

Holocaust composer's music debuts

By Tracy Vence
Special to The Advocate

Rosian Zerner was just a child during World War II when she was interned with her uncle, Edwin Geist, in Lithuania's Kovno Ghetto. She has very few memories of Geist, an esteemed composer, before his death. But on Oct. 25 and 26, at Boston's Goethe-Institut and Brandeis University, respectively, Edwin Geist's recovered music will have its U.S. debut.

Zerner is the former vice president and current governing board member of the World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust. Though she does not recall the life of her uncle in acute detail, the rediscovery of this otherwise forgotten composer has created a universal legacy.

"[My uncle] represents, in a way, all of the other talents that could have been," said Zerner.

Edwin Geist was released from internment to compose for the Nazis but was later murdered in 1942 after displeasing his captors. Zerner said that he was not composing the type and amount of music they were asking for. She recalled a family legend that told of her uncle writing a score about the Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro, and that the comparison to Hitler was "obvious."

Zerner said Geist requested more time to compose but it was "too much to ask."

"So they simply murdered him and sent his clothing and glasses back to his wife Lyda," she said. Lyda Bagriansky took her own life



Edwin Geist, murdered in 1942.

shortly thereafter.

Geist's music was only performed three times before the turn of the 21st century. After his death, Lithuanian friends broke into his sealed apartment and retrieved his compositions. The rescued music ended up in the hands of Helena Holzman, one of the people who rescued Zerner from the Holocaust. When Holzman was no longer safe living in Lithuania, she fled.

Forced to abide by Soviet rules that allowed each person only one piece of luggage, she gave the suitcase full of Geist's compositions to the Soviet Ministry of Culture. Geist's diary entries for Lyda were also left there.

In 2002, at the 100th celebration of his birth in Germany and Lithuania, Geist's opera was performed. This event, Zerner said, launched Geist's "rising from the ashes."

A CD, "Edwin Geist's Chamber Music and Songs," was subsequently released in 2007. It received honors from Musik-

Zeitung, the prestigious music weekly in Germany.

To date, Geist's music has been performed in Poland, Switzerland, Lithuania and Germany. The upcoming debut of his work in the U.S. "has been a culmination of almost 10 years of my love and devotion to honoring his memory," Zerner said.

She praised the German Consulate for generously funding and sponsoring the debut of her uncle's works in Boston. She credited Dr. Wolfgang Vorwerk, former German Consul of Germany in Boston, with moving the project along.

"He has been the mover and the shaker of this whole thing," she said.

Both Boston shows will include a panel discussion and reception in addition to the musical performance by Verena Rein, a soprano from Berlin, and the Irving

Fine Society Singers, directed by Nicholas Brown. In addition to Zerner, the panel will include Dr. Klaus Harer, deputy director of the German Cultural Forum for Eastern Europe; Reinhard Kaiser, who wrote Geist's biography; and Dr. Bret Werb, a musicologist at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Both events are free and open to the public, though reservations are required at Brandeis. Zerner hopes that her uncle's music will help to remind people of others that have been forgotten in the Holocaust.

"[This is for] those who could have, should have and would have been outstanding cultural contributors to our world," she said.

Event information: Goethe-Institut Boston, 170 Beacon St., call 617-262-6050 ext.10. Slosberg Theater, Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass., call 781-736-3400 (Option 5) to make reservations.