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A Hundred Years of Yiddish Song Mobility

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Abstract: The article surveys continuities in the Yiddish song world from 1920–2020 despite the radical disjunctures of eastern European Ashkenazic Jewish life, profiling singers born nearly 100 years apart. The approach is synchronic, a useful method for music and mobility studies.

Keywords: music and mobility; Yiddish song; synchronic studies

Musical mobility studies usually focus on the implications of a single moment of population shift (refugees, migrants), often as part of "waves". Jews are useful "to think with", as they are always on the move. History and the Jews' own stories catalog a millennia-long series of displacements, but there is little information about music's role in mobility. For the fairly recent period for which we have information, it is clear that while living conditions, song context, technology, and material culture have changed, often radically, some of the ways that people acquire, perform, and circulate folksongs have held steady across a very troubled time, even as new trends have made themselves felt. The present article is an exercise in using a slice-of-time approach, or *synchronic*, rather than the more usual unfolding of a history chronologically, a *diachronic* analysis.

The selected time-slice is 1920–2020, a period of demographic and musical flowering, loss, and recovery for the east European Ashkenazic Jews, which includes their major migration of 1881–1924, their subsequent annihilation in the Holocaust, and cultural survival in diaspora. Traditionally, this large population regularly performed oral expressive culture across a huge geographic and cultural landscape that was unified by a shared language—Yiddish—beliefs, and customs. Mobility of the population and its access to widening media set up patterns of musical creativity that have endured.

The target repertoire is the Yiddish song, rather than the more usually examined instrumental ("klezmer") tradition. Based on interviews and recordings, this article looks for themes that span the decades of activity of several generations of singers, from the pre-Holocaust cohort that grew up in Europe to a rising group of young singers maturing today.

Let us begin with two individuals in the older European context: Yitskhak Milstein, born 1914 and Morris Hollender, born 1925. Mr. Milstein was interviewed by Toby Blum-Dobkin and Mr. Hollender by Hankus Netsky. Milstein's account of his early musical life in Shidlovtsve, Poland, is remarkably detailed, starting with the home where his musical family learned songs from each other, using the mandolin as a medium rather than a phonograph. His dad had a songbook as well. An uncle brought songs from Warsaw, with its lively cabaret and theater scene. Local songwriters produced items that circulated in town. Milstein distinguished between those song creators that were "cheap", mere song cobblers, and those who wrote beautiful songs, which might be circulated by the wandering courtyard singers. Music at weddings and synagogues rounded out a rich musical life that was enriched when the gramophone arrived with Jewish and general songs from America, along with 1930s movie musicals starring the memorable Nelson Eddy and Jeanette McDonald. Milstein himself became a mobile musician, learning new material when he regularly traveled to Warsaw for seasonal labor.

Morris Hollender came from a much more rural background, growing up on a farm in Ukraine. His was a deeply religious family who was responsible for local services,

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using unique prayer melodies. Their repertoire was reinforced by a refugee rabbi who lived with them in the 1930s. Even in a remote Jewish settlement that did not benefit from Mr. Milstein's intense encounter with urban music, internal circulation provided a potent means of musical mobility. These two figures who grew up nearly 100 years ago describe patterns of mobility that have not changed, in some ways. You can talk to singers today who learned Yiddish songs locally from family or out of town visitors, from songbooks, films, and recordings, and at performance venues featuring local and touring musicians. Internal circulation remains a constant.

Take the case of my own mother and wife. My mom, born in Uman, Ukraine in 1909, already had a rich musical repertoire when her family became refugees to Romania in 1920. Then, she added a store of Zionist and Hebrew songs while joining a Jewish scout troupe in Kishinev (now Chisinau) in Moldova. It was all still within the ethnic network. My wife, born in Orenburg in the Ural Mountains in 1943, grew up in Chisinau with a father from Poland and a mother and grandparents from Romania, providing different song streams. 50 years apart, both Mom and Greta had brief compulsory encounters with Romanian folklore when local nationalism held sway in the schools. Once, when the ethnomusicologist Robert Garfias visited us, fresh from Romanian fieldwork, he played a tune. Greta got up and automatically danced the *tropotitsa*, a folk dance even she did not know she knew but had learned in elementary school in Chisinau. This type of experience underscores how individual Jews held onto diverse sets of music and dance that streamed through their lives, depending on location and political shifts. They combined the music of peripatetic family and friends with what they heard from their non-Jewish neighbors to seed a rich harvest of song.

Surprisingly, moves from the periphery to a more central Jewish location keep happening. Polina Shepherd, today a sparkplug of the London Yiddish music scene, started life in Soviet Tatarstan, in the provincial city of Naberezhnye Chelny in the 1980s. It was when she moved to Kazan, Tatarstan's capital, in high school that she discovered the Jewish music and dance that would inspire her to travel to KlezFest, a workshop in St. Petersburg run by visiting American Yiddish music luminaries. Polina ended up marrying Englishman Merlin Shepherd and moving to London in 2003, running a virtual klezmer festival of her own this year that continues patterns of internal circulation.

So Yiddish music, down to the personal level, suggests the snowball model of rolling through history, picking up bits locally while moving into new zones, sometimes downhill at a great clip, sometimes being pushed uphill against the tide of society. What remains constant is the individual's peripatetic possibilities dictated solely by discovery, taste, and the long blazing of an individual trail through the forest of signification and social currents.

Today, a singer such as Sarah Myerson, offers a complex example of blending family, local circle, and international travel in her very mobile musical life. She was born in 1987, which she says was "just at the right time. My parents were interested in klezmer, I grew up dancing and singing. My generation grew up going to folk festivals, people went to Klez Kamp, so it's not so strange as you might think, if you think of baby boomer parents". Klez Kamp, which was born at the same time as Sarah, ran for 37 years as an influential site of Yiddish musical and cultural activity. She says: "I had learned German -my grandmother's from Germany and my father spoke to her. I thought, I have the German background, some Hebrew background, some familiarity with Slavic languages, so it was time to learn Yiddish". Sarah started singing in Yiddish and was invited to events at the home of the Schechter family in the Bronx, an important node of learning and transmission through a number of its highly knowledgeable members. So, mobility still operates at the level of local circles, despite our pivot to internet research.

Sarah was embarrassed that she could not speak Yiddish. She took courses in 2012 in New York at both the Jewish Theological Seminary and the long-running summer program at YIVO, the Jewish research institute, and then she lived in Israel for a year, combining Hebrew, Yiddish, and Arabic studies. She found she could learn Yiddish more easily through a song. "So I started writing not very good poetry to help learning grammatical

things". She went to Yiddish Summer Weimar in 2011, a key European site of transmission, and learned traditional Yiddish songs from Ethel Raim. Ethel is a key figure as a founder of the Center for Traditional Music and Dance in New York as well as a major savant of the Yiddish folksong.

With Sarah and Ethel coming together, we see two mobile Americans sharing east European folksongs that had traveled generations earlier to the US while they are in, of all ironic places, Germany, which was not even an original home to the repertoire. As with Klez Kamp, Yiddish Summer Weimar draws both Jews and non-Jews into its orbit with the sheer magnetism of the music and its associated expressive culture-dance, theater, film, plastic arts. Sarah has been writing some striking new songs in Yiddish.

Non-Jews drawn by this powerful musical pull can be just as mobile as Jews. Olga Mieleszczuk, a Polish singer, ran into the heritage of Yiddish songs twice. First, as a revivalist of the great era of 1930s Polish cabaret songs, many of which were written by Jews, she discovered counterpart material in Yiddish. Second, while singing at a festival at Poland's eastern border, she ran into the repertoire of Mariam Nirenberg, which enriched her sense of the region. Nirenberg was a fine singer, documented as early as the 1960s and featured on the 1986 album I produced along with folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett that Mieleszczuk heard (Nirenberg 1986). She had a story similar to that of Mr. Milstein, profiled above, but had an even greater hunger for song acquisition. She readily sang in Yiddish, Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, Hebrew, and English. Her songs span a 500-year period, from the oldest strata of the Yiddish folksong to popular Jewish–American songs she learned both in Europe and after emigrating to Canada, where she kept learning new tunes in her senior center. Mrs. Nirenberg's repertoire combined the mobility of others she eagerly learned from in her youth and her own involuntary transatlantic movement. Olga Mieleszczuk was so taken with Jewish culture that she moved to Israel, placing a strong stake on mobility. She goes back and forth to Poland to carry on her career, personally paralleling the restless, non-stop movement of eastern European Jews.

Pendular movement, then, is another possible means of mobility. This is dramatically highlighted in the unwilling experience of another great traditional Yiddish singer, Lifshe Schaechter-Widman, a matriarch in the Schaechter family I mentioned earlier. She was born into the small town of Zvinyetshke in 1908 when it was still in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. There, Yiddish-speaking Jews picked up German as well as the Ukrainian of the surrounding peasants. Lifshe emigrated by herself to America in 1912, and, fatefully, returned home for a visit in 1914, getting trapped in Europe during World War One. She survived the Holocaust and returned to the US only in 1951. Her rich repertoire reflects both her own mobility and that of the music she heard and acquired over time through various personal contacts and mediated forms.

Personal pathways can flow into communal life in ways that can be stable over time. Linda Gritz is a fine example of the stubborn continuity of social structure in music. She directs and writes songs for a chorus she re-founded for the Arbetering (once the Workmen's Circle, now the more correct "Workers Circle"), an organization founded in 1900 as a mutual aid society oriented towards Socialist ideals. Part of its profile was its expansive choral music tradition, which only faded in the 1960s. I myself sang in a Jewish People's Chorus as a youngster in Detroit, still in the 1950s. Although the organization has, surprisingly, survived (partly by continuing to offer advantageous health-care plans), one might not have expected choruses largely singing in Yiddish to be part of the profile in 2020. Yet they have, in Boston, thanks to Gritz. A look at her background and how she assesses the current situation is helpful to the theme of continuity through mobility. "It was my parents' native language, but they never even spoke it to me, not even as a secret language, but they sent me to the *shula* [school] in the Bronx, I learned to read and write, and I happened to have as my music teacher Chana Mlotek. So what I learned was dozens of songs". Mlotek came from a family, such as the Schaechters cited earlier, who have served as pillars of Yiddish musical continuity for generations. Through the work of Chana and her husband Yosl, generations of summer campers learned songs, and a

much wider audience used the classic songbooks the couple produced. For years, they ran a column in the newspaper *Forverts* (still published, alongside the English-language *Forward*) asking readers to send in "pearls of Yiddish poetry", which they researched and eventually published. This channeled the individual mobility of scattered readers—an imagined community—into a flowing musical stream across time and space in the far-flung diaspora.

Gritz continues, about the Workers Circle Chorus: "then there's this amazing chorus we started twenty years ago and for over thirty years we have a monthly Yiddish sing. There's fifteen or twenty people under forty, which wasn't the case fifteen years ago. Yiddish classes are going strong, at four levels. The beginner class typically has twenty people in it, mostly young people. There's often some kind of family ancestor connection-why that skipped a generation is an interesting question. Or they somehow discovered it's radical. They get involved in the politics and then find out that Yiddish has a long history of fostering those radical politics". That is the same combination of tradition and politics that fostered the Mloteks' work and the *Forverts*/Forward paper. "I just started a few years ago. I started by writing new verses for songs. This past summer I wrote my first original words-and-music Yiddish song, and in the fall, I wrote my second one. The one I wrote last summer I was inspired: I was having concerns about the social justice of our organization not being connected with Yiddish, that people did not know our roots. New young adults were coming to the Arbetering, but not caring or knowing about the Yiddish roots. I wrote a song called 'roots and wings', *vortsl un fligl.* You need both: *Root and wing, both, together, root and wing, mountain and stream. Without a root, there is no way. Without a wing, aimless days. With a root, deeper understanding, with a wing, greater vision*".

In describing her compositional process Gritz modestly stresses the intuitive, continuous nature of the work, but also the strong collective responsibility that aligns her personal pathway with a mobile musical framework: "I'm totally amateur at it. I don't think intellectually about it at all. Having learned Yiddish songs all my life, I've never done analysis, so it's all kind of intuitive. I wrote the lyrics first then kind of walked around and played with melodies that would fit, and tested them out on family members, got feedback, brought them to Klez Kamp and Yiddish New York and tried them out. Whether it conforms to rules there are for Yiddish folksongs, I couldn't tell you. I'm not fluent; I used a dictionary and ask friends, but I want it to be rich and properly expressive. I just did it for the world – let the world do with it what they want. But I imagined it for community". She also harmonizes the Yiddish context with the world mobility crisis in ways that could have been articulated a hundred years ago. She has extended the gender re-write of a classic leftist song to embrace all the world's struggling migrants: "I've also written new verses for *Ale brider* ["We're all brothers", still a standby of Yiddish song] because we're all refugees, we're all siblings, because [just adding] "brothers and sisters" is way too binary these days".

It's important to think through how this, sometimes extreme, personal mobility combines with technology and media. Media are inherently flexible and movable, such as people, and have shifted from sheet music, the older recording formats, and radio to the richer possibilities of streaming and today's universal archive. As with other modern Euro-American traditions such as the American folksong, the story is one of complex diffusion. A given song or tune goes in and out of oral, print, recorded, and broadcast versions across generations, as some descriptions above suggest. People quickly lose track of song origins and catch items as they appear on their radar screens from whatever source. This is particularly common in the Yiddish-speaking world, with its long commitment to universal literacy and its enthusiasm for modernization, starting in the mid-nineteenth century. Even 150 years ago, a song could circulate along a huge Jewish network across the political boundaries of eastern Europe within a few months. Transatlantically, 78 rpm recordings in Yiddish emerged as early as any in the world as the fledgling American recording companies targeted the huge urban immigrant populations. A song could go "viral" worldwide 100 years before the internet emerged. We have many accounts from

older Polish or Russian Jews of having learned New York-based songs, and the same could be said of places such as Buenos Aires or Cape Town.

Finally, just one example to show just how unexpected the mobility of the repertoire can be: the current acclaimed and popular Yiddish-language version of "Fiddler on the Roof". This revival uses a translation written in the early 1960s in Israel to reposition a classic musical by bringing it closer to its roots in the original stories of the great Yiddish author Sholom Aleichem. This stands in sharp contrast to the approach of Jerome Robbins, the Broadway show's original producer, who forbade even a single word of Yiddish on stage to avoid "bringing down the level of the show".

At a time when the language was mostly used for comedy, this new production celebrates the vernacular sound and sense of the stories, particularly for an audience that knows the language. The mobility of the circuit from eastern Europe to Israel to New York is matched by the mental mobility of a cast that includes actors who previously knew no Yiddish. Physically, the show moved from a museum auditorium to Broadway, yet another type of dramatic movement. That a 60-year-old vehicle can revitalize by moving ostensibly back in time only emphasizes how seriously we might take a synchronic approach.

In conclusion, I strongly agree with the editors' credo for the present special issue's: "musics are always migrating". Yet, the contributions to this the issue speak to specific moments of migratory music, rather than looking for the long arc I have suggested above for the Yiddish song. In addition, even that horizon is short, in view of the documented multiple global diasporic migrations of Jewish music over at least the last twenty centuries, not counting the foundational moment of the patriarch Abraham's dislocation. As migration increases relentlessly over the next decades due to climate and political pressures, we need to think about the long trajectory of all the mobile music and musicians, as well as the immediate critical junctures. Any synchronic slice captures moments that link the past and the future but can also reveal long-term stable patterns of aesthetic and cherished expression, carried by minds and media wherever a population may flow.

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