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Whatever it Takes to Remember Holocaust, Even an Ice-Skating Routine

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Channel One

To me, most art is like music was to Louis Armstrong: it's⊠either good or bad. In Russia, ice dancing is an art-form no less respectable⊠than others. Tatiana Navka's courageous performance on Saturday commemorating⊠the Holocaust via a tribute to the 1997 film "Life is Beautiful" was better⊠than good. But what do I know?

Actually, I do know a few things (a very few things) they⊠taught me in grade school: you have to consider the intention of the artist⊠before judging; keep an open mind; and read the assignment carefully before⊠starting the work, ere you go off on the wrong tangent. In Hebrew school they also⊠taught us to never forget: this applies to the tragedy of genocide as well as⊠to the memories of those no longer with us.

Hence my surprise at accusations of disrespect,⊠inconsideration and tastelessness directed at Navka, especially from the⊠West.

I don't remember these critics using such terms to describe Pussy Riot's chicken-humping, church-crashing, pseudo-musical antics.

Navka's intent was plainly stated on her Instagram: "Our children need to know and remember that terrible time, which I hope, God willing, they will never know." The report on CNN neglected to translate this.

Keeping an open mind, I knew I needed an objective second opinion. Whenever I want an unfiltered reaction about something on Russian television, I turn to my sagacious mother-in-law. At 75, Tamara Alexandrovna spends a lot of time watching that box. Yet she is apolitical and has no axe to grind with anyone — including me (as long as I remember to pay the cable TV bill on time). I know I can count on her folk wisdom.

"Tamara," I asked, "Did you happen to watch that ice skating program on Saturday?"

"Yes, of course. There was one very especially beautiful routine. The one with the couple in striped outfits."

"How did people react? It is such a painful topic...."

"The audience gave a standing ovation. Many had tears in their eyes; I did too..."

Good enough for me. Sadly, I had to drag her back to the real world and explain that a scandal was brewing. Tamara frowned and said, "Too many people with too little to do. It was a moving performance, and that's it."
She has a way of ending conversations on a decisive note.

The situation brought back a memory of a bigoted classmate from school, in the town outside New York City where I grew up. It was a lily white existence, so we Jewish kids, though barely a minority, were, once-in-a-rare-while, made the targets of his derision. This particular boy liked to toss a penny on the floor of the hallway and urge us to chase it.

Then, in 1978, NBC broadcast a mini-series about the Holocaust. It was also criticized for accuracy and taste. In one scene, concentration camp mastermind Adolf Eichmann is dining with colleagues and remarks that the stench from the Auschwitz crematorium is ruining his appetite. A poorly timed commercial break for Lysol cleaning fluid follows. A woman named "Snoopy Sniffer" arrives in her neighbor's kitchen and announces there are odors that need to be dealt with, probably coming from the oven.

Still, the show managed to convey the horror of genocide. Toward the end it included a scene where Jews are rounded up and locked inside their synagogue, which was then torched by the Nazis.

The day after that episode the bigot-boy came up to me with a look of awe on his face. He had watched the series. "I had no idea," he said. "I'm so sorry. I'll never make fun of Jews again."

So now he knew something about that terrible time. A mind had been changed thanks to art. Good enough for me.

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