

SONGS FOR ETERNITY

Ute Lemper performs songs composed in concentration camps

Center for Jewish History, New York
April 6, 2016

The German Kabarett that flourished in the 20s and 30s of the last century was largely dominated by Jewish artists, composers and singers. Those who were unable to flee in time ended up in concentration camps, where they often managed to continue composing and also to organize shows: for them, it was the last chance for spiritual survival and the supreme proof of their humanity against those who regarded and treated them as animals for slaughter.

For this reason, there is a large repertoire of songs that emerged from the concentration camps. In Italy they have been gathered by Francesco Lotoro, a composer, musician and musicologist, for the last thirty years. He has pursued the mission to give voice to the music written from the camps with maniacal persistence and financing it from his own pockets. His mission is to save from oblivion the spiritual creations that the German Nazis would have wanted to erase along with the entire Jewish people – destroying Judaism not only physically, but also culturally. This job has become ever more urgent, because the survivors and witnesses, which are the main source for Lotoro's research, are rapidly disappearing.

Ute Lemper, a German singer who is very close to the Jewish world and sensitive to the tragedy of the Holocaust, has chosen to be the face of this dramatic chapter in the history of music, and to revive the voices of those who lost their lives in the death camps,

“For me, it’s a commitment to the highest ethical and humanitarian value, particularly because of the fact that I am German” explains Lemper.

A universal artist, Ute Lemper not only performs the songs with her inimitable voice, but she also recounts the genesis of each work: dramatic stories like that of Ilse Weber, who ended up voluntarily in the gas chamber in order not to abandon the children whom she took care of; or that of Willy Rosen who was able to assemble in Westerbork camp what he ironically called, "the best cabaret in the Netherlands", before being deported to Auschwitz during the "final solution".

Written on clothes and toilet paper, and even engraved on buckets, through sacrificing the few hours granted to sleep, or penned on sheets in the infirmaries where surveillance was less strict because the guards were afraid of infections, it is a miracle that so much music has managed to survive and be found, smuggled out by accomplice guards, transcribed by political prisoners who had more margin of movement, and remembered and then annotated by prisoners who saved the music, buried it and brought it to light after liberation.

Some of the songs will be dedicated to the cooperation established in the concentration camps between Jewish and Roma musicians, whose people also fell victim to the Nazi policy of extermination.