



A PIANO VIRTUOSO MURDERED IN AUSCHWITZ, BUT HIS NEPHEW CONTINUES HIS LEGACY: 'I FEEL HIS PRESENCE WHEN I PLAY CHOPIN'

The New York pianist Roger Peltzman only discovered his connection with his executed uncle, Norbert Stern, through music. In 'Dedication', showing this week at KVS in Brussels, Peltzman processes the staggering family trauma in a performance that concerns us all. -Floris Baeke

Roger Peltzman's tragic family history is worth several novels. He grew up as a Jewish boy in New York, but had "a dark cloud inside me," he shared with me via Zoom. "A lingering feeling of loss marked my childhood, long before I fully understood everything: there was a presence of absence."

Hitler took over Germany in 1933, and Peltzman's maternal family, the Sterns, fled from Berlin to Brussels. In 1944, the Nazis captured them in their hideout at Emile Becolaan 121 in Elsene. Almost all were killed in Auschwitz. "No matter how often I tell it, I still can't fully grasp it," says Peltzman.

His mother was the sole escapee: the girl climbed out the bathroom window during the SS raid, never to see her family again. Fleeing to New York, she fell madly in love with the boy behind the pharmacy counter. "My father was a true New Yorker," Peltzman reminisces. "That's how my mother tried to forget her European roots for a long time."

But growing up, Peltzman always saw that one photo on the coffee table that his mother cherished. It was her brother Norbert Stern, a musical prodigy. At fourteen, he had already won prestigious awards, played on Belgian radio, and received a medal from Leopold III.

Belgian Complicity - The reason you might not know him is due to the horrors of fascism. "As a child, I only knew Norbert from a photo and a medal," Peltzman recounts. "The moment I truly realized my connection to my uncle was when I myself began to excel at the piano. I felt his presence, especially when playing Chopin. It was as if he was giving me pointers, guiding me through the music."

Peltzman's quest to uncover his family history took him to Auschwitz, the Dossin Barracks, and eventually to Brussels, to a woman whose family let young Norbert play their Steinway during his hiding. Suddenly, everything became tangible: the piano, their house, photos, their fake ID cards.

Eventually, Norbert's story and that of his family led to 'Dedication', a musical performance with which Peltzman is now touring Europe. "Creating it was agony," admits Peltzman, but after four years of intensive labor and a hundred versions, the celebrated piece now stands. The engaging Peltzman narrates, laughs, mourns, plays blues and Chopin. He does everything with the talent the Nazis took from his uncle. But playing the one-man show is not lonely. "Every night when I bring the show, I spend time with my family. Then they are there, very close to me."

'Dedication' is more than a moving tribute: it's also therapy and a warning. Racism, antisemitism, and hatred are not just problems for certain groups, but for everyone. Belgians too transported Jews on Belgian trains to camps. Peltzman: "I don't know to what extent Belgians are aware of their complicity in all this, but it takes people to bring these things to light. My family members were ordinary people, like you and me. The fact that they became victims is something that should touch us all."

Peltzman realizes the world is not becoming more tolerant. "That's why I feel I must stand up for others. Because such things happened to my people."

Bizarre Homecoming - Returning to Europe is special for Peltzman. He speaks fondly of Belgian food, James Ensor, and the Ghent Altarpiece, his favorite painting. Both Brussels and Berlin, where his mother never wanted to return, feel like a bizarre homecoming. "I even have a German passport. My mother would go crazy if she knew. But I always say there are two people who would definitely hate that passport: her and Hitler."

Peltzman aims to testify to the truth in a time when it is increasingly manipulated. Thus, 'Dedication' does not end with Peltzman's final note. "This story needs to be told. If nobody does it, it will be forgotten or denied. That is now my responsibility."

'Dedication' plays on February 20 and 21 at KVS in Brussels.