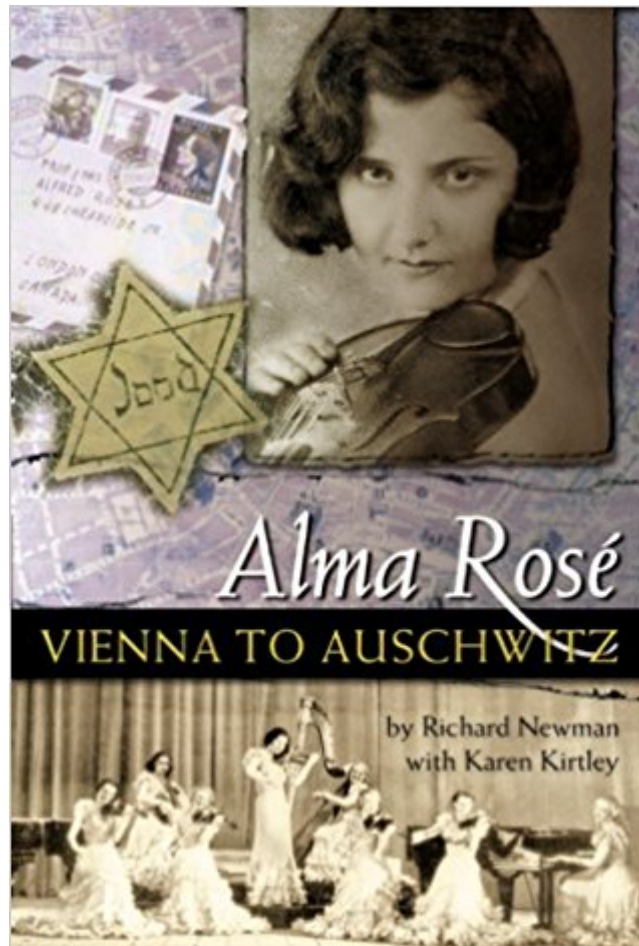




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# Alma Rose: Vienna To Auschwitz



## Synopsis

Alma Ross's story first came to public attention through the intriguing 1980 film *Playing for Time*. The true story of this heroic woman is now told for the first time. Rose was born to musical royalty in Vienna when the imperial city was the center of the musical world. Her father was violinist and concertmaster Arnold Rose; her uncle was Gustav Mahler. In the 1930s she founded and led a brilliant women's touring orchestra. Like many other Viennese Jews, the Rose family was caught off guard by the rise of Nazism. Alma assisted her family to flee but was herself caught and deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. There, Alma again formed and led a women's orchestra---the only women's musical ensemble in the Nazi camps---thereby saving the lives of some four dozen women. In telling Alma's full story, the authors honor her and the valiant prisoner-musicians for whom music meant life.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Part family biography, part European and Holocaust history, this book traces the life of violinist Alma Rosé, along with that of other members of her illustrious musical family, from her birth in 1906 in one of the world's foremost cultural capitals to her death in a Nazi extermination camp in 1944. It will be particularly fascinating and wrenching to anyone with similar roots. Alma was the niece of the famous composer and conductor Gustav Mahler, at the time director of the Vienna Opera, and the daughter of Arnold Rosé, concertmaster of the Opera Orchestra and the Vienna Philharmonic and leader of his own renowned string quartet. Her older brother Alfred became a noted pianist, conductor, composer, and teacher. Alma, named after her aunt and godmother, Alma Mahler, was

taught by her father and, both inspired and intimidated by the family's musical tradition, she became a fairly successful violinist. In 1930, she established a girls' orchestra called the Viennese Waltz-Girls, with which she toured throughout Europe as conductor and soloist, and which surprisingly had her austere father's blessing because of the high quality of the playing. Her marriage to the famous, dashing Czech violin virtuoso Václav Průcha soon ended in heartbreak and divorce. Disaster struck in 1938, when Hitler annexed Austria, whose population welcomed him enthusiastically; the country's always latent anti-Semitism erupted swiftly and violently. Though the Rosenthal family were completely assimilated and had even converted to Christianity, Arnold immediately lost his orchestra position and pension. His wife was ill and died that year, leaving him stranded financially and emotionally. Alfred and his wife managed to flee to Holland, England, and eventually Canada, where he died in 1975; Alma mistakenly thought she was protected by the Czech passport gained through her marriage. With dauntless determination, and with the help of old friends, including the famous violinist Carl Flesch, she got her father and herself to England only months before the outbreak of World War II. The Rosenthal Quartet's cellist and former principal of the Vienna Philharmonic, Friedrich Buxbaum, had arrived there earlier; he later joined the re-formed quartet. So far, Alma's story parallels my own. Born in Vienna 20 years later to musical parents who encouraged my violin studies, I grew up near enough the Rosenthal house to encounter the illustrious concertmaster not only on stage but on the streetcar. We witnessed Hitler's triumphant arrival, but our Czech passports enabled us to escape to Czechoslovakia. When Hitler caught up with us in 1939, we, too, managed with the help of friends to get to England just before the war. A few years later, I was thrilled to be the violinist in a trio with the venerable Buxbaum, who still played with the facility and tone of a man half his age. Here the resemblance ends. While we survived the war in England and ultimately came to America, Alma was tempted by performing opportunities to leave the comparative security of England for Holland, where her career flourished and she earned enough money to help her father. She was still fulfilling engagements when the Germans overran Belgium and the Netherlands; her efforts to get back to England, or join her brother in America, failed. Staying with friends, she was almost picked up by the Nazis despite a hastily arranged marriage to an "Aryan" Dutchman, and in 1942 she went into hiding, tried to get into Switzerland, but was betrayed, arrested, and deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. From here on, the story takes on a surreal character. Shortly after her arrival at what has been called "a wound in the order of being," it was discovered that Alma was a violinist, and, in a grotesque replay of her past, she was asked to take over a poor, threadbare musical ensemble of women inmates. By sheer courage, fortitude, and determination, she turned this motley group into a viable orchestra, training

and coaching the players; arranging music for its ill-matched instrumental makeup, from mandolins to sopranos; and driving herself and her musicians to exhaustion. Gaining unprecedented stature and exploiting some of the most brutal camp functionaries' love of music, she saved her musicians from the gas chambers and also obtained some favors and privileges for them. Forty years later, one of them said that there is not a day when she does not remember Alma and thank her. Alma herself succumbed to an undiagnosed illness, which deepened the mystery surrounding her. Author Richard Newman made friends with Alfred Rosenthal and his wife in Canada in 1946. The impetus for writing this book was the publication of a memoir called *Playing for Time* by Fania Frenkel, a singer with Alma's orchestra, which gives a very harsh portrayal of her. Newman's search for the "real" Alma lasted 22 years and took him around the world. His sources are family letters, interviews, and correspondence with family, friends, and surviving members of the orchestra, lending the book an overwhelming immediacy and authenticity. Included are Mahler and Rosenthal family trees, many pages of photographs, a map of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and a list of the orchestra players. The section dealing with camp life (and death) is written in an unemotional, reportorial style full of facts and figures. That approach may have saved Newman's own sanity, and, by its incongruity with the grisly content, it both blunts and heightens the impact of the indescribable, unimaginable details it recounts. This is a book to numb the mind and sear the soul. --Edith Eisler

Fania Frenkel's depiction of conductor Alma Rosé as a cruel taskmaster in her memoir-turned-film *Playing for Time* was the catalyst for this biography of the woman who founded and led the Auschwitz women's orchestra until her death in 1944. Surviving orchestra members felt Frenkel had presented an unfair portrayal of Rosé. Newman, a music critic with access to Rosé family papers, decided to set the record straight. Newman and coauthor Kirtley have produced an exhaustively detailed account of Rosé's life and times, covering Viennese musical society from the late 19th century until the rise of the Third Reich, life in occupied Holland, emigration and escape from pre-WWII Europe, daily life at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Alma's place in each. The result is a fascinating and painstaking history of an era but not, until near the end, an engaging biography. Rosé was born into a musical dynasty: her mother, Justine, was the younger sister of Gustav Mahler; her father, Arnold, was concertmaster of the Vienna Opera and Philharmonic orchestras as well a leader of his own acclaimed quartet, and it was he who taught his daughter to play the violin. It's not until her arrival in Auschwitz, midway through the book, that Rosé emerges as someone other than a dedicated artist, devoted daughter and spurned lover. Interviews with fellow orchestra members and camp survivors gratefully recall her efforts to find jobs for non-musicians and her

advocacy for the comfort and safety of the women in her block. At one point, Ros? asked for--and got--a heater in the middle of winter by telling camp officials that the instruments needed constant and warm temperatures. (Apr.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

A very tough "slog" with hundreds of performers, conductors of note threading their way through the first hundred pages. Tedious to put it mildly. The narrative picked up and the final few hundred pages are engaging and depressingly interesting. It would be of great interest to musicians - particularly those in the keyboard and conducting worlds. The Auschwitz narrative will be well known to those who know the history thereof. Alma Rose is tragic figure with so much unfulfilled potential.

"Alma RosÃfÂ©: Vienna to Auschwitz" is a poignant and beautifully related account of one the most extraordinary women who ever lived. Alma RosÃfÂ©, the daughter of the most renowned violinist of Vienna who was concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic and the first violinist of perhaps the finest string quartet in the world, was also the niece of Gustav Mahler. She became a fine violinist and musician in her own right, taking musical Vienna by storm, and creating a famous and successful women's orchestra which toured throughout Europe. Soon after the Nazi takeover in Austria, the Jewish family left for England where Alma continued to give concerts, playing even in her father's illustrious quartet. But she also took the risk of concertizing in Holland. She was trapped by the sudden Nazi blitzkrieg and takeover of Holland, tried to escape, was betrayed and caught by the Nazis, and sent to Auschwitz-Birkenwald. It was at Auschwitz that Alma's extraordinary life takes on new dimensions: within the death camp, she creates and directs a women's orchestra composed not only of traditional symphonic instruments, but also of guitars, mandolins, accordions, and recorders, playing arrangements made and copied by women inmates of Auschwitz. Because of Alma's work at Auschwitz, hundreds of women were saved from the Nazi gas chambers; in fact, many survivors contributed to the book through interviews with the author. This story has been told before, but never as well as Richard Newman and Karen Kirtley relates it. Mr. Newman took twenty-two years of painstaking work of research and interviewing before completing the book. In the Editor's Note, Ms. Kirtley points out Mr. Newman's "phenomenal achievement" of talking with "more than one hundred people able to provide firsthand information about Alma RosÃfÂ©." The book is carefully researched with abundant documentation, a massive bibliography, and appendices which contain lists of every woman who played in the Auschwitz-Birkenau orchestra, a background of the Mahler-RosÃfÂ© family, a list of every interview that was conducted, and a "camp glossary"

of terms used at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The authors delve deeply into Vienna's history, culture, and society, which produced the strong anti-Semitic feelings, and, ultimately, the welcoming of Nazi troops into the city. A short review, of course, cannot do justice to the scope and dimension of this marvelous book; it is a work that every student of music and European history should read.

However, the book will also appeal to readers without a background in modern European history, for the book is written clearly and with firm structure and form. Richard Newman and Karen Kirley have provided the reader with a remarkable book about an exceptional woman --- a poignant reminder of the anguish and tragedy of Nazi Germany and Austria, but also about the courage and humanity that existed in some people. This is an extraordinary book.

Fascinating story. Important historical record which highlights Nazi atrocities, illustrates the immense human tragedies that occurred. It also points out the irony that the Nazis rather than protecting German music indeed damaged a culture and legacy during the Reich and afterwards. We North Americans are the recipients of this culture. The author was an intimate friend of the brother of Alma. He survived Nazism by emigrating first to the US then lived in Canada. The story also gives us insights into the lives of Gustav Mahler, Alma Mahler-Gropius Werfel and Arnold Rose.

this book is for my daughter. she really liked it

great

My review is best expressed in a letter to the authors. While the letter speaks little of the content of the story, it does the reflections of the reader: I have just finished your book, Alma RosÃ©, Vienna to Auschwitz and felt compelled to write a word of thanks for such an excellent book. I have lived in Vienna for 23 years and in our early years I walked by the RosÃ© house in the Pyrker gasse each day, taking our oldest to the Volksschule. Of course, at that time, I had no idea the importance of number 23. Through your book and others of Viennese history I have gained a profound sense of history that a midwest American, growing up in the suburbs, rarely has a chance to learn. We have since moved from the 19th district, but each time I am in the city the enormity of life that has gone on before me deeply tugs at my soul. The stones I walk on have carried the lives of so many, each woven into a history of joy and often of utter loss and evil. I believe your book was one of those that has allowed me to enter into a life past. Through it I have gained new perspective that the joy and

beauty I now enjoy is not without the marring of tragedy and sorrow of many who were innocent. I was also able with my family to visit Auschwitz this summer. The visit has left a lasting impact on our minds and it certainly allowed me to have even deeper sense of personal presence as I read your book. The immensity of the tragedy leaves one lost for thoughts and words. The life of Alma RosÃfÂ© puts a reality to that part of history that seems unbelievable, yet was played out in the very places I have lived and walked. I visited the RosÃfÂ© grave in Grinzing last week and noted that Alma's name is inscribed on the headstone (unfortunately, the date is 4/4/44 and not 5/4/44). In honor of her courage and for the lives she most certainly helped spare, I left a memorial candle on her grave. I did not seem fitting to leave the grave without some acknowledgement and sign of respect of her family's life. Again, thank you for the fine research and excellent presentation of her life. The book must also be considered a memorial not just to one life, but to many who's stories will never be told.

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