

## **JAMES ELMER SPYGLASS - HONORARY CITIZEN OF SCHWALBACH**

On 8th January 1995 the town of Schwalbach awarded for the first time the "James Elmer Spyglass Prize" for contributions to intercultural relations. Who was James Elmer Spyglass and how did it come about that his name was considered so eminently suitable in connection with this award?

### **Early Years**

James Elmer Spyglass was born on 1st November, 1877 in Springfield, Ohio. Springfield was at that time a fast growing administrative and industrial centre of about 20 000 inhabitants.

Elmer's mother was born Elizabeth Johnson in Kentucky in 1847. Her family moved to Springfield, where she met her future husband, Augustus Spyglass. Augustus Spyglass was a blacksmith, who presumably found employment in the growing agricultural machinery industry of the town.

Elmer inherited an interest in music from his father, who was a passionate organ-player. Elmer started playing the piano at the age of five and by the time he was ten, he was taking piano lessons, which he paid for by working as a rose-picker in Springfield's famed rosefields. At fourteen he was singing in the local church choir.

In 1897 James Elmer Spyglass was one of the founder members of St. John's Missionary Baptist Church in Springfield, a congregation which grew quickly and which within four years could boast a group of fifty children.

Elmer visited Springfield Primary and High Schools, graduating in June, 1897. At his graduation ceremony from Springfield High School in June 1897, he sang Wagner's "Abendstern", with a success which convinced him to dedicate his life to music.

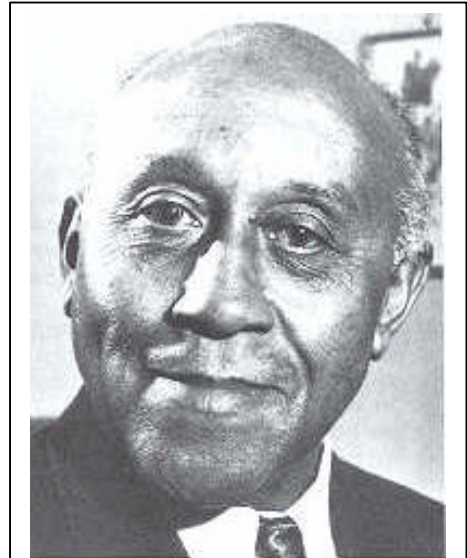
For a while he continued to live in Springfield, in a house in South Limestone Street, which however no longer exists, since it was on the site of the new Springfield South High School. During this time he was also earning his keep by singing at weddings and other celebrations. His first major appearance outside Springfield would appear to have been in the Carnegie Music Hall in Pittsburg where he sang Schubert Lieder and Strauß's "Schöne blaue Donau" accompanied by a 25 piece orchestra and a 200 strong amateur choir. The Pittsburg performance was obviously a great success. A repeat in Springfield was however a financial disaster and Spyglass had to work as a glass-packer in Toledo to pay off his debts.

Having reached Toledo however he made the best of it. He studied music at the Toledo Conservatory of Music from 1905 to 1906 and this was to provide the springboard for his European career. With the money from his concert appearances and with help from friends, he raised the US\$ 400 necessary to set off for Europe, where he hoped to complete his training as an opera singer.

### **European Star**

After landing in Liverpool, Elmer tried his luck in London going from agency to agency without any success. Finally as he was down to his last few cents he set sail for Antwerp and found a job singing in front of a women's band in a German-owned cafe. His rendering of negro spirituals became an immediate hit. But he bettered himself without much delay, landing a job at the Reichshof in Barmen at a fee of 5 marks per day plus free board and lodging.

Still in 1906, his first year in Europe, Elmer Spyglass came to Frankfurt as part of his first European tour, during which he established himself as a leading interpreter of negro spirituals. Already this first visit seems to have inspired a strong affection for the city on the Main. "The people there are so kind, so



**James Elmer Spyglass  
(1877-1957)**



**St. John's Missionary Baptist  
Church in Springfield, Ohio, where  
the young Spyglass sang in the  
choir**

friendly and so patient", he was reported saying nearly fifty years later in a newspaper interview. Maybe the rosefields of nearby Hattersheim, once the largest in Europe, also reminded him of home. Who knows?

For much of the next twenty years or so Elmer Spyclass was based in The Netherlands. There are records of appearances in The Hague, Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Scheveningen. He worked for the well-known Cabaret of Jean-Louis Pisuise and the composer Louis Noiret. At the end of World War I he wrote a song in Dutch with the title "Waardeering" (Appreciation). The title page of the sheet music contains the following text "Composed as a continuing reminder of the lovely, unforgettable Dutch public, in thankfulness for the good will, cooperation and exceptional friendship shown toward me during the war. Sincerely, J. Elmer Spyclass."

But Elmer saw much more of Europe than just The Netherlands. Particularly after the return of peace, he was often on tour, visiting all the leading European cities, often appearing with household names. He worked with Sarah Bernhard in Paris, with Carl Valentin and Liesel Karlstadt in Munich and with Otto Reutter in Berlin.

It interesting to speculate whether Elmer ever met Josephine Baker during his many visits to Paris. Though of different generations, both were black Americans of modest background who came to Europe, developed an affection for their adopted home and were honoured for the contribution which their sense of responsibility to those around them led them to make. Despite extensive research such a meeting could not be confirmed. They did however have a common acquaintance in the famous French cabaret star Mistinguette with whom Elmer had shared the stage in Paris. Mistinguette was one of the invited audience at a private pre-premiere of Josephine Baker's first Paris show "Revue Nègre".

Elmer Spyclass developed his public repertoire from what was originally billed as "Plantation Songs" to include his beloved opera as well as operetta and folksongs. He sang in English, German, French, Italian, Dutch and Danish. He acquired a particular affection for German folksongs. "My favourites are the emotion-laden Rheinlieder", he stated on one occasion.

### **Retirement to Frankfurt**

In 1930 aged 53 Elmer Spyclass decided to retire. For over twenty years his baritone voice had been an integral part of the European cultural scene. He had been fêted in the concert halls of all major European cities. He had travelled extensively and had a wide circle of friends. When selecting his retirement home he chose Frankfurt, the town he had visited time and again since his first appearance on the stage of Cabaret Klein 24 years previously.

Elmer lived in the south bank suburb of Sachsenhausen, home of Frankfurt's famous appelwein pubs. And he stayed here as long as it was physically possible. At the outbreak of war in 1939, when he was on a visit in Nice, he chose to return to Frankfurt and even after 1941, when he became technically an enemy alien, he continued to live undisturbed, only having to report to the police once a week. In 1944 Elmer's time in Frankfurt was brought to a sudden and forcible end, when his house was bombed.

### **Schwalbach**

While living in Frankfurt Elmer had come to know Schwalbach and it was to his friends there that he turned in his moment of need. He rented a room in Schwalbach and tended a small garden growing vegetables. He took a full part in the village life, difficult as it was in the last year of the war. When bombs caused damage or fires, he was there helping to clear up like every other Schwalbacher.

At the end of the war he immediately made contact with the American occupying forces to ensure that no harm came to Schwalbach. As Schwalbach's "protector" he arranged meetings between the Village Council and the Military authorities. He was also able to help individuals during the "denazification period" by attesting to their good character.

But among today's older Schwalbachers he is remembered more for his initiatives to help children than his more official activities. His good connections to the occupying troops enabled him to "organize" additional food parcels at a time when all the normal supply systems had totally collapsed. There were certainly more Hershey Bars per head of population in Schwalbach than in most of the country.

Elmer Spyclass continued his work among the children during the post-war years. He taught them English and gave them music lessons. Some he helped financially from his own savings. He also arranged Christmas parties for them at the neighbouring American Camp Eschborn. There are today still some of those children who remember his rendering of "Old Man River" at these occasions.

## **At the American Consulate in Frankfurt**

Immediately after the war Elmer Spyglass started work as an interpreter for the American Military Government, housed at that time in the Metallbank building near the old Opera House in the centre of Frankfurt. As peace came to rule over the town he was able to use this experience to obtain a position as Chief Receptionist at the American Consulate.

Again here his personality and ability to get on with people, no matter what their origin or position were invaluable. At this time only Americans were allowed into the Consulate. But Elmer was able to help in many a difficult situation, whether it was a matter of advising a shy young soldier how to obtain a visa for his new German bride or resolving the problems of a German widow with two teenage daughters whose American husband had died before the war. The impression Elmer Spyglass made can be measured by fact that the latter lady called the author to tell her story after reading about the James Elmer Spyglass Prize in the press, nearly fifty years after the occasion.

How well he filled the receptionist's chair was made clear by one diplomat who said: "If it weren't for Elmer, we'd all have blown our brains out before too long".

## **Honorary Citizen of Schwalbach**

On 9th November 1954 the Village Council took the decision to award Elmer Spyglass the honorary citizenship of Schwalbach. This was unusual for a number of reasons. It was unusual anywhere in Germany that a foreigner be given such an award. In Schwalbach Spyglass was also only the second person ever to receive it.

The celebrations took place in Schwalbach's famous Mutter Krauss Inn, a favourite stop-over of Bismark's when visiting the Frankfurt area. Among the guests of honour were the Landrat (County Governor) of Main-Taunus-Kreis, Dr. Josef Wagenbach, the Mayor of Schwalbach Julius Hemmerle and the Consul-General of the United States in Frankfurt, Mr. Montagu Pigott.

In their speeches both the Landrat and the Mayor thanked Elmer for his work in the post-war reconstruction in Schwalbach and for the help he had given to many individual Schwalbachers during this difficult time. Mr. Pigott referred to him as one of America's best ambassadors.

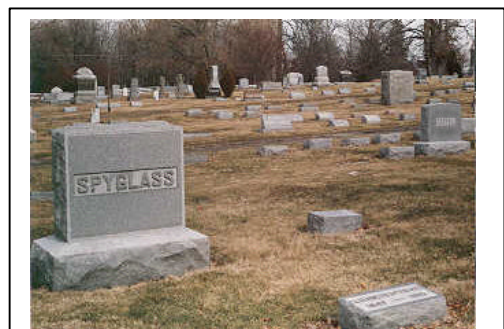
In his reply Spyglass simply stated that he had only returned the kindness that he had received from the inhabitants of Schwalbach during the war-years. Schwalbach had become a second home to him. He concluded the celebrations by singing two German folksongs with a strength of voice that belied his 77 years.

James Elmer Spyglass lived a long and varied life devoted to music and the people around him. It was not always an easy life but as he said with the title of his projected memoirs, "Where there's a Will, there's a Way." Although he had submitted the text to the State Department for clearance and records of negotiations with a New York publisher exist, the manuscript does not appear to have survived - a pity because it would have made fascinating reading.

James Elmer Spyglass died on 16th February 1957 at his home in Schwalbach. The American Consulate-General closed for the afternoon of the memorial service, so that his colleagues could take part in honouring his life. The service was attended by a large congregation including the Consul-General, Mr. John Burns, the Mayor and Councillors as well as many ordinary citizens of Schwalbach who came to pay their last respects. At his own request, James Elmer Spyglass was cremated and his ashes brought to Yellow Springs, near Springfield where he rests next to his mother and his cousin.

## **Author's Note**

The author would like to thank all those who have helped in researching the life of James Elmer Spyglass, in particular Virginia Weygandt, Julie Overton and Ernestine Lucas in Ohio, Jan Voorberg in The Netherlands and Sigi Fay and Detelv Kiekheben-Schmidt in Germany. Without their assistance this short biography would have been impossible.



**The final resting place of James Elmer Spyglass next to that of his mother in Yellow Springs, Ohio**