

## **Dances in the “Judengasse” (Jewish lane)**

**How the New Yorker Aviva Geismar assimilates the history of her Breisach family / by Peter-Philipp Schmidt**

BREISACH/FREIBURG, 3 August. At the beginning there was a name on the wall: Geismar. In Breisach on the river Rhine, situated in the Breisgau region about half way between Colmar and Freiburg, Geismar used to be a well-known family name for three centuries. Today, however, it can only be found on small white plaques in the “Gang der Erinnerung” (walkway of remembrance) in the “Blue House”, as it is called. The plaques in the former Jewish community centre of Breisach are a reminder of those families who were mostly extinguished in the years following 1940 - in Auschwitz among other places. Jonathan Hollander from New York, who has personal bonds with the small town on the Rhine, was familiar with the name Geismar from his circle of acquaintances. But to the American dancer and founder of “Battery Dance Company” it seemed remarkable that he discovered several Geismars in the family trees of the Breisach Jews. For he presumed that even in Germany this name could not be very common. So he picked up the receiver and phoned his colleague Aviva Geismar.

The dancer only knew very little about her father’s adolescence, his family and their German origin. She did not know her grandparents, many relatives had been long since dead. “My father did not like to talk about his childhood.” But Aviva Geismar knew that her father, the professor of sociology Ludwig L. Geismar, had grown up in Mannheim before the war before emigrating to the United States. “This I related to Jonathan,” explains the American woman. However, after Hollander’s phone call she did phone her father and asked him about the Geismars of Breisach.

It is only a few metres from the “Synagogenplatz” (Synagogue Square) down to the “Blue House”. The starting point of the walk is a Torah shrine made of stone, created by the Mannheim artist Riki Strassler. It was unveiled exactly 60 years after the destruction of the temple – on 10 November 1938. The inscription reads, “In shame and grief we commemorate the Breisach Jews, victims to blindness, hatred and violence.” Among them were descendants of the very first Jews who had settled in the town almost exactly 300 years before. This was just after the capture of the Austrian imperial fortification of the Habsburg family by the Duke Bernhard of Sachsen-Weimar who was then in the pay of the French: “Marx Schnatticher, Nathan Ulmo and the progenitors of the Breisach families Günzburger, Geismar and Wormser”, as it says in the town chronicles.

Aviva Geismar has walked dozens of times over the former “Judengasse,” which is now called “Rheintorstraße” (Rhine Gate Street), past her great-grandparents’ peach coloured house down to the “Blue House” which does its name great credit. “Closer than it Appears” is the name of the piece that the choreographer has created. The title does not allude to the short distance between the “Synagogenplatz” and the former Jewish community centre but to the historical immediacy of the Holocaust. For three nights, from Thursday to Saturday, artists from Aviva Geismar’s New York dance company “Drastic Action” and other dancers guide their audience with their dancing down the asphalt street. It takes a playful and merry start. But after a while the initial nursery-rhyme round takes a menacing turn, even before the dancers and the audience move uphill to the municipal amphitheatre and the Breisach Festival that takes place there.

Aviva Geismar and Jonathan Hollander came to Germany in July this year. Hollander, who has worked exclusively on choreography for the last 15 years, brought along six dancers of his more than 30-year-old company. Aviva Geismar, who unfortunately has sprained her ankle, arrived with four of her dancers. They now sit on an exercise bench in the sportshall of the Theodor-Heuss-Gymnasium, a Freiburg high school, and observe the “Dances for the Blue House”. For not only did the professionals create pieces for the Breisach open air stage, “Secrets of the Paving Stones”, “Between Heaven and Earth”, “All Fall Down” and “The Unbidden and Unhinged”. There are also nearly 100 students of three secondary schools from the neighbouring city of Freiburg who have thought about how to deal with the Holocaust heritage through dance.

“We don’t impose choreography on the students,” Aviva Geismar says. “We simply provoke, in order for them to find a possibility to express themselves.” The two New Yorkers were inspired to involve students in their project by the film “Rhythm Is It” from 2003. In the film 250 Berlin children and teenagers dance to Igor Strawinsky’s “Le Sacre du Printemps” – in a pedagogical project in joint participation with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra under Sir Simon Rattle. The girls of the Theodor-Heuss-Gymnasium – only one boy wanted to join their dance project – produce violence and oppression: one group pesters the other one, drags them on invisible ropes and fetters against their will over the wooden floor. Only to find themselves united again, marching and stamping like soldiers, so close to one another that none of them manages to free themselves despite vigorous jumps from the formation.

Within only four and a half days the students at the schools have created their own dances which will now be presented at the Breisach Festival – in front of a special audience: for the Friends of the “Blue House.” The former Jewish community centre has forged links again to numerous surviving Breisach Jews and their relatives around the world. “We had to raise some 90.000 Euros for our dance project,” Aviva Geismar reports. “So, among other things, we wrote about 100 petitions to the former Jewish community members and their descendants.” The response was overwhelming, “52 people answered.”

Aviva Geismar had the idea to bring the “Judengasse” back to life. The 41-year-old choreographer wanted to evoke a memory that she can call her own since only a few years ago. She learned about her family’s history through the “Blue House” and its director Christiane Walesch-Schneller. This was due not least because of a journey to “her” native region with her father in 2004. There she found out more about the Geismars, including the origin of her family name. At the behest of a prince it was presumably imposed upon the Jews living in the village of Geismar in order to label them as a single family. Through her father she also heard that her grandparents had left Breisach long before the war and moved to Mannheim. From there they were deported to Auschwitz – like all the other Geismars she is related to. Only her father and his sister managed to escape the National Socialists. 60 years after the war, her 85-year-old father Ludwig L. Geismar wrote a book about this legacy and his life as a stranger, which was probably also inspired by his daughter: “In the Shadow of the Holocaust”.

Caption:

From Thursday to Saturday Aviva Geismar (centre) and her New York Company “Drastic Action” lead the audience in a danceful way across the street asphalt. It takes a playful and merry start. But after a while the initial nursery-rhyme round dance takes a menacing turn. In Breisach, high school students participate in the project, too. The experiment, to express history through dance, is a new experience to them.

(photo: Frank Röth)

[Translation: Thorsten Eßmüller]