

The Palestine Orchestra in War-time.

... By ...

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"The cool evening air, and the magic of the music put me in a seventh heaven of delight. I shall not easily forget those wonderful moments; truly life was worth living then." This is an extract from the letter of a South African soldier who recently attended a concert of the Palestine Symphony Orchestra in Jerusalem. It is one of innumerable reports reaching us of the great work this Orchestra is doing in affording solace and pleasurable relaxation from the grim realities of armed conflict to our soldiers in Egypt and Palestine.

For despite the critical situation in the Middle East, the Palestine Orchestra is continuing to play to an eager and receptive public. The sixth season has just been concluded, and two hundred and one concerts were given in all. Of the thirty-eight presented in Egypt the majority were for troops. The other concerts were given in Palestinian towns, settlements and military camps. In Cairo the Orchestra played in aid of the Egyptian Red Crescent Funds, in Jerusalem for the Red Cross and in Haifa to benefit the British War Comforts Fund.

But apart from the tremendously musical men and women of the Yishuv, the Orchestra has now found a new and intensely significant audience, an audience of non-Jews from every corner of the free world. For the first time in their lives these non-Jews are encountering, and being made aware of a positive Jewish culture. The Hebrew University and the Habimah, too, have made deep impressions on the minds of these men, but it is the Orchestra alone that is able to break down linguistic barriers with the universal language that is music.

To listen to the eulogies of non-Jewish soldiers, officers and men alike, is to hear the words of the Book of Joshua: "So the people shouted when the priests blew with the trumpets; and it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout, that the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city."

For the Orchestra, in addition to helping to maintain the morale and giving the sorely-needed relaxation for mind and body, is doing much to make the walls of prejudice, intolerance and misunderstanding "fall down flat" and thereby to engender a healthy state of mutual respect and friendship between Jew and non-Jew. One used to hear it said of any of the famous Jewish virtuosi: "Oh, he's a *genius*—not a Jew!" But to-day soldiers returning from the Middle East speak in glowing terms of "the magnificent Jewish Orchestra in Palestine."

It is not necessary to tell here again the story of the founding of the Orchestra by the violinist Huberman, who sought, in his own words, "to unite the desire of the country for music, and the desire of the German musicians for a country." As the Nazi stranglehold spread over Europe, so the celebrated musicians of the Continent found refuge in Palestine, and the Orchestra became known as the "orchestra of

soloists." It was argued that such a group of specialised soloists could never be disciplined into an harmonious whole, and that the notorious individual Jewish temperament would never permit of such a coalescence. But not only does every conductor comment on the splendid teamwork of the players, but so magnificent is its discipline that the Orchestra has taken the almost unprecedented step of performing a series of "conductorless concerts."

There will be many who will question the existence and necessary support of an institution such as a symphony orchestra in war-time. The Palestine Orchestra is not a parasitic superfluity. The Orchestra has provided a home, a refuge and a source of employment for eight-five war-refugees and their dependants, totalling

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over three hundred persons. They are now serving to keep alive some of those cultural standards in defence of which this war is being waged (and here one should add that the Orchestra performs the music of all composers irrespective of their nationalities).

But most important of all, their music serves to satisfy one of man's elementary and essential needs—the desire for music. And there is no time that man has greater need of the spiritual relief and exaltation that music brings than in war-time. In Russia, where music is actually commissioned by the Government for the edifica-

tion of the people, "fire-watcher" Shostakovitch, the Soviet composer, while he nightly kept vigil on the roof of the Leningrad Conservatory of Music has conceived his Seventh Symphony, the "War" Symphony which prophesies in tone "the victory of light over darkness, of humanity over barbarism." In battered London Myra Hess has organised her inspiring series of lunch-hour concerts in the hall of the National Gallery. Out of the concentration camps of Europe have come such songs as "The Peat-Bog Song," which express in one of the most powerful and elementary modes of expression known to men, the song, the spirit of undaunted hope and courage of temporarily enslaved people. So powerful is the universal language of music that these songs, despite the drastic steps taken by the Nazis, have spread like wild-fire throughout the prison chambers of Europe. In Palestine, not only is the Orchestra bringing emotional relief and intellectual satisfaction to the men and women of the Yishuv, but it is helping in no small way to maintain the morale of the fighting forces of the Middle East. This is the most cogent argument in favour of its continued existence.

However, it is indeed paradoxical that a group of people so badly in need of comfort themselves should be doing so much to brighten the lives of others. Nor is their task an easy one for the Orchestra to-day is in dire circumstances. That an Orchestra of 85 players could function at all in such a small, poor country is due to the fact that the people, one and all, tradesmen and farmers, city-dwellers and shepherds, are musically and culturally in need and in demand of the Orchestra. But the sharp increase in the cost of living in Palestine coupled with the cutting off of all financial support from the Continent has rendered the Orchestra's position extremely precarious and several near-tragedies among members of the Orchestra have been fortunately averted.

The Orchestra depends for its existence on the sale of subscription tickets inside the country and the support in contributions from the outside world. Societies of Friends of the Palestine Orchestra have been formed in the Diaspora, and to-day it is only with the support of these societies in countries still able to give their aid that the Orchestra can continue to exist.

The founder of the Orchestra, Bronislaw Huberman, artist, philosopher and humanitarian, is now devoting his full energies to maintaining this "child" of his creation. Many of the leading non-Jewish musicians in the world are keenly interested in the Orchestra. Arturo Toscanini, who in 1936 refused to conduct at Salzburg because of the racial discrimination policy of the organisers, came all the way to Palestine to conduct the first concert of the Orchestra.

Despite the Arab riots, he returned to Palestine the following year and travelled the country in armoured cars under police escort. It behoves every Jew to make his own the words of this great man: "It is everyone's duty to strive and help according to his means in the cause which is the Palestine Orchestra."