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Yale Strom and Hot Pstromi perform at the Holocaust Center

Cooking with klezmer



Photo by Yeva Dashevsky

"The White House?" I ask, almost incredulous.

"Yes, Hanukkah at the White House," says Yale Strom. It's been several months since Strom was one of about 400 guests invited to celebrate Hanukkah with President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama at the White House, but he's clearly still excited. "It was humbling, kind of surreal, and definitely a thrill to be there," he says. "And I bumped into my cousin!"

Strom is one of the most prominent names in klezmer in the United States. A musician who records and performs with his band, Hot Pstromi, he's also a composer who has produced a number of string quartets as well as a symphony.

He has authored more than a dozen books, most of which are based on his extensive field research into the lives and music of Eastern European Jews.

Strom and his wife, Elizabeth Schwartz, flew into Washington, D.C. for the Hanukkah celebration. "I was surprised," he says. "Here we were with prominent people in the arts and politics, and there were people who knew who I was. They knew me from my work. One person who works in the Labor Department asked who I was and when I told him, he said, 'You played at my son's bar mitzvah!'"

I spoke to Strom about his life and how his love and dedication to klezmer music has put him at the forefront of this vibrant music's revival, led to his endeavors in books and film, and even put him in the company of the president.

It's a crisp winter morning, and in the front sitting room of his well-kept Craftsman home, Strom lounges back on a white couch. The family dog, Olive, joins us and takes to sitting on my feet. "She does that to everybody," Strom says.

A century-old Steinway sits to one side of the room. The instrument belonged to Strom's mother-in-law. "In all that time, it's only been owned by two other people. No one in the family really plays the piano, but even still ... " he says as he admires the family keepsake.

In the spring of 1981, it looked as though Strom's future was to be something completely different from a life of klezmer and academia. The San Diego State University graduate had just completed the LSAT. One night Strom and a friend went to downtown San Diego to enjoy a local band playing klezmer music.

When Strom, a decent fiddler at the time, asked if he could join the band for a tune or two, they gave him the cold shoulder. He thought that if he was unable to play with San Diego's one and only klezmer ensemble, he'd start his own band. "I thought: San Diego is big enough for two klezmer bands. I thought also that I would try to play the tunes and songs that nobody else was doing, the klezmer compositions that were possibly about to be forgotten," he says.

Leaving the possibility of law school behind and with little more than a camera, some recording equipment, his violin, and a little Yiddish, Strom travelled to what were then the Soviet bloc countries behind the Iron Curtain. He had no sponsorship, was not a graduate student, nor did he have the credentials of a college professor. There was no promise that his work would lead to any book deals or contracts for films or recordings. And, as his undergraduate studies were in American studies and furniture design, he had no background in ethnomusicology or any other field research. Strom let none of it hold him back.

"I've always been very bold," he says.

"I flew from Vienna to Zagreb, which was then in Yugoslavia, and I went to a Jewish old-age home. It was a bit of a distance from the airport to the home, but I

didn't want to spend the 25 cents for the bus. I had maybe \$500 for the whole trip, and I was trying to hold onto every penny. It started drizzling. It was late, close to 10 p.m., but it was summertime and still light out. When I got there, they were very nice, but told me, 'Your grandmother is probably sleeping. Please come back tomorrow.'

"I explained what I was there for, what I was trying to do. They closed the door and I could hear them talking behind the door. They found a woman who could speak English and she told me that they had decided to let me stay the night." Strom wound up spending the next week at the home. Strom's questions prompted memories with many of the residents recounting freilachs, horas, and waltzes from their youth.

After his stay in Zagreb, the residents sent him along to a contact in the next town, phoning ahead to tell their acquaintances to expect a young American with a violin and a lot of questions. "It was all done through connections, families, or others knowing the Jews in the next village. Also Catholic churches. The local priests usually knew the Jews in the community," he says.

When he wasn't getting contacts from Jewish communities or churches, Strom did the best he could with the Stalinist government officials, often bribing border guards and officials with a few Marlboros to get over a border or past a checkpoint.

In one case, unable to use his recorder, Strom asked a klezmer musician to repeat a musical piece over and over so he could play along and memorize the tune, which he then copied later.

"In Bucharest, I was at a library and asked to Xerox a piece of music and they looked at me. 'There is no Xerox machine here,' they told me. The closest one was miles away. They wouldn't let me take photographs. Remember, this is the Soviet Union. So I went back over the next several days and copied the music by hand."

Strom spent a year researching klezmer music. What began as a desire to form San Diego's second klezmer band turned into a great deal more. The Jewish communities of Eastern Europe were decimated by World War II and the Holocaust. Without Strom's efforts, much of this music and culture would have disappeared from the earth.

His first book, *The Last Jews of Eastern Europe*, co-authored with Brian Blue and published in 1987, documents in photographs and essays the lives of Jews and their withering communities in Eastern Europe.

After Strom's third trip to Eastern Europe, Spertus Institute in Chicago agreed to have a showing of his photographs. To earn extra income while he was there, he busked in the streets with his violin. With his violin case yawning for tips, Strom displayed some of the photographs he made in Eastern Europe.

A woman stopped and looked at the photos, asking Strom if they were published. He said no, and she replied: "I'm a publisher!" leading to what was possibly one of the quickest book deals ever.

In the years since, Strom has authored or co-authored more than a dozen books. Among his latest works is a book on Dave Tarras, a virtuoso considered the "King of Klezmer." The Ukraine-born clarinetist's talents were such that even beboppers Charlie Parker and Miles Davis made pilgrimages to the Catskills to hear him. Strom includes the sheet music to 28 of Tarras' tunes, almost all of which have never been published before.

Another recent book is *Shpil*, a concise primer on klezmer and an instructional book on klezmer performance. For the book, Strom wrote a brief history of Jewish music. Each member of Hot Pstromi takes a chapter to introduce performance techniques of klezmer singing, string bass, accordion, drums, clarinet, and violin.

Strom started playing music when he was in the third grade and was introduced to the violin by his grade school music teacher, Mrs. Baker. An 8-year-old Strom demonstrated a fair degree of musical ability. His family rented a violin for \$20 a month, which included lessons from Mrs. Baker. Years later, he played in the San Diego Civic Youth Orchestra. "There were 32 violins. I was the 32nd violinist," he recalls with a smile.

For the last 30 years Strom has led his band, Hot Pstromi, which often includes wife Elizabeth as vocalist and San Diego bassist Jeff Pekararak. Strom has delved deeply into klezmer's history and traditions, but that hasn't constrained the sound of Hot Pstromi, which incorporates Gypsy and world beat sounds.

"Klezmer is always evolving," Strom says. "Nothing is static. (Let's say) we have the recording of klezmer from 1913, and we listen to what those cats were doing back then, and we get down the way the fiddle sounds and the way the clarinet sounds and we try to stay true to that. Well, if the musicians from 1813 heard what the music was like in 1913, they'd say 'No way that's klezmer!' See, it changes, just like everything else. We can't just let klezmer be a museum piece from one brief time period."

For some of his albums, Strom tries to re-create the music of Eastern European Jews from 100 years ago, often recording songs and tunes that have never been recorded before. With others, he ventures into the avant-garde with experimentation and influences from jazz and 20th century classical music. He will often mix things up, incorporating flamenco rhythms or Afro-Cuban percussion in his performances and recordings.

With his most recent album, *City of the Future: Yiddish Songs From the Former Soviet Union*, Strom brings to life the music of Ukrainian born Yiddish composer

Samuel Vladimirovich Polonski.

The composer was active in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, so a number of the songs have such titles as "Factory Song" and "The Song of the Collective Farmer."

Along with Hot Pstromi, Strom assembled some of today's most noted Jewish singers for the recording. Along with wife Elizabeth, the singers include Judy Bressler, Vira Lozinsky, Michael Alpert, Anthony Russell, Jack Falk, and Daniel Kahn. The arrangements are among the most striking and intriguing that I've ever heard, with a strong taste of both tradition and Soviet industrialism.

Strom has produced a number of documentaries about klezmer music and Jewish life. One, *A Great Day on Eldridge Street*, took inspiration from the photograph and documentary *A Great Day in Harlem*, in which many of the greatest names in jazz were gathered in front of a Harlem brownstone.

In his documentary, Strom exchanged the townhouse for a synagogue and gathered more than 100 klezmer singers and musicians to be photographed and celebrated.

He's now working on a documentary on the life and work of Eugene Debs. The film about the labor leader and five-time Socialist Party of America presidential candidate is Strom's first film that's not on a Jewish subject.

"My father was a socialist," he says. "I started this project because, back in 2008, I'd hear people say that Barack Obama is a socialist. He's not a socialist. I wanted to demonstrate to people what socialism really means."

Schwartz and Strom have been married for two decades. "It was something my mother and a couple of her friends worked up," Schwartz says. Her mother had seen Strom at a showing of one of his documentaries and thought him the right sort of fellow for her daughter. "But us getting together had its difficulties. Yale was living in New York and I was living in Los Angeles at the time," Schwartz says.

The date finally came about in Los Angeles at a vegetarian restaurant. "I couldn't believe how he packed away the food, him being so skinny," recalls Schwartz. Afterward, at Schwartz's apartment, Strom said that he was leaving for New York the next night, but asked if Schwartz would like to see *The Madness of King George* before he left.

"Four months later, he admitted to me that he'd noticed a movie list on my coffee table with titles crossed out and that was the next in line," he says. "He hadn't known what it was, but he figured that it was a good way to get me to go out with him again. We fell in love within a week."

The couple has a daughter, Tallulah. She plays classical guitar and spent her childhood and teen years performing in Hungary, Romania, Ohio, Michigan, and

elsewhere with her parents.

The morning has warmed outside, and Olive, the dog, has left her perch on my feet and is now investigating some noises she hears outside. I've been glancing at a few copies of Strom's books and hand them back to him.

"All my work, my compositions, my films and books, are about the human condition," he says. "I want to make things that resonate with most people, people who are open to culture. I've wanted my work to be about what makes this world a wonderful place to live in."

Yale Strom and Hot Pstromi perform at the Holocaust Memorial Center as part of the special event "A Taste of Klezmer: Yiddish Songs, Stories and Sweets from Eastern Europe," on Wednesday, April 6. Starts at 7 p.m.; 28123 Orchard Lake Rd., Farmington Hills; RSVP required to 248-553-2400 Ext. 119; Event is members only, so admission fee is membership to the Holocaust Memorial Center.