





From far left: Anita Lasker in the 1930s; Alma Rosé, who did not survive the camp, in 1924; Fania Fénelon in the 1930s and Claire Monis in 1946. Below: the railway tracks leading into Auschwitz

packed floor-to-ceiling with paintings and books. Now aged 73, Sebba began her career as the first woman to work as a Reuters correspondent in London and Rome, and is the author of acclaimed biographies of Wallis Simpson, Jennie Churchill and Mother Teresa. So what compelled her to tell the story of the orchestra?

'I had long been aware of it through my professional research into other Holocaust stories. My father was part of the British forces who were involved in the post-liberation operation at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, and I decided to research what he did.' When she was growing up in the 1960s Sebba was unable to talk to her father about what he had seen, as he would shut down any talk about his experiences.

Delving into the National Archives after his death, Sebba found a thin file containing a regimental war diary signed with her father's unmistakable signature: Major Eric Rubinstein, 31st Armoured Brigade. Against the date of 24 May 1945 he had written: 'C Squadron 7 R Tanks with crocodiles burning Belsen camp.' What could this mean?

Sebba discovered that as a 32-year-old tank commander, her father and his regiment had reached Belsen a month earlier. Nothing he had previously seen could prepare him for the horror: 'Thousands of skeletal creatures were lying on bunks unable to move, while dead bodies were piled in heaps all around the camp, reeking of putrefaction.'

Once the prisoners had been moved out of the huts the disease-ridden buildings were burned to the ground by Churchill 'Crocodile' flame-throwing tanks to prevent the spread of infection. In the regimental diary Sebba's father also listed 'displaced persons' – camp survivors who had no home to return to, including former members of the WOA. 'Ever since I discovered my father's proximity to these events I have been gripped by a need to understand more about how these women had survived,' says Sebba.

One of at least ten orchestras at Auschwitz, and the only one for women, the WOA were amateurs who could barely play in tune until Alma Rosé, a talented Austrian Jewish musician and niece of the composer Gustav Mahler, took charge in the summer of 1943.

Alma had made her debut in 1926 at Vienna's Musikverein playing Bach's Double Violin Concerto, accompanied by her father. Four years later she married the famous Czech violinist Vasa Prihoda and went to live with him in Prague. They toured together and attracted widespread coverage in magazines.

In 1932 Alma founded an exclusively female orchestra, the Vienna Waltzing Girls. Her marriage to Prihoda ➢

PICTURES: ALAMY; ANITA LASKER-WALLFISCH