



MAKING MUSIC IN A LIVING HELL

In her latest book the journalist Anne Sebba tells the macabre and moving story of the young women prisoners who escaped death by playing in an orchestra at the Auschwitz concentration camp

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'EVEN IN THIS place one can survive, and therefore one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness; and that to survive we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilisation'.

These words were written by the Jewish Italian writer Primo Levi in his 1947 memoir If This is a Man, which describes in wrenching detail the 11 months he spent incarcerated in the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz in Poland. Over the course of the Second World War more than a million people – most of them Jews – were killed at the camp by gassing, shooting, starvation, beatings and disease.

Even the sadistic SS officers who ran the camp recognised the need for a 'form of civilisation'. In 1943 they ordered the creation of an orchestra in the women's part of the camp, which they thought could be useful propaganda for newsreels and might improve morale among the prisoners as they were force-marched to their gruelling days of labour. It could also be used to entertain the officers on their days off.

The result was the *Mädchenorchester von Auschwitz*, – the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz (WOA) – most of whose members were young Jews or Poles. This remarkable if macabre ensemble is the subject of a new book by the writer Anne Sebba, which draws on archival material and letters, as well as personal interviews with women who were there.

'Apologies for the chaos, there's a film crew shooting in the basement,' says Sebba when I arrive at her home in West London. She invites me in with a friendly smile, then leads me into her bright living room, which is