FRIEDENSNOTE NR. 40

The Madness of War

An Italian chanson by Francesco de Gregori shows: even when a war is „won“, there are only losers.

Volker Freystedt — non-fiction author, satirist and one of the early critics of the coronavirus health dictatorship — coined the term „Faschützmus“ (1) in a piece for Rubikon in April 2020. During his longer stays in Italy he came to know and appreciate the Italian music scene; he translated hundreds of songs into German to bring them closer to a home audience. Among Italy's most respected Cantautori (singer-songwriters) is Francesco de Gregori. One of his best-known songs is a dialogue that is at once poetic and unsparing with one of the perpetrators: the „Generale“.

PUBLISHED	22. April 2023
AUTHOR	Volker Freystedt
SONG	Generale
PERFORMER	Francesco De Gregori
ALBUM	De Gregori, 1978

Francesco de Gregori (born 1951 in Rome), a singer-songwriter in the tradition of Bob Dylan, caught on with the public only after some delay. He began at the age of 17 in a Roman venue where up-and-coming musicians performed, and also played together with Antonello Venditti — who had his breakthrough before him — and later with Lucio Dalla and Fabrizio De André. Together with Venditti he gave a double concert at the Olympic Stadium in Rome in June 2022 — for both of them practically a home game. Francesco De Gregori has long belonged to the old guard of Italian Cantautori, held in high esteem even by his colleagues — those, that is, who write and perform their own songs.

One of his best-known songs is „Generale“, which de Gregori wrote in 1978 on the occasion of his military service. He was stationed in South Tyrol, where militant groups were demanding separation from Italy. Violent clashes were therefore not merely theoretical.

In „Generale“, de Gregori makes the banality of war palpable in his own poetic way, by portraying what remains even when the war has been won: the soldier only wants to get back quickly to his old life! Human sensations and feelings, however, return only slowly. And so there is no joy in victory either — after all, it was never his war …

In this anti-war song the word „peace“ does not appear a single time, the word „war“ only twice. „Generale“ is no fiery plea for „Ein bisschen Frieden“, it is no outraged cry of "Nie wieder Krieg!". It addresses a general — who is presumably sitting in the same train compartment as the ordinary soldier from whose vantage point de Gregori observes — in a monologue that glides restlessly from one image to the next; fittingly, the song has no refrain either. These are not „Pictures at an Exhibition“ that one can contemplate at length. They are glances from a moving train, mingled with flashbacks and the associations of a man who knows himself on his way home — for "the war is over, the enemy fled or beaten". The music, especially the recurring riff, underscores this unstoppable rolling-onward of the train, which "no longer stops, not even to piss, you ride straight home without thinking any further" — as one was always told —, "that war is beautiful, even if it hurts". Now all one wants is to "return again, to sing and to let ourselves be loved", even if it is only "the love of the nurses".

> *In the middle of a pasture stands a peasant woman, bent in the sunset she looks like a child of fifty years, with five sons who came into the world like rabbits, went out into the world as soldiers and have not yet returned.*

Still "behind the hill the night dark and murderous" seems to hold, but clearly there "is no one left now, only pine needles and silence and mushrooms that are good to eat and good to dry" — and the associations leap onward, back into the old normality: "to make yourself the sauce when Christmas comes" — and further still, to a memory bound up with Christmas: "when the children cry and won't go to sleep".

"General, these five stars; these five tears on my skin — what meaning do they have in the din of this train that is half empty and half full" — on the one hand many have fallen, on the other some have survived —, "and that races swiftly toward the return — in two minutes it is almost day and almost home and almost love". War makes everything else relative — almost …

The song „Generale" is probably familiar to every Italian. That became clear, too, when Italy's greatest rock star Vasco Rossi opened his concert „Rock sotto l´assedio" (Rock under siege, San Siro/Milano, 1995) with „Generale" — the whole stadium sang along. Vasco Rossi at the time: "It is a song against war — against ALL wars!" With this concert he wanted to express his respect for the musicians who, during the nearly four-year siege of Sarajevo, organized a concert out of the need for a little normality amid the madness of war.

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THE SONG IN ITS ORIGINAL · YOUTUBE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Volker Freystedt

Volker Freystedt, Jahrgang 1950, hat sich Mitte der 1980er Jahre am Aufbau des spirituellen Magazins connection beteiligt. Später war er Mitgründer und langjähriger 2. Vorsitzender des EQUILIBRISMUS e.V. sowie Mit-Autor des Sachbuches „EQUILIBRISMUS — Neue Konzepte statt Reformen für eine Welt im Gleichgewicht“. Er schrieb zahlreiche Artikel und Essays zu den Themen Ökologie und Ökonomie, Geld- und Bodenreform, Demokratie und Friedensbewegung.

Source: https://friedensnoten.de/en/articles/the-madness-of-war/