



SAVING MOZART

By Raphaël Jerusalmy

"With its sober, sarcastic tone and feverish rhythm, this concerto for a solo voice is undeniably a success."—*L'Express*

"If we can imagine a part of the contents [of the intimate journal kept by Steiner], in direct relation to the somber reality of the period, it does not reserve fewer considerable surprises that situate it well beyond a simple chronicle of the time."—*L'Humanité*

"This is a book that merits taking the time to turn the pages."—*ActuaLitté*

"*Saving Mozart* is a masterpiece."—*La Croix*

Raphaël Jerusalmy's debut novel takes the form of the journal of Otto J. Steiner, a former music critic of Jewish descent suffering from tuberculosis in a Salzburg sanatorium in 1939. Drained by his illness and isolated in the gloomy sanatorium, Steiner finds solace only in music. He is horrified to learn that the Nazis' are transforming a Mozart festival into a fascist event. Steiner feels helpless at first, but an invitation from a friend presents him with an opportunity to fight back. Under the guise of organizing a concert for Nazi officials, Steiner formulates a plan to save Mozart that could dramatically change the course of the war.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Saving Mozart* opens with Otto J. Steiner eating saveloy (sausage) on a Friday, which is a violation of both Christian and Jewish practices. What are Steiner's religious beliefs? Is he areligious or angry with God? How does his faith/faithlessness inform his behavior?
2. Lovers of music are often deeply sensitive people who sometimes find difficulty expressing their emotions in words. Does Steiner fit this characterization? How might his eremitic behavior be seen as a coping mechanism for his oversensitivity?
3. To what extent does Steiner consider himself and others in the sanitarium to be threatened by the war? Is he right?
4. Music plays a substantial role in how Steiner experiences life. Why is music so special to Steiner? Why does he love Mozart above all other composers?
5. Steiner says that Mozart died at about the same age as Jesus. In what ways does Steiner treat music like a religion?
6. What role does status play for Steiner? How does his final act of defiance show that he has come to think differently about status by the end of the book?
7. Halfway through the book (p. 60), Steiner says he is no longer ashamed of "belonging to the family of the sick." What changes his mind?
8. Steiner plans to rid the world of a fascist tyrant, which would change the course of history. Are his goals altogether altruistic?
9. We come to find out that Dr. Müller has been selling the sanitarium's medication on the black market and giving the patients palliatives instead. How can Dr. Müller's deception be understood in terms of the broader Nazi project?
10. Although Steiner fails in his assassination attempt, he does engage in one final act of defiance. What makes this an act of defiance? Even if this act does no ostensible damage to the Nazis' war efforts, should Steiner still have done it? Why or why not?

Q&A with RAPHAËL JERUSALMY

Q: *Saving Mozart* is structured in diary form and introduced as “The Diary of Otto J. Steiner (July 1939—August 1940).” Were the events in the diary inspired by real people?

A: *Saving Mozart* states that anyone of us has the power to fight injustice. The diary of Otto Steiner takes this notion to the extreme. Otto is the least likely candidate for heroic action, yet by one single non-violent gesture, this solitary man will succeed in perpetrating a most uncommon act of resistance. *Saving Mozart* also states that seemingly insignificant events often go against or even transcend the course of history. As an Israeli Defense Forces officer, I have witnessed many such events in the field—surrealistic moments filled with intense human emotion. The plot is built around true facts, which recently took place in the Middle East, such as an Egyptian general picking up a violin and playing *Fiddler on the Roof* melodies to a group of Israeli officers during a security-related encounter.

Q: Were there any constraints or freedoms you found when writing an epistolary novel?

A: A diary, as opposed to a narrative, forces us into the present. There is no distance, no safety net, no time to think in retrospect—not for the main character and not even for the reader. Otto is not profuse in his style of writing. A lot is left unsaid and is meant to be guessed or intuitively felt by the reader. The unsaid is also responsible for the atmosphere of dry cynicism pervading the diary. What is said, on the other hand, is said with acute precision. The meaning and emotion contained in each and every word is extracted to the full. Even when Otto simply notes his tenants paid rent on time, a full range of understatements and feelings is evoked.

Q: In many Holocaust narratives, the characters take refuge in art, like music or literature. Why do you think that music is a recurring theme in many of these narratives?

A: Music constantly hovers above the diary of Otto. It is sensed rather than heard, especially once Otto is deprived of his gramophone. It becomes the ultimate literary tool because it transcends language.

Q: Did you keep musical rhythm in mind when writing *Saving Mozart*?

A: Music is also a character in its own right. It evolves along with the plot, from sheer apathy to downright revolt, just like Otto. One must remember that whether played at military parades or at the gates of Dachau, music is a part of the Nazi era, often times as an accomplice. Even though it will turn into the last stronghold of freedom and dignity, music is being brought to trial, as are faith and culture. Rather than Hitler or any particular regime, it is this trial that gives the novel its subversive streak.

Q: Since your novel ends in 1940, Otto can only comment on certain events that have already taken place, like the Nazi occupation of France. Do you think this has a different effect on readers, as opposed to other novels that see a character through the entirety of the Holocaust?

A: The diary of Otto ends in 1940 for two reasons. The first is that the case of the Holocaust remains open to this day. We are just as confused and helpless today as Otto was in 1939. Ironically, it is he who comes to our rescue, who leads us along the path he chose to take and shows us how to put a smile on the lips of our destiny. The second reason is that *Saving Mozart* is not a book about the Holocaust—is a tale for today. Dedicated to the memory of a little Jewish boy from my family who was murdered in Auschwitz, it sings the victory of life.

Q: Whom have you discovered lately?

A: I have very much enjoyed Peter Heller's debut novel *The Dog Stars*, which offers a definite taste of suspense and adventure while depicting the human condition at large. I especially liked the second main character, Bangle, perhaps because he is not unlike Otto Steiner—a hard exterior with a compassionate heart, a selfish rough type capable of sacrifice, etc. You also feel an immense love of nature and all living things and even learn a few survival tricks that might come in handy since Heller makes these apocalyptic circumstances quite credible. The inner monologues of the hero Higgs and the various dialogues are very alive, full of funny but very true remarks and some winks to the reader that bring smiles even during the most arduous times or moments of despair. It is a tale of unabated optimism written with heart while avoiding soap opera clichés. It pays homage to the great American tradition of adventure and epics (Fennimore Cooper, Melville) with its symbolism while also addressing issues of our time.