy woke to the sound, rose thirsty for his music. Andy loved music, all music, but he had never experienced anything like this.

Andy had a slim build, a small-featured, impassive face, dark brown eyes and bright red hair. When he played his guitar he let his long hair fly loose, but now, to play the violin, he tied it into a tight pony. Andy pulled on a grey cotton t-shirt and a pair of baggy khaki shorts, grabbed his violin, and stood barefoot by his unmade bed. In front of him, on top of a brown plaid armchair which had been losing its stuffing for years, sat Landersman's notebook. Andy opened it at random, cupped the violin beneath his chin, and started to play as light broke over the Hollywood Hills.

Landersman's notebook looked like an ordinary notebook: a spiral-bound affair, a green cover bearing U.C.L.A.'s seal. Inside, cryptic notations covered all pages except the first, which contained an introduction in Landersman's fine hand, first in German, then in English, beginning: "Since the destruction of Jerusalem, our people have neither temple nor meeting-

place, song or celebration, lute or lyre, music or mystery, but I, Matthias son of Beniah, of the tribe of Levi, learned from my father these ancient songs..." The original music for the Book of Psalms, sung in ancient times at the Jerusalem temple, lost so many centuries ago? Impossible. Yet there sat Landersman's ratty notebook, morning after morning, waiting for Andy.

Andy drew the bow across the strings, he played his violin. An ancient clamor filled his room, all around him music swelled. He played it once, he shut his eyes, he knew it now by heart. The air around him smelled of figs, the sunlight smelled like lemon. The floor beneath him slipped away, he stood on silken blades of grass, his face was washed with rain. The rain felt cool, it tasted sweet, and then the rain was gone. A jasmine-scented mountainside, a pink and teeming city. Clouds and whirlwinds, fields and mountains, oases, ice-flows, hurtled by. He heard the sound of tambourines. A tiger brushed against his leg. He opened his eyes and he saw nothing but the peeling paint on his apartment wall.

"Trippy," said Andy.

So how did this long-silenced music show up in the Hollywood apartment of a sporadically employed, would-be rocker without any interest or expertise in ancient cultures? A gift from Landersman, said to be snatched like Landersman himself) from a fiery Nazi destruction. Andy taught this sparsely-attended seminar at the YMHA, "The Cantorial Tradition In Eastern Europe." Not until after the third class, when old Mr. Landersman had approached Andy and introduced himself and argued—gently—about a particular setting for the prayer *U'Nsane Tokef,* played by Andy from a scratchy old vinyl record, did Andy learn who this student was. Simply put, Isaiah Landersman was none other than Yeshaya Leib himself, that fabled and fabulous cantor of the old school, a man called "the Royte"—the Redhead—who had toured the capitals and shtetls of pre-war Europe, giving concerts, leading prayers, not to mention serving as cantor at the Leopoldstrasse Synagogue, of all places, the loveliest synagogue to grace Vienna. His accomplishments called out from any Jewish encyclopedia, and here he sat, in Andy's seminar, listening to Andy droning on about the "cantorial tradition."

The old man liked to talk, and so the two of them sitting for hours in Landersman's kitchen, feasting on soda crackers and cranberry-tinged seltzer. Doris liked him too, on the many outings the three of them had taken together: his gallantry seduced her. One night, after a date where the three of them heard Bach and Schoenburg, Doris and Andy went with Landersman back to his Fairfax apartment to listen to sound-recordings of his work, mostly cantorial, some opera. What a voice Landersman had! Sonorous and filled with pathos.

"I hear only flaws," he told them. "I want to throw them all away."

"Throw them away!" said Doris. "They're treasures."

Landersman shook his head. "I'll show you treasures," he said.

From his bedroom, Landersman produced the spiral notebook, clutching it hungrily there on his sofa. A few years back, Landersman himself had copied the notes for most of the psalms—before his finger's aching joints caused him to quit—from a notebook, now nearly disintegrated, dating back to 1938. The pre-war notebook (long locked away in some bank vault), in turn, contained the full text of all the musical notes which Landersman had copied from an ancient manuscript kept by the sexton at the Leopoldstrasse Synagogue. The sexton hoarded piles of manuscripts in the attic of the synagogue, a room just above the sanctuary's cathedral ceiling, above the rows of candelabra, above the lustrous wooden pews and balconies, above the looming Hebrew motto which proclaimed, "You are commanded to know that God is the Lord and there is no other beside him." All gone now, of course—the sanctuary, the manuscript, the synagogue, the sexton—swallowed up in the great destruction.

The sexton, understanding Aramaic, could read the introduction and saw that it purported to date from post-Talmudic Babylon, and to be a transcription of the notes of Davidic music that had been performed in the temple service, passed down from generation to generation in a family of Levites, the tribe that had sung and played the lyre and lute and drums. But the sexton knew nothing about music, and so he consulted Cantor Landersman. Yeshaya Leib copied everything, from the sexton's translation of the opening text to the cryptic notes which neither man could interpret.

"I want you to have this copy," Landersman said. "Maybe you can translate it into music? I gave up twenty years ago."

Andy doubted he could decipher the musical code, but, intrigued, he made the effort, and within a few months, with some clues gleaned by Landersman during fifty years of studying the document, he unravelled the

system of notation. Andy interpreted and invented, of course, and translated for an instrument (the violin) that did not exist when old King David composed his music. But Andy knew that he had the music right: his violin sang with a spectacular strength and clarity.

Doris, though, would not admit the music was authentic, and they bickered about it. Like now, when he showed up for breakfast at her dreamy Santa Monica apartment.

"You're late," called Doris from the kitchen when he let himself in. "Playing your tunes again?"

"They're not, like, tunes. They're different."

Doris's apartment hung over the edge of the continent. Pelicans passed her balcony, gliding in formation above the Santa Monica coast. Andy had first spied Doris in this sleek white building, sunbathing on this very balcony. He had been visiting a childhood friend who was living the life that Andy's parents had wished on Andy, playing violin in the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. His friend knew Doris, waved at her from

The sound continued to build...and he found himself floating, floating above the heads of the audience

his balcony, and told Andy that she, like Andy, traded in music. She worked for that famous advertising agency, Satchel and Lourdes, in Beverly Hills. Though Andy could never remember Doris' exact title, she bore heavy responsibilities in supervising accounts, approving ad copies, finalizing layouts. She also was the sole person at Satchel and Lourdes responsible for jingles. Doris had met Andy's friend when she asked him his opinions about converting a portion of Handel's Concerti Grossi (which Andy's friend had played the night before) into an ad for pain relievers.

Doris emerged from her kitchen. Her hair, though shockingly short, fell in bangs down her forehead. She wore thick white stockings and a vintage dress from the late sixties, something black and close fitting that did not reach her knees. As usual, her lips were painted bright red, and she had chosen glasses which looked like bifocals, but were not.

"Your turn to make the eggs today," she said as she carried a small

platter of already-prepared eggs onto the balcony, where a newspaper opened to the horoscopes and a half-finished cryptogram lay on the table beside a bowl of strawberries. To their right, swirling mist enveloped the Malibu Mountains. Doris sat like a passenger on a cruise ship, covering her legs with a pink woolen blanket.

"I wonder if it's healthy for you," Doris said "obsessing about the music. Though look what the paper says." She pointed to the entry for Leo. "'Stay with your passions, they will reward you.' So what do I know?"

"The stars also say we shouldn't be together," Andy told her. "Leo and Scorpios, you say, don't mix."

"My psychic told me it's okay, so I'm not worried." She took his hand, and he wondered whether she planned to read his palm. Instead she asked, "Don't your neighbors wake up when you play your violin at dawn?"

Andy thought about it. "No."

"Andy, they bang on the wall when we play a cassette at night. They're not shy neighbors. They've got to mind all that racket."

Andy gritted his teeth. "It's not a racket, it's not tunes, I'm not just jamming. They're, like, holy."

"They're fake," Doris said. "Beautiful, but fake. How can they be anything else?"

"Landersman would not have lied."

"Right. Where's the original notebook? Oh, that's right, in a bank vault." She shook her head. "You know I love Mr. Landersman. He's a charming old man, I've been using him as a consultant-"

"What?"

"I haven't mentioned? The man has an uncanny ear for music in general and jingles in particular. But for all we know, he's a pathological liar. For all we know, he composed the music himself." Doris poured herself another cup of hot tea against the winter sea-cold. "Andy, we'd both like to believe that a bit of our holy Jewish history could reach up and touch us here in Los Angeles, but it's just so unlikely."

With every passing moment, Andy sank lower into Doris' leather director's-chair. Doris, who wasted time with tarot cards, who saw an omen in every raindrop, who would cancel a client meeting if a pigeon roosted on her rooftop, sat there lecturing him on being rational. Andy was turning

thirty when Landersman had presented him with this amazing music. Andy held down an odd and low-paying job, and lived in a pathetic apartment in a dangerous part of Hollywood, and had still not cut an album. A few strands of long grey hair had infiltrated the red. He would not let Doris' sudden cynicism infect the perfection of Landersman's gift.

"Doris, I'd never bothered with other people's holies, high masses and Taoist chants and the wailing from muzzeins. But here's our own music, and it's in my hands." He frowned. "How can I convince you?"

"You can't."

"Maybe you'd understand if you did something creative with music yourself," Andy said, and instantly regretted it. Doris had graduated from Julliard, and Andy knew that it was a sin and a shame to imply that she had wasted her training in composition and voice.

"Maybe," Doris said, throwing down her napkin, "I should become an unemployed musician who makes twenty-thousand a year, like you."

"Hey, don't get nasty on me." Andy put his hand over hers, which was ice-cold. "Besides, you do get your creative juices flowing when you perform with us." Doris sometimes sang with Andy's band, Lyre-on-Fire.

Doris pulled her hand away. "I use my creative energy at work. Are you dense, Andy? Is that music clouding your brain?"

"Stop insulting the music." He stood up, knocking against the glass-topped coffee table. "I've got to get out of here."

"I couldn't agree with you more," said Doris. "You should see the color of your aura."

Andy was still fuming when he brought his car screeching into place in the Y's underground parking lot. The Los Angeles YMHA was a cavernous building that stood behind a row of exotic and elegant palms a block to the north of Wilshire Boulevard. The neighborhood, once Jewish, now not, frightened some away. Attendance was spotty these days at "Yiddish Songwriters in America," "Klezmer, Old and New" and "Modern Jewish Song." The dusty halls of the building echoed. Undisturbed, the ancient pool in the building's basement glittered silver and blue, reflecting its floor mosaic of miniature tiles.

As he turned the key in his office door, it opened abruptly from inside and there stood Irina, the cleaning lady, a Russian Jewish immigrant.

Andy liked Irina and worked with her: as part of his responsibilities as "professor," Andy tidied the eccentric turret which constituted the music wing of the building, while Irina cleaned and cleaned.

"Professor, I finished but I don't have to do nothing."

"What's that?"

"It doesn't get dirty no more. This office. No dust. No dirt. No musty smell. This used to be toughest room to clean. Now, I don't have to do nothing."

"Come on."

"Not musty, like it used to."

"How long has this gone on?"

"Five weeks, six weeks, I don't know."

Around the time he had started playing the psalms here, interpreting them, practicing them. This mundane miracle didn't surprise him, either: at home, a number of brown, haggard plants adorning his peeling windowsills had recently grown green again, with the only supplement to their usual care being Andy's playing the music before them.

As Irina left, Mr. Landersman presented himself, tapping softly on the door. As always, he wore a pair of carefully-pressed grey pants, and a white shirt with sleeves rolled up just far enough to reveal the blue numbers adorning his arm.

"Hey," Andy said. "Class doesn't start for half an hour."

"I know, I know," said Mr. Landersman. He pulled himself into the old wooden chair across from Andy and hooked his cane over its arm. "I wanted to speak with you. About Doris."

Andy sat, mesmerized by the precise cut of Landersman's fingernails. Andy did not know anyone else so well groomed."She's driving me crazy," Landersman said. "I know she's your girl, and she's very nice, very generous, but she's driving me over the brink."

"I know," said Andy, sighing. "Me too. It's the psalms."

"The psalms?" Landersman seemed hazy for a moment. "No. She's bothering me to do work for that advertising agency. You should excuse me but what do I know from advertising?"

"You don't like the advertising work."

"She's always got some plan, some project. I want to be polite, but

there are limits. 'Would the elderly population relate to this tune, Mr. Landersman?' 'Does this one have an authentic Austrian feel?' Enough is enough."

"If you don't want to do it, don't."

"She is very strong-willed."

"Tell me about it," Andy said. "We're having a problem too. In our relationship."

Mr. Landersman lit a cigarette, an act which violated several recently-enacted municipal regulations and the Y's own policy. "Relationships. Everything today is a relationship. I come to talk with you about my own troubles, and I hear about relationships."

"She's driving me nuts. The music you gave me? She thinks it's fake."

"She may be right," he said, blowing out smoke. "For all I know, the sexton at Leopoldstrasse was crazy. Or playing an elaborate joke on me."

"What is it with the two of you?" Andy shot up out of his chair, which went skittling back on its rollers. "I'm the one who plays the music, and I'm telling you, it's real and it's holy. And if Doris can't admit just that much, it's hard for me to see a future with her."

"Then you are foolish. If you find something precious, hold on to it, tight, whether it is music or whether it is a person. It is so easy to lose them. If she is meant to hear what you hear, she will."

After class, attended by Landersman and three others—a brilliant disquisition, Andy thought, on cantorial influences in Yiddish musical theater—Andy lingered, fiddling with the music for Psalm 104 (his favorite), lingering over it, delaying meeting up with Doris. Andy always hated meeting Doris in public after a fight, but he had to meet her that night at the Hovel. Every Thursday night, Lyre-on-Fire rocked the Hovel, a club a few blocks from where Andy lived. No one from Geffen or Motown or Polygram had yet recognized his band's brilliance, and it often had trouble booking clubs, and it couldn't get an agent, but Andy kept the faith. Andy loved his band, loved making music with Dan and Rick and Eddy and Angela, and if the Hovel was the only place they could get a regular gig, so be it.

The Hovel was dark and smoke-filled; it attracted a rough mixture of dazed students and tough and hopeless locals. The crowd wore a fair amount of leather. Bottles shattered every night. Fights broke out under

smoky lavender lights. When Lyre-on-Fire played at the Hovel, they cranked their music up and played only songs that sounded like discordant screams. "I think we're most successful there," Doris once had told Andy, "because no one can really hear us." Doris tried to avoid the Hovel, but an unexpected bout of chicken pox had felled Angela, the other singer, and Doris had to fill in.

Andy found Doris already onstage, testing the microphone. "I'm sorry we fought," Andy said.

"Sorry we fought? Or that you were a jerk?"

"Not fair. You're driving me crazy with your disresepect of the psalms."

"Andy, you can't ask me to believe in something I don't. You either hear it, or you don't."

Andy's electric riffs filled the small room, and Rick on drums and Tom on bass vied with each other to see who could play the loudest. Andy couldn't even hear Eddy's keyboard; probably a problem with the acoustics. Doris shrieked the words she had to into the microphone, which had a tendency to screech itself. The crowd got especially raucous that night. A few fights broke out and were quelled, the first by Hovel's bouncers, the second by the cops. As a slight police officer hauled off an enormous man boasting a pentagram on his bare chest, Rick turned to Andy and said, "Might as well try it now, man," he said.

"Try what?" asked Doris. Suspicious, she grabbed on to Andy's sleeve.

"Andy's solo," Rick said.

"A solo! What sort of solo?" Doris was amazed. One rule was firm: never play solo at the Hovel. Far too dangerous.

Andy flashed her a spacey grin, grabbed his sleeve out of her clutches, and walked towards center stage. Once he stood above the roiling and mutinous audience, there was no going back.

Andy had replaced his electric guitar with an acoustic one. At first, you could barely hear Andy's melody over the general buzz, but the sound seeped, slowly, into the crowd's consciousness. Andy saw Doris staring at him from the wings like he was an idiot. He had never played Psalm 104 for her, but she recognized the style, and she looked furious.

The audience, incredulous like Doris, hissed, and booed, and a few

of the rowdier patrons threw bottles right at Andy, who kept on playing. "We didn't come hear goddam Muzak," one young woman screamed, but Andy barely heard her because the tune was so sweet it flooded his mind.

Number 104 was a long piece, and as he played it Andy heard nothing but the music. Near the end, he stole another glance at Doris. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and her scowl had vanished. In the audience, the woman who had screamed obscenities was crying also, violently almost, her head in her hands. And a man near her, a biker whom Andy would not want to meet in a dark alley or on a stormy night, quietly wept. The room turned quiet, and no one danced, and there was no sound (a miracle), no sound at all, except for the soft music from Andy's guitar. Though Andy did not change the volume or tenor of his playing, the music swelled, caressing the audience. Couples clasped, and swayed, and the sound continued to build. The stage's murky yellow footlights swathed Andy with an amber glow and he found himself floating, floating above the heads of the audience.

Afterwards, he slipped off-stage, to where Doris waited. He hitched the guitar from around his neck. "Well?" he asked.

"They're real," Doris said, touching a strand of Andy's long red hair, "and they're holy."

Andy smiled. Beyond the halo of Doris' hair, he saw a man farther off-stage talking to Rick. Wasn't the man a popular music promoter from one of the more important music publishing houses? Poised to approach Andy, to reenact the L.A. dream about discovery of talent in out-of-the-way places? Anything was possible.

Doris drove home alone to Santa Monica. The gleam from Andy's thin face—he could have been praying instead of playing—and the reaction of the crowd at the Hovel astounded and exhausted her. Why Andy, like some grand inquisitor, had demanded an affirmation of faith from her, Doris could not figure, but she gave him what he wanted, and gave it honestly, and the matter was closed.

She entered her apartment and walked through the dark to a white formica work desk in front of the picture window. Below, waves crashed onto the hidden California coast. Doris turned on the desk-lamp and the sea disappeared, leaving her reflection in its place. From her top drawer, she took a dogeared copy of the Psalms (in English, of course, she knew no Hebrew)

and flipped at random to the end. Doris read:

In the sky and on the land
In all the depths of the sea
God does all he desires.
He raises up vapour from the corners of the world
Makes lightning for the rain
Brings winds forth from his treasuries.

Ancient music echoed and Doris heard a swelling and a crest, like the waves below. Could she capture it without making it too Western, a glorified Bach choral piece? And if she completed it successfully, could she slip it to Andy with Landersman's help? Mr. Landersman seemed to be tiring of her enthusiasm, her mischief, the intrigue of plotting with her, the need to re-copy her absurd code for musical notations that Doris had created. No matter, for even if Andy never heard the tunes for these last psalms, Doris had to write them. The next time she wanted someone's unbiased opinion about her secret compositions, Doris thought, she would ask directly, and engage in no ruse. For what had started as a prank ended as a gift, a trick that would never end. Andy would play and her music would radiate across the planet.

"Holy, holy, holy," Doris said, very softly, as she started to compose with pen on starched white paper.

Joseph Lipner *writes fiction and practices law in Los Angeles. His work has previously appeared in* Midstream *and the* Cleveland Plain Dealer.