




Above: prisoners in the women's camp at Auschwitz in 1944 and the site of Block 12, where the musicians lived

didn't last, and they separated in 1935. When the Germans annexed Austria in 1938 she fled to London with her father. Foolishly, she thought she could continue her career in the Netherlands, but the Germans invaded and occupied the country almost as soon as she got there. Once again she was forced to flee, this time to France, where she was arrested in 1942 and transported to Auschwitz.

On arrival Alma was sent directly to the medical experimentation unit, which was run by a gynaecologist called Dr Carl Clauberg who was conducting pseudo-scientific experiments on female sterilisation. Luckily Alma was recognised by one of the nurses, who gave her a violin to play, which undoubtedly saved her life. Her exquisite playing was overheard by Maria Mandl, a senior officer in the women's camp, who arranged for Alma to be transferred to the music block.

She could immediately hear that the orchestra was not up to scratch. She expanded it with violinists, guitarists and vocalists, from around 20 members to over 40. She picked the best instruments from those confiscated from new prisoners arriving in transports.

Mandl would discuss with Alma how the orchestra could be improved, and even attempted to find competent musicians among the prisoners. Alma managed to improve conditions for the orchestra during her first months in charge. In Block 12, where the musicians lived, each woman had a small bunk bed to herself, with rough sheets, a blanket, a pillow and a thin mattress. They could use toilets and washrooms regularly. 'These were huge potentially lifesaving privileges compared to the squalor faced by other prisoners,' says Sebba.

The musicians wore camp uniform except when they played on Sundays and holidays, when they were given white blouses, pleated navy blue skirts and blue headscarves. Unlike other prisoners they were allowed to grow their hair, because Mandl felt it was important for them to look attractive as well as play well.

'Most of what the orchestra played was not beautiful music but marching tunes used by their oppressors to enforce military-style discipline on the prisoners,' writes Sebba. 'They had to march in rows of five so they could be counted more easily. Music by Mendelssohn, Chopin or Beethoven was forbidden on the grounds that the composers were Jewish, Polish or too great for "inferior" Jewish musicians.'

The orchestra's day usually started around 3.30am at the first roll call. The players then gathered and tuned their instruments so they were ready to play outside at 5.30am, when the other female prisoners had to march to work. 'It was tough under Alma, but not nearly as tough as hauling rocks,' says Sebba. 'She was fierce but she got them through. She realised that if the orchestra did not live up to expectations they would all be gassed.'

**'Alma realised that if the orchestra did not live up to expectations they would all be gassed'**

Through gaps in the planks of the music hut the women could see the arrival of the transports of new prisoners, not to mention the hellish flames and smoke of the crematoria. The WOA was expected to play on regardless of the carnage all around. The musicians often played with the stench of charred flesh filling their nostrils. Ashes from human remains even settled inside some of their instruments, a layer of fine black dust that was not discovered until after the war.

Mandl was concerned that the orchestra should not become top-heavy with Jews, so Alma was grateful to find a non-Jewish professional violinist of the calibre of Helena Dunicz Niwinska, who was 28 and had previously played with the Lwow Youth Symphony Orchestra. Helena had been arrested earlier in 1943 for suspected resistance activity.

Alma also recruited Hilde Grünbaum, a Jewish girl who played the violin and became Alma's assistant. Hilde's friends smuggled out a red pillowcase from their hut so she could sew a cloth case for the sheet music.

Later that year Alma was excited to hear about the arrival of a teenage German Jewish cellist, as the orchestra desperately needed one. Anita Lasker had ➢

PICTURES: GETTY IMAGES