

To Life!

Yale Strom and Nikolai Muck have given a great concert in the former Synagogue of Ober-Gleen and got also linguistically in touch with their audience

„Mir zaynen ale Brider, oy, oy, ale brider, un mir zingen freylekhe lider, oy, oy...“ With his first concert in Ober-Gleen, Yale Strom has created a link to what had seemed to be lost since Nazi-time. Of the Jewish culture of former centuries, there aren't only half-timbered Synagogues left in the countryside, the paths of Jewish merchants and Jewish cemeteries, but also Hebrew and Yiddish words, that can't possibly be separated from the Upper Hessian dialect. The musician and researcher from the U.S. speaks several languages, including Yiddish. In the Vogelsberg region, he is able to make himself understood without knowing much about High German.

„The concert has fallen into our laps“, confessed Helmut Meß, the head of Heimatverein (culture and home association) Stadt Kirtorf when he was greeting the audience. After the Association for Jewish History in the Vogelsberg region (Verein für Jüdische Geschichte im Vogelsbergkreis) had had booked „Yale Strom & Hot Pstromi“ once more for a concert in Lauterbach, Joachim Legatis had proposed a concert in Ober-Gleen, as well. And so, in the evening after the official re-opening of the old Synagogue, the widely traveled, charismatic ethnologist, violinist, singer, filmmaker, university lecturer and bookauthor connected Klezmer and Roma Music from Eastern Europe to Synagogue songs from Hesse. The song „Ale Brider“ could not be lacking: „Un mir zingen freylekhe lider, oy, oy, oy, un mir haltn zikh in eynem, oy, oy, zikh in eynem, azelkhes iz nito bay keynem, oy, oy, oy.“

As his wife Elizabeth Schwartz had been fallen ill and had to rest after the soundcheck in the Synagogue, Yale Strom and the guitar player Nikolai Muck played on their own in Ober-Gleen. A singer like Elizabeth Schwartz can hardly be replaced, but Yale Strom has his way with turning listeners into co-singers. Wholeheartedly, men, women and children from Ober-Gleen, Kirtorf, Alsfeld, Kestrich, Frankfurt, Bremen and other towns, sang refrains and single vowels or just hummed along: „Un mir zaynen ale eynik, oy, oy, ale eynik, tzi mir zaynen fil tzi veynik, oy, oy, oy!“

Few people had been at the official opening. Ulrich Künz, the mayor of Kirtorf, pointed out one more time the importance of not forgetting those who have suffered because of the NS regime. Herbod Gans, the architect from Homberg who had restored the Synagogue in Romrod as well, explained why he had decided to forgo colors. The plans of the carpenter still exist, but only because of oral history there is knowledge concerning the colors of the Synagogue. The late timewitness Frieda Jirusch had told local historians, that the women's gallery had been painted jeansblue. Another timewitness confirmed that: The blue color and the yellow of the little stars had only vanished, when the village's blacksmith, *Schmidts Kall*, who had made the Synagogue his shop, had whitewashed the room before the celebration of his wedding anniversary.

Since it has been restored, the inside of the Synagogue is painted in a light grey, to the effect that it is modest and noble at the same time. The opal glass lamps on the walls are almost invisible, and a round, flat chandelier made of metal, big as a wagon wheel, but without spokes, spreads an equal light, without dazzling anyone. The three heating plates beneath the u-shaped women's gallery give just enough warmth to protect the building from damage in winter. From the backside of the house, water is obviously pressing into to the wall, stains are showing underneath the arched windows. Noone has put the elements to a halt, yet. A staircase made of steel leads to the women's gallery. The wooden annexe is placed where the religion teacher and prayer leader had lived and given lessons. On the same grounds, there had been a little stall, as well, and a garden, as the historic plans clarify.

The floor of the old Synagogue is made of bleached wood, the middle has been left out, as if it was lowered. A big, round stone marks the spot where the reading desk had been standing. Four dozens of Thonet chairs and a reading desk are the only furniture in the room. The four stone steps in front of the North-Eastern wall that had been leading to the Torah shrine, had been demolished after the war when the chimney had been built. It is gone, and no new shrine built. No doubt: The house is no longer a Synagogue, but a house for concerts and readings, mainly in the warm seasons. The acoustics are good, as long as the musicians aren't placed beneath the gallery.

The late architect Thea Altaras from Gießen had already opted in Romrod to chose for the interior of the Synagogue bright colors. Thanks to her book, the wider public has become aware of the cultural meaning of the view Synagogues in the countryside. Some of the Synagogues that had been standing after pogrom night in 1938, had been demolished in the decades after the war. Also the ones in Angenrod and in Diez upon the Lahn, where Johanna Stern, nee Lamm from Ober-Gleen, had been living with her family. How elaborated the research of her mother had been, the opera director, actor and author Adriana Altaras has described in her book „Titos Brille“ (Tito's glasses). Thea Altaras had been in Ober-Gleen, as well.

The few Jewish families of Ober-Gleen had saved money for almost 30 years to build their Synagogue, and met in their houses till then for the prayers. In 1872, they ordered the half-timbered house that has been build close to the house Obergasse 48 and got the official address Obergasse 91. Other than in many other Synagogues in the countryside, the one in Ober-Gleen had not been integrated in a private house, the architect Herbold Gans said in his speech. Later on, a farmer had built his stall very close to the Synagogue. Two arched windows had to be sealed with bricks. It might have been effected quarrels, but is also the reason why the building is still standing: In order to protect the property of the Christian neighbors, the SA-men had not put fire to the Synagogue in November 1938. But they had torn the Torah rolls through the street, as timewitnesses remembered, and had attacked Jewish families in their homes.

At the occasion of the official opening of the old Synagogue it has been Rudolf Scheld who spoke about the pogrom night. The farmer lives in Ober-Gleen, but he was born in Kirtorf and four years old at the time of the "Kristallnacht". The house of his family had been standing on the same grounds as the Synagogue of Kirtorf that has been demolished later. When the SA-men had come, his father had wanted to put on the light in the court, the eyewitness said, but the Nazis had threatened to kill him. They went into the Synagogue, damaged a lot and stole things. Jewish people from Kirtorf were hit and later deported and killed. When Jews of Kirtorf had knocked secretly at their backdoor, asking for a piece of bread, his mother had given them something to eat, Rudolf Scheld said. "This shall not be forgotten, as well." There had been the Nazis, but also some people who had helped others in need. Like his mother and like Elfriede Roth, the girl who had assisted Rosa Weinberg, nee Lamm from Ober-Gleen, on Sabbath in her household in Lauterbach.

In Lauterbach, „Yale Strom & Hot Pstromi“ had sung 79 years after the pogrom night. In their concert the next day in Ober-Gleen, Yale Strom and Nikolai Muck had been alone, not counting an enthusiastic audience. Noone dared to dance spontaneously, but many feet were jiggling, and the listeners got warm hands by clapping them, as much as a rhythm group as when applauding.

No question: To accompany Yale Strom's charismatic, energy loaded violin play properly, it needs an extraordinary jazz guitar player, experienced in improvisation. The two professional musicians

live on two different continents and therefore don't often go on stage together, but they are a well-coordinated team in the truest sense of the word.

As a regional contrast to the Roma music and the Klezmer from Poland and Russia, the two musicians played three songs who had been heard in Hessian Synagogues in the 19th and 20th century: „Meyen Nign“ from the cd „Borsht with Bread, Brothers“, a piece from Frankfurt upon the Main, that had been played formerly to give the bride and the groom a last chance to change their mind. The historian and journalist Monika Felsing who is working voluntarily for the historical society Lastoria, Bremen, has published four books about Ober-Gleen and writes a blog in dialect, High German and English, had found notes and lyrics of further Jewish songs from Hesse for Yale Strom, thanks to book author Dr. Michael Imhof from Fulda („400 Jahre Juden in der Rhön“), the European Center of Jewish Music in Hannover and the society for Christian-Jewish cooperation Bad Hersfeld-Rotenburg. Two of the pieces were to be heard in Ober-Gleen now: a song from Tann in the Rhön mountains that had been played at pilgrim's feasts in autumn, spring and summer, and a Hessian song to the circumcision of a male baby. In the audiobook „Yiddish Leben“ about Jewish life, these songs will be heard, thanks to the musicians. The volunteers of the historical society are working on this sixth cd of the series „So klingt Owenglie“ (The sounds of Ober-Gleen) at the moment. The cds of „Yale Strom & Hot Pstromi“ are available in Germany, as well. „Un mir libn zikh dokh ale, oy, oy zikh dokh ale, vi a khosn mit a kale oy, oy, oy, un mir zaynen freylakh munter, oy, oy, freylakh munter, zingen lider tantsn unter oy, oy, oy.“

The echo of the concert will last for a long time. The joy of playing music, of playing with languages, of the interaction with the audiences made the concert an experience. The listeners called out for three encores. Some of the Gliesbeurel (dumpling bags, the dialect name for people from Ober-Gleen) were stunned how much of Yale Strom's lingually mixed announcements they had understood. „My ee is a oo, and my oo is a ee“, Yale Strom had said at the beginning of the concert, cheering up his Upper Hessian audience whose dialect is famous for switching and combining vowels. His Yiddish has changed over the years, he wrote in an e-mail later. „My bobe (grosmutter) would say Gut Shabes, Azoy Gut, Gut Morgn, etc. but because of all the time I have spent in the Carpathian Mountains as well as in Romania my Yiddish is the dialect where all the ‚oos‘ become ‚ee's‘.“

All in all, it was a special day for Ober-Gleen. One of those who were lacking, was Ernst A. Bloemers. The late hotel manager with international experience and charming owner of a little gallery („Kunst im Kuhstall“/Cultura 2000) had stood for the restoration of the Synagogue and for the research of the local Jewish history. In his efforts, he had been supported by the Heimatverein and the longtime head of the village council, Armin Becker. His daughter, the musician and choir leader Veronika Bloemers who has lived in Israel for more than two decades, had been sitting in the audience during the concert. In the afternoon, she had already represented her father worthily and had interpreted, among other songs, a traditional song for Sabbath, but also Bulgar a la Naftule, Oyfn Pripetshik and L'Chaim: „To Life!“ A quartet led by her had sung „Eli, Eli“, „Hashivenu“ and Aaron's blessing from the fourth book of Moses: „G-d bless you and shelter you.“

And who might not have thought of the Jewish families of Ober-Gleen that night? Since his parents, his brother, his sister and he had been able to emigrate four days before pogrom night, Ernest Stern (Ernst Lothar Stern), the son of Johanna Stern, nee Lamm from Ober-Gleen, lives in the U.S., but he is well informed about the events in Hesse. He has joined the Ober-Gleen project of the historical society Lastoria, like Robin Smolen, one of the daughters of Herbert Sondheim from Ober-Gleen. She would have loved to come from California to be in the Synagogue of her ancestors, and to listen to the music. There will be another chance: Yale Strom and Nikolai Muck

have promised to come back to Ober-Gleen to give a concert in 2018. And then, the wonderful voice of Elizabeth Schwartz will fill the beautiful, bright room. „Un mir zaynen ale shvester, oy, oy, ale shvester, azoy vi Rakhl, Ruth un Ester, oy, oy, oy.“

Monika Felsing
www.monikafelsing.de