



NORBERT STERN, PIANO VIRTUOSO KILLED BY THE NAZIS: 'A STORY THAT NEEDS TO BE TOLD FOR ANOTHER THOUSAND YEARS'

Tom Zonderman | February 2024

No one played Chopin and Schumann as virtuoso as Norbert Stern, a Polish-German Jew who arrived in Brussels in 1933. He would have undoubtedly become an international star. However, the Nazis decided otherwise. Eighty years after his death, his nephew Roger Peltzman brings him back to life at the KVS.

"I will bring copper polish to Belgium," Roger Peltzman tells me via Zoom from his apartment in Washington Heights, New York. "To polish the Stolpersteine for my uncle and his family. They have turned completely black." The 'stumbling stones' are located on Avenue Emile de Becol in Ixelles, and are cobblestones in honor of Norbert Stern and his parents, who were arrested there, in their hiding place in an attic, by the Nazis in 1944, and deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Roger Peltzman's mother Beatrice managed to escape through the bathroom window.

The Polish-Jewish Stern family arrived in Brussels in 1933, after fleeing Berlin when the far-right NSDAP started gaining power. The family's son, Norbert Stern, played the piano and studied at the Royal Conservatoire, where he made a big impression. "At the age of fourteen, he won the annual piano competition at the Conservatoire," Peltzman says. "But it was so embarrassing for the older students that the jury awarded him second place. I have a piece of paper on which his name has been crossed out at the top of the list."

The following year, Stern's name was at the very top of the list, thanks to his brilliant performance of Robert Schumann's Symphonische Etüden, a very challenging piece. His teacher saw in him the next Arthur Rubinstein, the legendary interpreter of Chopin. Stern even received a medal from King Leopold III, as he was unanimously voted best pianist of the Conservatoire.

Blues pianist

During the war, Norbert Stern continued his studies at the Conservatoire, until, in 1942, he and other Jewish students were barred from the Conservatoire by the occupying forces. In a letter to his brother, who had emigrated to the US, father Mayer Stern wrote that they were starving in Brussels and could no longer afford the rent. He hoped to be able to cross the ocean as well. "I know that Norbert, whose recent progress proves that he has become a mature artist, will immediately become successful, and will make a lot of money," the letter reads. "He is undeniably the best in Belgium today. As far as his artistry and his technique are concerned, no one even comes close. People are finding out that he really has 'it'."

Not much later, all Jews in Brussels were ordered to report to a train station to go to 'work' in Germany. The Stern family saw through this horrific deception and had false identity papers made. The family went into hiding. To no avail. In 1944, the Sterns were captured and deported. The father and mother were killed upon arrival in the concentration camp. Norbert Stern died after a few days of forced labor and illness. He was 21 years old.

"My mother emigrated to the U.S. after the war and built a new life there," says Peltzman. "She told me and my two brothers her story when we were kids. As a six-year-old, I immediately lost my innocence. As I got older, I wanted to know more about the lives of my relatives." Peltzman went to Auschwitz, visited the Kazerne Dossin in Mechelen, and began to piece together the lives of his grandparents and uncle. Because he himself plays the piano and taught at the Third Street Music School in New York, the story of his uncle's stifled talent hit him particularly hard.

"For a long time, I considered myself a blues pianist. I dreamed of the rock 'n' roll life style," Peltzman says. "Until I discovered classical music and fell in love with it. From then on, I started to have 'conversations' about music with my uncle. Especially when I played Chopin. It was as if he was giving me directions. I was a lousy pianist. Thanks to him, I improved." Gradually, the idea matured to turn his uncle's story into a performance. "A big job," says Peltzman. "I worked on it for four years. There were at least a hundred drafts." The performance is aptly called Dedication. The term refers both to his devotion to his beloved instrument and to the fact that the piece is a tribute to his family.

Second generation trauma

Roger Peltzman's dedication received an additional boost when, in 2010, shortly after his mother's death, he received a phone call from an 85 year old woman in Brussels. "She had tracked me down through an obituary in The New York Times. She told me how my uncle would occasionally leave his hiding place to play her Steinway piano. She still had the piano. I immediately got on a plane to see her and to play that piano." The old woman in question was Ghislaine Hennessey. After he played Chopin's lullaby Berceuse on the very same piano his uncle had played during the war, Hennessey showed Peltzman the place where his mother, her brother and their parents were in hiding during the war.

"My life is marked by this kind of crazy 'coincidences,'" Peltzman says. "I have a beautiful piano here at home, an expensive Mason & Hamlin that I won in a competition. Without this piano, I would never have been where I am today. It's like my uncle was somehow guiding me." At one point, Peltzman was looking for a recording studio in the UK to record an album. "Through a blog, someone contacted me and invited me to come and record in Brussels. The studio turned out to be at the Conservatoire, where my uncle had won all those prizes."

Peltzman also performed at the Kazerne Dossin, where visitors can watch a film about the experiences of his family and where an arrest warrant for his mother is on display. "They didn't know what happened to her after the war until I told them. The people at Dossin did a lot for me. They are invested in each and every one of the 26,000 prisoners who were transported to the concentration camps from there." "The past is never dead. It's not even past," American writer William Faulkner once wrote in his book *Requiem for a nun*. Roger Peltzman uses this quote in his performance. "Dedication turned out to be very therapeutic for me. This performance is actually about second generation trauma. All my life, I felt a certain kind of darkness lurking in the back of my mind. By learning more about my family, and by dealing with that trauma, I began to understand my own life better. It brought some peace of mind. There are not many Holocaust survivors left. With them, their stories, too, die. I consider it my responsibility to keep these stories alive. The fact that I can do that makes me happy."

His grandparents and uncle used to be distant relatives he never knew. "I didn't have a connection with them. However, after creating this performance and doing all the research, I feel very close to them. I have the feeling that, in a certain way, I brought them back to life. They are no longer murdered and forgotten."

A life in a cardboard box

There are people who did have the opportunity to hear Norbert Stern play, including Ghislaine Hennesey, and Suzanne Vromen, professor emeritus in sociology at New York's Bard College and herself a war refugee from Belgium. "For her book *Hidden children of the Holocaust: Belgian nuns and their daring rescue of young Jews from the Nazis*, she interviewed my mother," says Peltzman. "I got in touch with her. She told me that when she was a little girl, she heard my uncle play at their house, on his Bechstein piano. She said it changed her life."

Such stories make Norbert Stern a little more tangible, because, unfortunately, no recordings have survived. Even though he played concerts for the NIR (Belgian National Institute for Radio Broadcasting), which was located at the Flagey building at the time. "They may have gotten lost during the war," Peltzman thinks. "But there still has to be something somewhere. Whenever I find the necessary time and money, I will start looking for it. Those recordings are the holy grail."

All of a sudden, he starts waving the medal that Norbert Stern received from the king. "Thanks to my mother, it wasn't lost. Before they went into hiding, she had the presence of mind to take a box of stuff over to her best friend's place, at the age of fifteen, mind you. It contained hundreds of photos, Norbert's metronome, his tefillin, their Jewish passports, my grandparents' marriage certificate. After the war, my mother returned to pick up this box. Many Jews were unable to leave anything behind. When I visited the Kazerne Dossin, they gave me the content of my grandparents' and Norbert's pockets when they were arrested. I was able to touch their fake IDs. That, too, is very rare."

Peltzman performed *Dedication* more than fifty times in the past two years, including in New York and London. Now, for the first time, he is also presenting it in Brussels and Berlin. Did his work take on a different meaning since the Israel-Hamas war? "Since October 7, I'm frequently asked this question, but my performance transcends this conflict. This is a story that needs to be told for another thousand years. It's timeless. Look at African-Americans, Roma, Armenians, if you ignore that they were victims of persecution, you're mistaken. I condemn Hamas, but what Netanyahu is doing is also despicable. With *Dedication*, I want to remind people of what it is that we share: humanity."

Roger Peltzman's *Dedication* is on view on February 20 and 21 at KVS BOX