

Luca Lombardi

WHY ISRAEL?

During most of my life, I was interested in Israel, until I got to know the country just a few years ago and then decided, relatively quickly, to accept the Israeli citizenship. Why?

I was born shortly after the end of World War II in Rome. My parents (both of them are from Naples) were Franco Lombardi, who was a philosopher and was of decidedly antifascist persuasion, and Iole Tagliacozzo, a teacher and, when I was born, a member of the constituent assembly of the newly established Republic of Italy. She was Jewish and survived the war and German raids by living in hiding and under a pseudonym. Only ten years after the war, my parents sent me and my siblings to the German School in Rome. That was a strange decision, but also a courageous one: Apparently, their love for German culture and trust in a new Germany embedded in a new Europe was stronger than their loathing of Nazi barbarism. At the German School in Rome, I received my first piano lessons. I grew up with German culture and received my high-school diploma there.

Judaism did not play a role in our family, except for a few, mostly funny, family stories and anecdotes we were told once in a while. During the mid-1960s, I had a teacher at the Conservatorio di Santa Cecilia in Rome, Armando Renzi, who was very important for me. When he changed from the Conservatorio to the Pontificio Istituto per la Musica Sacra (the Pontifical Institute for Sacred Music), I wanted to follow him as a student, but, for admission, I needed a certificate of baptism which, because of my rather atheist upbringing, I did not have. But, fortunately, it was the time of the ecumenical movement begun under Pope John XXIII and, thus, I was generously admitted as a Jew. It was the first time and, for many years hence, the only instance that being Jewish played a role for me.

Twenty years later, I began to get interested in Jewish topics and my own Jewish roots. My approach to Judaism took primarily a musical path: by getting to know music in the Jewish tradition and also through my own compositions. My first composition with a Jewish reference is *Ai piedi del faro* of 1986 for double bass and eight instruments. The title comes from a statement by the philosopher Ernst Bloch: "At the foot of the lighthouse is no light," a statement that, in a way, also relates to my awareness or non-awareness of my Jewishness. The lighthouse can shed light to the front and to the back, but it cannot illuminate the here and

now. I used in this piece a scale that facilitated sounds of an oriental nature. Over time, I developed out of it the scale that today I use in nearly all of my compositions: c-c#-d#-e-f-g-g#-a#-b-d / d b b-c b -b b -g-g b -e-e b -c. The scale is a kind of condensed emblem of my life as a whole, which is rooted in the Mediterranean region: on the one hand, Naples; on the other hand, Israel (the family of my mother allegedly came to Italy after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE). When I was commissioned in 1994 to write a piece for voice and guitar, I decided to compose a cycle of Jewish songs. I consulted several anthologies with traditional Hebrew chants and was looking for someone who could translate them for me into Italian. In turn, I got to know Miriam Meghnagi, who not only helped me with the translation but who also wrote some texts for me. That's the way the song cycle *Yedid Nefesh* came about.

Miriam and I got married in 2003. In the same year, I travelled with her to Israel (it was my first time). There I encountered a country totally different from the one shown in general by the media. What did I like and what impressed me there in particular? For instance, the many different faces. On a small scale (but by-and-large successfully so), Israel is a melting pot of people who came here from all corners of the world. Many Jews had to flee from Arab countries and found a refuge and a home here. Why does one never hear about the more than one million Jewish refugees from Arab states? There are not only Palestinian refugees who, for generations, have been kept in precarious conditions (namely by Arabs), but also Jewish refugees who have long since been absorbed by different countries, including Israel. Miriam, for instance, had to flee with her family from Libya—a country that once had 35,000 long-established Jews, but today does not have a single one.

In addition to Jews from Arab countries, there are Jews from many other countries of the world. The barber who cut my hair yesterday is from Azerbaijan; the seamstress who changed my trousers comes from Iran. One can hear all kinds of languages on the street, including, of course, many from Europe. Israel is a real Babel, albeit a rather well-organized one. The country seems to function relatively well. As a Prussian Mediterranean (or Mediterranean Prussian), I am attracted to this peculiar combination mixing typical features of the Middle East and efficiency. I also like that Israel has strong links to European and Western culture. Just to talk about music: it is remarkable that in 1936, i.e. twelve years before the foundation of the state of Israel, a world-class symphony orchestra was founded in Tel Aviv. The first concert was directed by the Italian Arturo Toscanini, at the time the world's most famous conductor.

After my first visit in 2003, I always enjoyed travelling to Israel in subsequent years. Of course, I cannot deny that in Israel, as everywhere else, there are idiots, rogues, and criminals. Nevertheless, even though I do not believe in miracles in general, I think that this little country

of, by now, 8 million souls represents a miracle. It is as small as perhaps the Italian region of Latium—comparable to the state of Hessen in Germany—but in the arts (especially in literature, film, and dance) as well as in the sciences and technology it produces accomplishments of the first rank. It is also miraculous that the Hebrew language which, for thousands of years, had been only the language of clerics and a few scholars has been resurrected to new life. I am happy that, by now, I can express myself in this language in a reasonable manner.

And yet: this country that is so small that one always must write its name on the world map in the sea next to it is constantly being slandered. As a friend of Israel, I always have to justify my position. When, after the first visits to Israel, I repeatedly was questioned by friends back home, even by relatives, I decided to become an Israeli citizen. This was to be my statement of loyalty. But I also want to take a position by way of my music. Thus, I am working at the time on an opera (its working title: *Ofer*) whose topic is the current situation in Israel. It is based on the novel by the Israeli author David Grossman, *To the End of the Land*. I compose it in Hebrew: it is not only a journey into the complexity and the richness of Israeli reality, but also a journey into the fascinating richness of relations in the Hebrew language.

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(trans. Jürgen Thym)