

Music survives Holocaust

May 5 concert pays tribute to cantor, celebrates Rabbi Spar's 75th birthday

By LISA MANCUSO

Over 60 years ago, Cantor Shmuel Blaszczyk was the chief cantor at the New World Street Synagogue in Eger, Hungary. He was a gifted composer who wrote and performed original music scores at the synagogue in the village where he and his family lived. But on June 7, 1944, the Nazis marched into Eger, and like so many Jews in so many villages throughout Hungary and the rest of Europe, the cantor and his family were herded into ghettos and deported to concentration camps.

The Blaszczyk family was sent to Auschwitz, but before he was taken away, Cantor Blaszczyk was able to give six of his compositions to a neighbor for safekeeping. The cantor, his wife and other members of the Blaszczyk family didn't survive the Holocaust but five of his eight children did. One of his daughters, Eva Egri, now 90 and living in Florida returned to Eger after the war. Their neighbor had successfully hidden Cantor Blaszczyk's music from the Nazis and she was able to retrieve the documents.

That was in 1946. Now, more than a century later, Cantor Blaszczyk's music will finally be heard at a cantorial concert "Remember Us Unto Life" at Temple Beth Shalom, 433 Edgewater, Smithtown on Thursday, May 5 at 7 p.m. Cantor Judy Merrick, along with five other cantors from around Long Island, will perform the music for the first time since World War II and for the first time in the United States. The event will celebrate the life of Cantor Blaszczyk and also the 75th birthday of Rabbi Elliott T. Spar, who was instrumental in raising the funds that made the cantorial concert possible, said Rhonda Cooper, chairperson of the event.

In spite of its dire beginnings, the journey of the cantor's music from Hungary to Florida to Smithtown is truly a story of perseverance and friendship that transcends cultural and religious boundaries. Cantor Blaszczyk's daughter has lived in Fort

Lauderdale for many years. Her next door neighbor is the mother of Leonard Romano, a Smithtown resident. "They couldn't be more different but they are like sisters," said Mr. Romano, whose mother is Catholic and of Italian heritage. "They are inseparable." Their apartments share a common kitchen wall, he said, and if one of them goes out, she is sure to knock on the wall when she returns to let her friend know she is back.

Mr. Romano, who taught social studies and Holocaust Studies in the Northport-East Northport School District for over 35 years, visits his mother often, and whenever he is in Florida to see her, he sees Mrs. Egri. Over the years, Mrs. Egri talked with Mr. Romano about her terrible time in Auschwitz and about her family. Although he never pushed her to tell him what happened all those years ago, Mrs. Egri would often open up to him. As a history teacher who taught students about the Holocaust, Mr. Romano said that Mrs. Egri told him she knew he would share her story with his students, which he did.

About five years ago, Mr. Romano was once again visiting his mother. She was at a doctor's appointment so he visited with Mrs. Egri while waiting for her to come home. While they were talking, he said she went into a closet and retrieved a large brown envelope. She showed him the contents: her father's music. Mr. Romano realized the music was something special. He asked her if he could make copies, "I would never take the originals from her," he said. She agreed. When he returned to Long Island, Mr. Romano knew he had to share the music with someone, but life got in the way. It wasn't until this past June, after he retired that he took the music to Temple Beth Shalom in Smithtown, where his children had been Bar and Bas Mitzvahed by Rabbi Spar many years ago. "I think the world of Rabbi Spar. So I made a phone call and spoke to Cantor Judy and told her the story. Her father is a Hungarian Jew who also experienced that connection that prompted Cantor Merrick to invite Mr. Romano to the temple. "When I showed her the music, she was floored; she told me it was very historical." They ultimately turned to Rabbi Spar who was able to get the funding they needed to make the May 5th concert possible.

Although Mrs. Egri is too frail to attend the concert in New York, Mr. Romano said they are going to be able to broadcast it over the internet through Skype so that Mrs. Egri and

her family in Florida will be able to see and hear her father's music performed. There will be numerous speakers at the event and a taped interview with Mrs. Egri where she will share some of her incredible story. Members of the Blaszc family who live in Brooklyn will be present at the concert. Plans for a subsequent concert in Florida are in the works, said Mr. Romano, so Mrs. Egri will be able to attend in person. Tickets to the event are still available. For information, call 724-0424.



A concert May 5 at Temple Beth Shalom will feature the work of Cantor Shmuel Blaszc, who was the chief cantor at the New World Street Synagogue in Eger, Hungary in the 1940s. Although the cantor did not survive the Holocaust, his daughter, Eva Egri (left, with granddaughter Julia Goldner) was able to cover his original compositions hidden with neighbors when the Nazis invaded. The concert will also celebrate the 75th birthday of Rabbi Elliot T. Spar who led Temple Beth Shalom.