

# Opera & Real Life



## 6. The Oldest Hatred

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# The Oldest Hatred

OPERAS ABOUT ANTI-SEMITIC PERSECUTION, are relatively rare, but they have a surprisingly long history: we shall look at works from 1835, 1968, and 2022. The oldest, *La Juive* (the Jewess) by **Fromental Halévy** (1799–1862), was for many years a staple of the French *grand opéra* repertory. It has both the strengths and issues of that genre, yet it contains scenes of authentic feeling that distinguish it from its contemporaries. Both the others are postwar operas dealing with survivors of the Holocaust. *The Passenger* by **Mieczysław Weinberg** (1919–96) was written in Russia by a Polish refugee and premiered only in concert performance; it had to wait until 2010 to receive the premiere staging that we shall watch today. *The Promise* by Swedish composer **Mats Larsson Gothe** (b.1965) was premiered only this year. A poetic distillation of a true story, it tells of the nightmare journey of a camp survivor to find (and ultimately reach) her husband from whom she was separated only days after their wedding.

## A. Gothe

*The Promise*, with libretto by **Susanne Marko**, begins with the wartime wedding of **Ava** and **Teo**. It plunges immediately into the postwar world, mediated by a chorus of the dead, as Ava wanders in search of her husband. The poetic narrative plays out in a mixture of dreams and reality, at an expansive place that contains many episodes of true beauty. But we have time for only the most lively of them, a scene where Ava shares with the young refugee **Rosa** the memories of her mother's cooking, and for a moment the stage becomes alive with joy.

**Gothe:** *The Promise*, Prologue and scene from Act II

Stockholm 2022; c. Alan Gilbert, d. Stefan Larsson; Hanna Husáhr (Ava), Agnes Auer (Rosa), Karl-Magnus Fredriksson (Teo)

## B. Weinberg

*The Passenger* (1968), with libretto by **Alexander Medvedev**, was based in turn on a play by concentration-camp survivor **Zofia Posmysz**. Seeing a woman in the street whom she (mistakenly) thought was a guard from her camp, she began to imagine how this would be the other way around, if a guard thought she recognized a former inmate. This is the subject of *The Passenger*, in which **Liese**, the wife of a German diplomat, thinks she recognizes a former *Kapo* on a liner taking her and her husband to his new posting in Brazil. We never learn the identity of the mystery woman, but even the suspicion is enough to unleash Liese's guilty memories of how she groomed the *Kapo*, **Martha**, to do her bidding, and was indirectly instrumental in the death of her violinist husband, **Tadeusz**, all of which plays out in a memory-space below the deck of the ship. Though originally written in Russian, the opera is sung in the different languages of its characters.

**Weinberg:** *The Passenger*, excerpts from Act II:

Bregenz 2010; c. Teodor Currentzis, d. David Pountney; Michelle Breedt (Liese), Elena Kelessidi (Martha), Roberto Sacca (Walter), Artur Rucinski (Tadeusz)

## C. Halevy

*La Juive* (1835) was a product of the great librettist **Eugène Scribe** (1791–1861) who might be called the godfather of *grand opéra*. Its title and plot depend upon a piece of back-story that is essential to understanding the whole. As a younger man, the Jewish goldsmith **Eléazar** lived near Rome and witnessed the execution of his sons as heretics by **Count Brogni**. During his own flight to Switzerland, Eléazar found a baby near death, abandoned inside a house, torched by bandits, which turned out to be the home of the Count. Eléazar took the child and raised her as his own daughter, naming her **Rachel**. Brogni became a priest and later a cardinal. He is now in Switzerland, as the Pope's representative at the **Council of Constance, 1414**.

Our selection opens with a Passover Seder at Eléazar's house. Rachel has invited a young Jewish artist named **Simon**, but when they are alone, she discovers that he is in fact a Christian. She nonetheless remains attracted to him, and follows him to the palace of **Princess**

**Eudoxie**, where apparently he lives. She offers herself as a servant to the Princess in order to be close to him, but is horrified to discover that her "Simon" is in fact **Prince Léopold**, Eudoxie's husband. At the climax of the ceremony honoring the Prince for his valor, she denounces him as a seducer, triggering a magnificent ensemble, but ending with her arrest.

Act IV of the opera takes place in the prison. Eudoxie visits Rachel and eventually persuades her to withdraw her accusation. Cardinal Brogni offers Eléazar his freedom if he will convert, but he refuses. His realization that this will also condemn his beloved Rachel is the cue for the most famous number in the score, the aria "*Rachel, quand du Seigneur.*" Eléazar does offer Rachel the chance to convert in the final scene, however, but she too refuses, and the Cardinal learns of his daughter's fate only as she is going to her death.

**Halévy:** *La Juive*, Scenes from Acts 2, 3, and 5

Antwerp 2013; c. Antonino Fogliani, d. Peter Konwitschny; Corinne Winters (Rachel), Nicole Chevalier (Eudoxie), Roy Cornelius Smith (Eléazar), Riccardo Zanellato (Brogni)

**Halévy:** *La Juive*, Act 4 aria, "Rachel, quand du Seigneur"

Vienna 2003; Neil Shicoff (Eléazar)

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