

JAZZ IN TOTALITARIAN SYSTEMS (NAZI-GERMANY AND FORMER USSR): THE LIFE OF THE TRUMPET PLAYER EDDIE ROSNER

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Abstract

This cultural-political investigation about German and Russian jazz history before, during and after World War II is showing the life of the trumpet player Eddie Rosner, born 1910 in Berlin to a Polish-Jewish family. 1930 to 1933 member of the then famous German jazzband, Weintraubs Syncopators“, he tested 1933 in the United States the emigration possibilities. Finally he moved to Warsaw where he fled 1939 to the Russian-occupied city of Lviv (today Ukraine). After an engagement in Minsk he was appointed to lead the best-paid jazz band in the USSR. He played for Stalin in Sochi, toured the whole Soviet Union and recorded a number of titles. During an attempt to return to Berlin without visa 1946 he was arrested and sent without trial into labour camps in Sibiria. After his release 1955 he settled in Moscow forming a large symphonic jazz orchestra. He was allowed to leave Moscow eventually in 1973 but all treaties for recordings were cancelled, his fortune was confiscated, his name extinguished. Before his death 1976 he had to make a living on a small pension in Berlin. His life shows how is working “political protection” in totalitarian systems. To make a research with serious results about him is not easy as source materials are spread mainly in Russia, Poland and Germany and have to be collected there before investigation and evaluation.

Keywords: German and Russian Jazz History, Eddie Rosner

Material and methods

Human sciences (humanities), history

Historical methods of research with archive material and literature (collection, investigation, evaluation)

Objectives

Cultural-political investigation in contemporary history and jazz history in Germany and former USSR before, during and after World War II by means of the life and career of a jazz musician

Aim of this cultural-political investigation about a chapter in German jazz history before, during and after World War II is to show by means of an individual destiny the life of one of the best jazz trumpet players of his time, Eddie (Adi) Rosner. His life is an example how is working “political protection” in totalitarian systems. It is necessary to say that this research project is a “work in progress”. The 2010 published biography about the so far little known life of Eddie Rosner, written by an historian for East Europe Gertrude Pickhan and the music journalist Maximilian Preisler entitled “Von Hitler vertrieben, von Stalin verfolgt. Der Jazzmusiker Eddie Rosner” was very helpful for this investigation. The same applies to the documentation video from 1999 “Eddie (Adi) Rosner. The jazzman from the Gulag” under the direction of Pierre-Henri Salfati and Natalia Sazonova.⁷⁰

However, intention of the project is it moreover to throw light on the contemporary, political and cultural-historical background, to focus on historical-political connections and the development and role of jazz in totalitarian systems during the East-West-conflict. To make a research with serious results is not easy as source materials are spread in Russia, Poland and Germany and have to be collected there before investigation, evaluation and interpretation. Recently I could get access in archives in Berlin (Germany) to some documents.

Therefore this paper for the moment is showing the life of Eddie Rosner, which has after Pickhan and Preisler “paradigmatic importance for the 20th century”⁷¹ with focal points on the role of jazz under the Nazi-regime and mainly in the Stalin era.

Adolf Rosner, to give him his proper name, was born in Berlin to Polish-Jewish parents in 1910. He had violin lessons from the age of six and later enrolled at the Berlin conservatory to study violin and conducting, and trumpet as a mandatory instrument. The influential banker Kommerzienrat Baron Bronner became interested in Rosner’s musical talent, sponsored the boy and paved the way to his first public appearances as a child prodigy; Rosner always regarded Baron Bronner as his uncle. On one occasion, Rosner played at a banquet for Reichspräsident Friedrich Ebert.

⁷⁰ Gertrud Pickhan a. Maximilian Preisler: Von Hitler vertrieben, von Stalin verfolgt. Der Jazzmusiker Eddie Rosner. Berlin - Brandenburg 2010. Pierre-Henri Salfati u. Natalia Sazonova: Eddie (Adi) Rosner - The Jazzman from the Gulag. Arte u.WDR-DVD. Berlin 2000.

⁷¹ Pickhan u. Preisler, Von Hitler vertrieben, p.7.

From around 1928, Rosner became interested in jazz and played with dance orchestras like Efim Schachmeister and Marek Weber in Berlin, switching on these occasions to his second instrument, the trumpet.

Rosner eventually broke off his classical studies in 1929 and became a full-time jazz and dance musician. Initially, he joined the German *Rose-Petöfy Orchestra* for an engagement in Hamburg from where he switched to the *Weintraubs Syncopators*, one of the best German professional bands for dance music in the Hot Style, which performed in Germany and Europe between 1926 and 1933. He replaced there the trumpet player Arno Olewski. The members of this band, lead by the pianist Stefan Weintraub, were all competent in several instruments and knew how to combine theatrical and clownesque elements. Moreover, they inspired listeners with their great choice of musical styles. All these corresponded with Rosner's virtuosity and entertainment talents. Preisler characterizes that, giving the gist:" He was able to swing, that was very rare for German jazz musicians."⁷²

Soon the *Weintraubs* were considered the most popular show-band in Germany and performed beside others in the famous Winter-Garden-Variété in Berlin with Josephine Baker and they had 1928 their first recording. The film-industry, too, got interested in them, as they were as attractive in their looks and acting as in their music. Between 1930 and 1933 they made twenty films. The most famous film was "The Blue Angel" after the novel of Heinrich Mann and under the direction of Joseph von Sternberg. The young Marlene Dietrich became famous with this film in the role of Lola-Lola and made an international career. The time between 1930 and 1933 was also filled with extensive tours through Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.⁷³

In July 1932 they travelled as show band on a steamer, but after arrival they were not permitted to leave the ship. The U.S. American labour union had forbidden to unload their instruments. There is a short documentary film existing from this trip.⁷⁴

⁷² Otto Langels (rev.): Gertrud Pickhan u. Maximilian Preisler: Von Hitler vertrieben, von Stalin verfolgt. Der Jazzmusiker Eddie Rosner. Berlin - Brandenburg 2010. Unter: http://www.dradio.de/dkultur/sendungen/aus_der_juedischenwelt/1358486/ (07.05.2012).

⁷³ To *Weintraubs Syncopators* see Horst Bergmeier: The Weintraub Story. Incorporated the Ady Rosner Story (=Jazzfreund Publication. Bd. 16). Johannesburg u. Menden 1982; Albrecht Dümling: Die Weintraubs Syncopators. In: *Jazzzeitung* 9 (2006). Under: www.jazzzeitung.de/jazz/2006/09 (8.5.2012); and Jörg Süßenbach u. Klaus Sander: Bis ans Ende der Welt. Die Geschichte der Weintraubs Syncopators. Arte u. WDR-DVD. Berlin 2000.

About the further fate of the *Weintraubs* in Australia see Albrecht Dümling: Die verschwundenen Musiker. Jüdische Flüchtlinge in Australien. Köln-Weimar-Wien 2011.

⁷⁴ Pickhan a. Preisler, Von Hitler vertrieben, p.30ff.

As non-Arians 1933 the *Weintraubs* were forbidden to perform in Germany and went on extensive tours abroad, but at the beginning of 1933 at the time when the Nationalsocialists had overtaken the power Rosner left the band to form his own band which probably included Harry Wohlfeiler (cl/as), Lothar Lampel (g/v), and Georg Schwartzstein (d), rest unidentified; Lothar Lampel was Adi's cousin. But Rosner remained connected with the *Weintraubs* until end of 1933. The Polish trumpeter Manny Fisher now substituted Rosner.⁷⁵

Having been severely beaten up by maroding S.A.hordes in a pub near Berlin's Alexanderplatz around March/April 1933, Rosner arranged for his parents and three sisters to emigrate to the United States and to South America. One sister went to Sao Paolo and the other to Buenos Aires.⁷⁶ He changed his name into "Adi", later into "Ady" and "Eddie". At that time he played in Belgium and in the Netherlands in the orchestra of the bandleader Fud Candrix and probably he met there Louis Armstrong, who dedicated him his photo with the signature, "To the white Louis Armstrong from the black Adi Rosner."⁷⁷

After first exploring the possibility of settling in Scandinavia, he settled initially in Belgium, however, had to leave this country over some visa problems in the autumn of 1935. Via Zurich and Prague, Rosner and several members of his former band finally moved to Warsaw, Poland.

In early 1936 he formed a band of seven musicians for an engagement at the Café Cyganeria in Krakow, Poland. This band followed 1937 a new formation with experimental new ways in instrumentation, which played in the Palais de Danse in Warsaw.⁷⁸

The year 1938 was filled with tours to Paris where he performed for three months at the ABC Theatre with his *Adi Rosners American Band* with stars like Maurice Chevalier, Lucienne Boyer and Marie Dubas.

During this engagement, the Rosner band recorded a number of titles for the label Columbia like „Caravan“, „Bei mir bist du schön“, „I Need You“, „On the Sentmental Side“ oder „Midnight in Harlem“. However, Rosner had to accept the fact that some of his musicians were not up to international standard and had to be replaced.

Paris was followed by engagements in Monte Carlo, Lille, Amsterdam, Scandinavia (Danmark, Sweden, Finland) and Riga in Latvia.

For the Scandinavian tour with opening in Copenhagen Rosner engaged new musicians from the Netherlands. For publicity reasons some of

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.37.

⁷⁶ According to Bergmeier, *The Weintraub Story*, p.31, Rosner is supposed to have been traveling into the USA and to have met there famous jazzmusicians like Gene Krupa.

⁷⁷ Pickhan a. Preisler, *Von Hitler vertrieben*, p.38f.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.43.

the names were americanized: Tonny Helweg was billed as Tommy Elman, Ab Struik as Bert Streatham, Jaap Sajet as Jim Sayet, and Maurice van Kleef as Morris Vanclave.

In January 1939 Rosner returned to Poland with the intention of taking a holiday, however, he was persuaded to organise yet another band for an engagement at the Esplanade, Warsaw and made recordings there.

1939 he married the Jewish singer Ruth Kaminska (born 1920), daughter of the well-known Jewish actress Ida Kaminska, star of the Czechoslovakian-produced film “The Shop on Main Street”. There is one daughter from this marriage. The bombing of Warsaw they survived in the cellar of the night club Esplanade. As the situation became more and more threatening Rosner moved with his young wife, her family and some of his musicians to the East, where the Red Army meanwhile had occupied the East territory of the Second Republic of Poland. Pickhan explains plausibly the motive Rosner’s for fleeing to the East as follows: “After his experiences with the Nazi-regime it is not surprising, that he believed to have been arrived in freedom”.⁷⁹

The following years were the most successful in Rosner’s career. Without speaking Russian he changed from refugee to an admired star with an enthusiastic impact to an audience of masses. Via Byalistok he moved to Lviv. Within weeks most of his musicians had regrouped there and Rosner’s new band played there at the Café Bagatelle.

During an engagement in Minsk he was appointed to lead the best-paid jazzband in the Soviet Union: the First Secretary of the Byelorussian Communist Party, Panteleimon Ponomarenko, promoted the establishment of a State Jazz Orchestra of the Byelorussian Republic, considering jazz as a very useful element for stabilising the communist regime.⁸⁰

Already before World War II the promotion and rejection of jazz in the USSR had a long tradition. During the twenties jazz was very promoted in the course of futurism till 1928 Maksim Gorkij published his article “About the Music of Degeneration” in the newspaper of the communist party “Pravda” which lead to a change in direction. Internal restructuring, the first Five-Years-Plan 1928/29 and the development in foreign politics in the thirties brought strong regimentations. Essentially it came to a “Sovietization” of the “American” jazz and a so-called “Red Era of Jazz” began.⁸¹ Martin Lücke is giving information on that topic in his publication

⁷⁹ Ibid., S.64f.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.65.

⁸¹ Ibid., p.69.

“Jazz im Totalitarismus” and “Verfemt, verehrt, verboten. Jazz im Stalinismus zwischen Repression und Freiheit”.⁸²

1938 a State Orchestra of USSR was founded, followed by other republics of the Soviet Union, among them 1939 the State Jazz Orchestra of the Byelorussian Republic lead by Rosner. The Orchestra consisting of refugees from Germany and Poland performed with overwhelming success in Minsk, Leningrad and in the then famous complex of theatre Ermitaz in Moscow followed in the next years by tours through almost all Soviet Republics. Numerous recordings were made, among them the “St.Louis Blues” has to be regarded as a milestone of European Jazz. Even Stalin was among the jazz fans, so Rosner: During summer 1941 the Orchestra had to play by order of the regime in an empty hall in Sotchi at the Black Sea only for Stalin who was present but could not be seen by the musicians.⁸³ As to be seen later, the personal protection did not continue very long.

After the German invasion the Orchestra had to be recast, it became more “Russian”.⁸⁴

The Soviet-US-American War Alliance meant for jazz as a whole a positive phase in the following years, as contacts were again possible. Rosner had a privileged life among the citizens of the Soviet Union, he was living in a luxury apartment in the “Moskva” Hotel. But after the end of war 1945 campaigns were directed against the “cosmopolitan influence” in the arts in general. Although the concerts of Rosner furthermore were sold out, 1946 a defamatory article about him was published in the communist party press. After that he decided in the course of the repatriation of Polish citizens to make efforts for departure. In late 1946, when he tried to leave The Soviet Union and to return to Berlin without valid visa, he was arrested and came at first into detention pending trial. In July 1947 he was sentenced in an “extrajudicial procedure” to ten years imprisonment in a labour camp. The “personal protection” of Stalin and his special position had not prevented that. After various stations in Siberia he came into the camp of Magadan, where he lived until his release 1954. The camp’s director Alexander Deverenko made it possible for him to form and to lead a jazz orchestra, the “Jazz Orchestra of the Camp Department Nr.3”, which mainly served the entertainment of the guards, officials and their families. Music respectively

⁸² Martin Lücke: Jazz im Totalitarismus. Eine komparative Analyse des politisch motivierten Jazz während der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus und des Stalinismus. Münster 2004, and Martin Lücke: Verfemt, verehrt, verboten. Jazz im Stalinismus zwischen Repression und Freiheit. In: Osteuropa 11 (2005). Under: <http://eurozine.com/articles/2005-12-13-lucke-de> (7.5.2012).

⁸³ Pickhan a. Preisler, Von Hitler vertrieben, p.75.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p.76.

jazz was again very helpful for Rosner, who was also composing and arranging to get better conditions of life.⁸⁵

After Stalins's death in March 1953 the situation relaxed and first amnesties followed. But Rosner had to wait until spring 1954 for the abolition of the sentence by the Supreme Court of the USSR. After his rehabilitation and release he settled in Moscow and formed again a large symphonic jazz orchestra, the so-called *Estrade Orchestra* which at times had as many as 64 members. He could continue his former successes, moreover could exceed all expectations. Now, during the political thaw-period after Stalin jazz had again a growing popularity in the soviet society. 1962 Benny Goodman, who had Russian-Jewish ancestors, visited him in the course of giving thirty concerts in USSR after an official invitation.⁸⁶

In the late sixties the glory of the "Tsar of Jazz", as Rosner was called, began to fade with the emergence of new musical styles like rock and pop and went slowly out of fashion. More and more he got into difficulties with the cultural authorities. That caused him to make numerous applications to return to Berlin, but they were continuously turned down.⁸⁷

When in the course of the policy of détente 1972 the US-American President Richard Nixon visited Moscow Rosner entered the U.S. Embassy and tried to seek the President's support to obtain an approval to leave the USSR. Finally in 1973 he received the passport for departure and returned with his second wife Galina, whom he had married 1956, and two daughters to Berlin, but all treaties for recordings were cancelled, his fortune was confiscated, (he was said to be one of the richest men in the Soviet Union), his name was extinguished. After his arrival in Berlin he tried in vain to organize a new band. Before he died 1976 in Berlin on a heart attack he had to make a living on a small pension, as all his claims for compensation were rejected.⁸⁸

Involved and forced into two oppressive systems, the Nationalsocialism and the Stalinism, Rosner had to fight against both. It was a life full of triumph and tragedy as well.

He was instrumentalist, one of the best trumpet players of his time, bandleader, but also arrangeur and composer. His repertory reached from Swing music, jazz standards, Evergreens, film-music to modern jazz compositions and not at last he contributed to the development of tango in the USSR.

A German version of this paper is published in „Jazz, pouvoir et subversion de 1919 à nos jours. Jazz, Macht und Subversion von 1919 bis

⁸⁵ Ibid., p.87.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.119f.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p.124ff.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p.125ff., and Bergmeier, The Weintraub Story, S.51 ff.

heute“, éd.Pascale Cohen-Avenel, in: Traveaux Interdisciplinaires et Plurilingues, Vol.21, Bern (e.a.) 2014, p.135-142. The translation into English was made by Elisabeth Kolleritsch.