

NATIONAL POST

Lay Down Your Arms



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I used to sing in a school choir. Invitations to entertain outsiders were exciting. I can imagine how thrilled we would have been to perform a song in a film. Here is a story of a choir that was asked, but didn't perform.

Award-winning producer/director Fern Levitt specializes in documentaries dealing with human rights issues. Her current project is a film on Mikhail Gorbachev. For a sequence in which the Berlin Wall comes down, she wanted children singing a sweet peace song as a vocal backdrop, so she contacted Jan Szot, teacher and choir director at Toronto's prestigious Claude Watson School of the Performing Arts. Szot enthusiastically accepted in principle Levitt's invitation for the choir to perform in the film. Various songs were discussed, including the well-known and widely admired *Lay Down Your Arms* (LDYA).

The lyrics to LDYA are based on the prophet Isaiah's yearning vision of a peaceful global kingdom where "swords [are] beaten into ploughshares, spears into pruning hooks." The Israeli composer Doron Levinson wrote the song to commemorate comrades lost in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The melody is haunting, the words moving:

*Dear God, please hear us – Listen to our prayer,
And help us do Thy will upon this earth
Let the children suffer war no more
And let a peaceful world be given birth.*
(To hear it sung, go to www.laydownyourarms.ca)

On being informed of Levitt's final decision in favour of LDYA, Szot reversed course. Szot left a telephone message, according to Levitt, saying the choir would not perform LDYA because it was "written by an Israeli soldier". Alex Khaskin, the documentary's independent musical composer, affirms that in a subsequent telephone conversation, Szot also confided to him her

"Israeli soldier" reservations. Khaskin recalls Szot remarking that her choir was "like a United Nations," and that such a choice might offend

the sensibilities of Middle Eastern students' parents.

The road is long and steep

What we sow, we reap

Children need you:

Let us lead you.

Deeply offended herself by the song's rejection, Levitt met with Szot and Claude Watson principal Heather Mitchell to discuss the issue, along with representatives from the teachers' union and Canadian Jewish Congress. Mitchell cited the Toronto District School Board's policy of non-discrimination in agreeing that the song, benign in content, should not have been rejected because of its composer's national provenance. According to Levitt, Szot then stepped back from the "Israeli soldier" comment, claiming rather that LDYA was "not a high quality song".

Levitt lodged a complaint against Szot with the Toronto District School Board. The Human Rights Department of the Board undertook an investigation. Last week the Board exonerated Szot, saying it was Levitt's word against Szot, who claimed she "could not recall" whether she made the Israeli soldier comment or not. Curiously, in its investigation the Board did not seek to include Khaskin's critical corroboration of Levitt's story.

*Every hand that holds a sword
can hold a baby*

Every heart can learn to love ...

Lay down your arms ...

Coincidentally, Szot's choir was to have performed at a benefit for the Friends of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in June. When word of the LDYA contretemps reached him, the Centre's director Avi Benlolo withdrew the invitation.

Although Szot didn't respond to my requests for comment, she states in the Board report that she feels devastated by the blowback she is experiencing. I believe it. For Szot is clearly neither anti-Semitic nor anti-Zionist, and has the professional record and personal testimonials to prove it.

No, this story is rather about earnest

multicultural correctness clumsily navigating between deference to minority grievances on one side versus non-discrimination against individuals on the other. When "Israel" hit her radar screen, I think Szot, normally unbiased, simply took the current path of least resistance: She let an idealistic Israeli artist take the political hit.

Somewhere deep inside the soldier

There's a dreamer

Dreaming of a world of peace.

So our greater concern should be to know: Does this represent a trend? Did voices in the global anti-Zionist ether subliminally murmur to Szot that there would be a higher price for the school to pay in angry reactions from Israel-hating unassimilated Muslims if she accepted the song than from "nice" Canadianized Jews if she refused it? Where Israel is concerned, has appeasement of Muslims – pre-emptively in this case – become the instinctive default position amongst even our most enlightened and cultivated pedagogues?

A CHILDREN'S CHOIR HAS LOST TWO OPPORTUNITIES TO SHOWCASE ITS TALENT

What a lose-lose situation we have here, and how bitterly seasoned with irony. A children's choir has lost two opportunities to showcase its talent on two values-centric stages: a film associated with one of Democracy's finest hours, the fall of the Berlin Wall – and an event to honour Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal, acknowledged icon of justice and human rights. What beautiful memories those children and their families might have cherished, aborted because an educator failed to distinguish between politically correct deference to (presumed) minority bias, and the higher value – non-discrimination against a fellow artist – to which she is morally and pedagogically bound.

*Lay down your arms –
Let Time heal every wound,
And Love will someday set us free!*

The publisher of *Lay Down Your Arms* is considering an Arabic-Hebrew version, hopefully to be sung by a mixed Jewish-Muslim choir. Who could complain about that? Somebody, I dare say. It's the way we live now.

- The English lyrics to "Lay Down Your Arms" were written by Lisa Catherine Cohen. The bridge was written by Harry Lewis.