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A Passion For Yiddishkeit

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Composer, filmmaker,
photographer, scholar
— and violinist —
Yale Strom brings his
love of klezmer to
Metro Detroit.

Suzanne Chessler |
Contributing Writer

Yale Strom will bring an audience directly into a klezmer concert with a new segment to debut in Michigan. Strom, a violinist who spent his early years in the state and often returns to entertain with his Hot Pstromi band, has invited Holocaust survivors to suggest important songs known in their early years and help lead a sing-along.

Strom, 57, a klezmer devotee since the 1980s, traveled throughout Europe as he researched Yiddish music and the culture it represents. His experiences form the foundation for recordings, films, books and photographic essays.

"It's very touching to think I'll be performing with survivors," says Strom, artist-in-residence at San Diego State University where he also teaches in the Jewish studies program.

"I've never done this before although I have learned so much about traditional Yiddish tunes from survivors. The lyrics will be in the program so the audience can sing with us. Some may just want to hum."



Strom will appear with his wife, singer Elizabeth Schwartz

The concert will begin at 7 p.m. Wednesday, April 6, at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills. The program, "A Taste of Klezmer," also will feature his wife, singer Elizabeth Schwartz, and accordionist Peter Stan. Traditional Jewish desserts will add to the mood of the event.

Strom, who enlightens his programs with song histories, will have the trio play "Szol A Kakas Mar" ("The Rooster Is Crowing") among the folk songs audience members suggest. It was popularized by Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Taub (1724-1828), who brought Chasidism to Nagykallo, Hungary.

"I learned that it was sung by Stoliner shul-goers [from the town of Stolin in Russia] beginning in the 1930s at a synagogue on

Elmhurst in Detroit," Strom says. "Stolin is where my grandmother was born."

Also on the program — and for the sing-along — will be "My Yiddishe Momme" by Jack Yellen and Lew Pollack. Recorded in 1925 by Sophie Tucker, it was requested for the program by Jeannette Olson, who survived a childhood of hiding in France.

"My parents were from Vienna, and they had to get out in 1938," says Olson, who came to the United States in 1951, lives in West Bloomfield and performs with the Metropolitan Singers of Southfield.

A song she also remembers is "Rozinkes Mit Mandlen" ("Raisins with Almonds"). It tells a story of a goat, and her mother used to tell about having a goat.

Fryda Fleish, who came to the United States from Poland in 1958 and lives in Oak Park, requested "The Partisan Song" [about resistance to the Nazis] although she's not sure she will be singing.

"It's a remembrance from home, but singing will depend on who's around me," Fleish says. "It's an international song, but my voice really is not for singing."

Strom, who has visited Holocaust centers around the world and performed at the Simon

Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, started learning violin at Vernor Elementary School in Detroit just before his family moved to California, where he joined a youth orchestra. Klezmer became a strong interest after he heard a prominent band while in college.

"I had grown up with klezmer and played some songs," says Strom, who came to write his own klezmer music. "I decided I wanted to do something with Yiddish culture and bought a ticket to the Eastern Bloc countries to search for music."

After earning a master's degree in Yiddish studies at New York University, Strom formed his own band and wrote his first book, *Last Jews of Eastern Europe*.

His body of work has grown to 12 books, 15 recordings and eight documentaries. His film *L'Chayim, Comrade Stalin* has been featured at the Detroit Film Theatre, and his book *Klezmer: The History, the Music, the Folklore* has been featured at the Jewish Book Fair.

"We have a new CD, *City of the Future: Yiddish Songs from the Former Soviet Union*," says Strom, whose visits to Michigan include spending time with Shirley and Harold Strom, an aunt and uncle, as well as cousins.

details

"A Taste of Klezmer" begins at 7 p.m. Wednesday, April 6, at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills.

The admission charge is membership in the center, which provides a household with a year of complimentary museum admission. To RSVP or seek membership, contact Ruth Stern at (248) 553-2400, ext. 119 or ruth.stern@holocaustcenter.org. For more about Strom's music, books and photos, visit yalestrom.com.



Strom began taking photographs when he embarked on his first trek to Eastern Europe in 1981 in search of remnant Jewish culture — he has since returned more than 60 times, with camera in hand. **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** A circa-1932 synagogue in Birobidzhan, Russia (2000); a Hungarian-Romanian violinist on the train to Cluj (1993); the former Jewish quarters of Kazimierz in Krakow, Poland (2000); Tisha B'Av in a synagogue in Miskolc, Hungary (1987).

“The recording project was brought to me with Yiddish songs written in the early 1930s, when there was a renaissance of Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union.

“I’m also working on a documentary about Eugene Victor Debs, a one-time presidential candidate representing the Socialist Party of America and a labor organizer who was not Jewish but had Jewish cronies. [And] my wife and I are working on a play about the life of Chagall.”

The Stroms and their 18-year-old daughter, Tallulah, are active in their local synagogue, Ohr Shalom, where he performs once a month.

Strom, who will return to the area in May to make a presentation at the Windsor International Writers Conference, has strong emotional ties to what klezmer represents.

“To play these tunes and see enjoyment as people express themselves is especially nice,” he says. “It’s a small token of my appreciation.” *