

AN OPEN LETTER TO ANNE SOFIE VON OTTER

Dear Anne Sofie von Otter,

We are writing to you because we wonder whether a musician who has done as much as you have to make the world remember the Nazi 'show camp' of Theresienstadt might be willing to think about the implications of your performances in Israel, scheduled for this October.

Possibly among your audience will be survivors of the Holocaust – and no one would want to deny people who suffered so much the pleasure of hearing you interpreting the wonderful music you will sing. Unless your presence in Tel Aviv raised a moral question – and in our view, respectfully, it does.

Because scattered all over the world are survivors of another kind – some of the 750,000 Palestinian men, women and children – half the population – who were driven out of their country by Israeli forces in 1947/48 and have never been allowed to return. Of the roughly 450 Palestinian villages that were emptied this way – producers of wheat, barley, olives, almonds, cotton, goats, honey, peaches, figs, apricots, some from before Roman times – almost all were bulldozed. Beautiful ancient Palestinian cities – Jaffa, Lydda, Acre, Majdal – were suddenly proclaimed Israeli. The Palestinians thus wiped off the map, their children and children's children, in exile from Detroit to Adelaide, in refugee camps in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, and under Israeli military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza – none of these Palestinians will be able to come to Tel Aviv and hear you sing.

You have said that as you researched the music written in Theresienstadt, you discovered that your father, a Swedish diplomat in Berlin during World War II, had learned about the death camps and alerted his government, to no avail.

If your father were alive today, what do you think might trouble him? Perhaps the Israeli blockade of Gaza, which has sealed off 1.5 million people, many of them still traumatised and homeless after the three-week carpet bombing Israel subjected them to early last year. Perhaps the daily struggles of a West Bank farmer who's lost her orchards to Israeli settlers, whose well has been sucked dry by the settlement, whose children can't get to school because the Israeli army blockades the

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village and the settlers shoot at the children, whose harvest of tomatoes and cucumbers rots at a checkpoint at the whim of the soldiers – we could go on. Richard Horton, editor of the reputable British medical journal *The Lancet*, writes about ‘the small daily atrocities that are continuously eroding the future of Palestinian families’.

Consider the appearance of civilised normality your concerts will give – a glass of wine after work; coffee and cake on a Friday afternoon; a chance to contemplate the meaning of *Um Mitternacht* in an atmosphere charged only with the beauty and drama of your voice. And yet forty minutes’ drive from the concert hall, a million and a half people will be walled up in the Gaza ghetto. While you are singing, Palestinians in the Occupied Territories will be facing the ‘small daily atrocities’ that Richard Horton evokes, and calling on their stores of resilience – because he also says that what he observes among Palestinians is ‘a quiet civic resistance and resilience to chronic terror’.

Your presence in Tel Aviv will implicitly condone that ‘chronic terror’. But you could make a different choice.

When the International Committee of the Red Cross inspected Theresienstadt in 1944, they believed the show the Nazis put on for them – that this cruel antechamber to Auschwitz was a model resettlement town for Jews, complete with parks and children’s playgrounds and concert halls. You, on the other hand, have access to all the information anyone could possibly need to understand the cruel situation in which the Palestinians live. You have knowledge, and the power of choice. (Your one-time colleague, Elvis Costello, considered the evidence, and, to his very great credit, changed his mind about going: <http://www.elviscostello.com/news/it-is-after-considerable-contemplation/44>.) Please, don’t sing in Tel Aviv.

Yours sincerely,
Professor Haim Bresheeth
Mike Cushman
Professor Hilary Rose
Professor Steven Rose
Professor Jonathan Rosenhead

London, July 2010