

Chapter 10

Ach ja!: The Syl Groeschl Story

Program 10 Performances

All selections are by Syl Groeschl.

1. "Jolly Coppersmith." 2. "Hooter Waltz." 3. "Two-Step Medley."
4. "One Beer for One." 5. "Alexander's Ragtime Band." 6. "We Left Our Wives at Home." 7. "Brass 'n' Sax Polka." 8. "Immer noch ein Tropfen."
9. "Ve Get So Soon Oldt." 10. "Herman, Take Me Home."

The Holy Land

The eastern shore of Lake Winnebago in east central Wisconsin is one of the most picturesque areas of the state. It is part of what local folks call the "land between the lakes," a square chunk of land about fifty miles on a side between lakes Winnebago and Michigan. The rolling hills are dotted with small dairy farms, each farmstead a cluster of buildings dominated by a big red barn flanked by tall silos looming like the towers of a fortified medieval fiefdom. This is real dairy country. One of the four counties in the area, Calumet, is notable for having a greater population of dairy cattle (31,700) than humans (30,867).

Some of the pastures and hay and corn fields run practically up to the shore of the glistening waters of Winnebago, a shallow but expansive lake nearly thirty miles long and ten miles wide, the largest natural lake within the boundaries of a single state. On February's ice, local spearfishers jig their hand-carved wooden fish decoys known as teasers to lure to their barbed tines the mighty lake sturgeon, a ponderous and dinosauric fish sometimes as large as the fisher.

It is hilly country. The northern tip of the Kettle Moraine, a thirty-mile-long battleship-shaped section of unglaciated land, extends into the southern portion of the land between the lakes. In hilly spots, wooded acreage still abounds, and from some of the highest hills majestic churches survey the landscape, giving rise to another nickname for the area: the Holy Land. Towns bearing the names St. John, St. Anna, Jericho, Calvary, Mt. Calvary, St. Nazianz, St. Cloud, and Eden testify to the strong, mostly conservative Catholic religious tradition of the Austrian, Czech, and southern German immigrants who settled in the area in the middle of the nineteenth century.

While the Slavic-speaking Czechs have had a linguistic impact on the northeastern section of the land between the lakes, settlers in the rest of the area mostly spoke southern German peasant dialects, and they continued to do so—in rural households—until the 1940s. Syl Groeschl, who reckons his Calumet County family has been providing old-time music to the area's residents ever since his great-grandfather Johann Groeschl immigrated in 1839, talked about the language situation during his childhood in the 1930s:



Promotional billboard on the outskirts of Calumetville, 1985 Photo: Jim Leary

My first language was German. That's just the way it was in our house. . . . My whole family talked German. My grandparents could hardly talk English, a very little bit of English. And it was very broken. When I started school, Catholic parochial school . . . I couldn't even talk English. Very little bit, I could. All of us kids, when we were playing outside in the playground, we'd talk German. To heck with English! . . . (S. Groeschl 1990 I)

This strong persistence of the German language, for nearly a century, into the fourth generation in America, is typical of the area. For many decades the rural German-speaking communities have been naturally cohesive, and only recently have they made deliberate efforts to revitalize their ethnic traditions. In short, their German-American identity came naturally but nowadays they have to work a little harder at it. The musical style and repertoire of the currently prominent old-time bands from the area, Syl Groeschl's and Jerry Schneider's, reflect the cultural influences and changes within this tight community over the past 150 years. When it comes to choosing tunes, Syl Groeschl's band is not overtly revivalistic. Syl reckons that his band still plays about five or six German folk songs passed down from his great-grandfather including such German chestnuts as "Du, du liegst mir im Herzen" and the polka, waltz, and schottische tunes his dancing audience demands. Yet he has no problem with playing old-time American popular tunes like "Old Gray Bonnet" or "Golden Slippers," country tunes like "Your Cheatin' Heart," and even an occasional recent hit song such as "All the Girls I've Loved Before." But on stage he invokes his German identity by sporting a well-worn pair of lederhosen and a rumpled *jäger* hat. When he

sings in German it is with an unpretentious vocal style and in his native dialect. He sprinkles his performances with the German exclamation *ach ja!* but also with an imitation of Woody Woodpecker's laugh.

Jerry Schneider's band, comprising somewhat younger musicians, can be a bit more overtly German in their tune choices, more likely to include newer German favorites like "Das Kufstein Lied." They feature the powerful baritone vocals of bass horn player Bill Halbach, who sings in literary German with carefully correct diction. The Chilton-based band even gave a German language title to their most recent album, "Etwas schoen von Chilton" (Something pretty from Chilton). But on the album jacket they invoke not only their Germanness by displaying beer steins and inlaid button accordions, but also their local identity by posing right under a monstrous Lake Winnebago sturgeon mounted on the wall.

Merrymaking Catholics

Unlike the Bible Belt of the southern United States, where strong fundamentalist religious beliefs have been something of an impediment to secular music and dance traditions, in Wisconsin's Holy Land conservative Catholicism neither restricts secular merrymaking nor prohibits alcohol. In a thoughtful, evocative interview with ethnomusicologist Becky Miller in 1990, Valeria Groeschl, who played piano and sang in her father's band for over eleven years, recalled life in the family band and the two sides of her bandleader/tavern keeper/farmer father, Tony Groeschl:

He knew I was really dependable and he knew, in case they had a little more fun than they should have through the night, they had a driver. . . . For a while there we had all of us playing. My brother Sylvester, who runs the band now, he played sax and clarinet, and my brother Tony played the trumpet and Leon played the drums. My dad was playing the concertina, bass violin . . . it was a hectic life. You have to love music to do this. To do this for money, we were only getting seven dollar a night. That's all I got paid. . . . It was very hard on my mother when her whole family was in the orchestra. Very hard . . . well, she saw her whole family leave in one car. And one accident could have wiped out the whole family. . . . You know we never had much time with our father. He was never home much. That we missed. Because when he was home, there was work to be done, then it was time to get ready and go play again. . . . I really don't know, I think it was just because he was brought up with music. His dad played the concertina. . . . I don't know if he started [the band] because he just loved music or . . . figuring it would have a supplemental income. My dad was a great one for parties. . . . House was filled, two rooms, but they always had room for people. And he'd play his concertina and things, oh sure. . . . Kind man, strict. Religious. Even when he had the taverns. If there was nobody in there . . . he had this chair and he sat next to the refrigerator, and he had his rosary. He prayed the rosary. He'd pray for his family always, so everybody would be ok. He was really a mixture. . . . And always church. You wouldn't dare miss church. We always had to pray before meals and things. He was very religious and very strict, like a lot of men are. But he was kind. But it was just that he was never home enough. It was very hard on my mother, very hard. She still talks about it. Because she really cared for Dad and it hurt her that she didn't have the time to spend with him. But that's the way it was. (V. Groeschl 1990 I)