

Presentation by Dr. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett At the Annual YIVO Gathering  
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### Researching Yiddish Folk Songs Then and Now

01-333A 42:56<sup>1</sup>

Esteemed friends, today I will attempt to place the history of Yiddish folksong research in the context of the development of general folklore studies. Then we will assess the achievements to date of Yiddish folksong researchers. Finally, we will recommend research problems for further research that we should now be addressing, and describe a current project which is, in fact, addressing these problems.

The interest in researching folklore begins 200 years ago, when romantic nationalism was developing in Western Europe, specifically in Germany, Scandinavia and the British Isles. A first principle of romantic nationalism was the idealization of primitiveness and naturalness, which Rousseau, the French philosopher of the 18<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Transcription from the audio-recording, which can be found at:

[Annual YIVO Gathering. "Jewish Folk Songs - Past and Future" | Yiddish Book Center](#)

The locators are given in this format: Reel no. (here, 01-333A) followed by Elapsed time (here, 49 minutes:10 seconds, notated as "49:10"

century, propagated, and which gave the folk and its creations a central importance. Instead of praising the refined literature of the elite and criticizing the crudeness of folk-creations, Johann Herder, the brothers Grimm, Elias Lönnrot, and other philosophers, poets, and philologists saw in folk songs and folktales the expression of the folk spirit of a given people. They held that the folk was not yet corrupted by civilization and by foreign influences, and that in the folk one could find the roots and the spirit of a people.

We can understand from this: each people researched its own folklore as a means of finding its own genesis and essence. The Germans researched German folklore, the Russians researched Russian folklore, and so on. The first collections appear in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1765 Percy's *Relics of Ancient English Poetry* comes out; in 1778 Johann Herder publishes *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern*; and only one hundred years later, in 1901, the first substantial collection of Yiddish folk songs is published Ginzburg and Marek's *Yidishe folkslider in rusland* [Yiddish Folk Songs in Russia].

It was only 75 years ago that the Jews became interested in their own folklore, very late, that is to say, in comparison with the Russians, the Germans, and the English, who had started more than 200 years earlier. That said, very similar motivations were at work for Jews, and the character of Jewish folklore study was also formed under the influence of romantic nationalism. National ideological movements also developed later among Jews, and not all Jewish national ideologies

evinced a scientific interest in Jewish folklore. Several prominent exceptions notwithstanding, the early Zionists, for instance, rejected everything associated with Diaspora – a rejection that was considered a means of constructing a new Jewish society. The Yiddish language and folklore in Yiddish did not interest them.

This being the case, where *did* our folklore researchers come from? And how did their nationalist approach affect the research of Yiddish folk songs? Let's start with the times when it was not even known that Yiddish folk songs existed at all. In 1861, for example, Moyshe Berlin wrote in his ethnographic schema of Jews in Russia, 哲 o songs used by the folk at various pastimes exist among Jews whatsoever, even though they are naturally inclined to sing. There exist only songs of the synagogue, known by almost all Jews. As long as researchers thought that Jews did not sing any folk songs, there wasn't anything to study. But even when folklorists knew that Jews *did* in fact sing folk songs, it was not recognized that the songs had a culturally specific character. For this reason, Henryk Lucian Kon, writing in Poland, stated, “The complaints that there is no Jewish national music are *a priori* incorrect. No one has taken the trouble to collect the melodies (*nigunim*) which have such wide currency among the Jewish folk masses. And even when the existence of specific Jewish folk songs was acknowledged, their importance as a field of study was not recognized. Jakob Shatzky, an esteemed historian and bibliographer of Yiddish folklore research, explains that in 1868 Feliks Kon published a declaration, and later an article, in which he points to the importance of Yiddish folk songs. The Hebrew-language newspaper *Ha-Tsefirah* (*The Epoch*) laughed out loud. Hayim Zelig Sionimski

maintained that "poetry such as exists in the stars in heaven, Yiddish folk songs do not possess." As Shatzky explains, the Polish-Jewish scholars promoted the importance of Hebrew and the insignificance of the zhargon's childish literary amusements which impede assimilation and spread various superstitions. How strange, but understandable, that our first folklorists took an interest in Polish and Russian folklore, while some of the first folklorists who studied, or encouraged our folklorists to study, Yiddish folklore were either Poles or Russians.

Sh. An-sky, Joel Engel, Joseph Beckerman, Henryk Biegeleisen, and others took part in the awakening of Polish and Russian nationalism. An-sky, the pioneer of Yiddish folklore studies, got off to a strong start in Yiddish folklore only in the last 15 years of his life. Before that, he was a *maskil* [adherent of the Jewish Enlightenment] who came under the powerful influence of the literature of the Russian *narodniks* [populists]. He lived in Russian villages, among Russian peasants, and wrote about Russian folk life. In the meantime, the Polish folklorist Oskar Kolberg contributed in *his* printed collection of Polish folk songs several Yiddish folk songs which he had heard from Jewish coachmen who had conveyed him on his ethnographic travels.

Shatzky maintains that Yankelovitsh, the founder of *Wisła*, a Polish linguistic-ethnographic journal, also displayed an interest in the Yiddish folk song. He wanted to have Yiddish folklore also represented in his Polish journal. The assimilated Jews looked very much askance at these plans. According to Shatzky, in this environment

the few Jewish folklorists were more interested in Polish folk songs, with the folklore of the Polish tradespeople in Warsaw, and left Yiddish folklore untouched; while several Polish folklorists, on the contrary, were collecting Yiddish folk songs and encouraged Jewish scholars to explore their own culture.

At the end of the [19<sup>th</sup>] century, the nationalist feelings among Jews were growing stronger. Several lawyers, as we will hear, were turning their attention to the history of Jews in Russia and were gathering all sorts of documents, including materials relating to folklore, as a means of documenting Jewish life in Russia. The Ginzburg-Marek collection of Yiddish folk songs was a byproduct of the Jewish Historic-Ethnographic Commission, which comes into being in St. Petersburg in 1891-1892. The Ginzburg-Marek collection incorporated only the texts of folk songs, which were sent in by correspondents. It was greeted with great enthusiasm. Seven years later, two societies were established which stimulated the study of Yiddish folk songs to an even greater degree: the Society for Jewish Folk Music and the Jewish Historic-Ethnographic Society. The musicians wanted to create a Jewish national art music and saw in Yiddish folk songs the needed raw material. Similarly, An-ski, who had organized an ethnographic expedition in 1911 with the help of the Historic-Ethnographic Society, saw in Yiddish folklore a source of creativity for the Jewish writer, poet, and artist. He himself had based his play, "The Dybbuk," on a legend he had transcribed on his expedition. Thanks to nationalist sentiments a great interest in Yiddish folk songs had at long last developed, and Jewish folklorists began energetically to collect them. Classification and analysis came later.

On account of the tireless work of our collectors-to-date, such as Y. L. Cahan, Idelsohn, Lehman, Pipe, Prilutski, Bastomski, Kipnis, Sekulets, Kaufman, Skuditski, Litvin, and others, we now have a durable accumulation of thousands of Yiddish folk songs. Thanks to modern technology, several collectors, such as M. Beregovski, Ruth Rubin, Dov and Meir Noy, the Language and Culture Atlas, and others, there are magnetic audio recordings of thousands of Yiddish songs from Yiddish singers in Poland, Russia, Canada, America, and Israel.

A long tradition of ours of using correspondents in far-flung corners is still alive today in the columns of Yiddish newspapers, for example, in the *Forverts* and until a year ago in the *Tog-morgn zhurnal*, where readers send in folklore materials they remember. The weekly columns of Naftoli Gross, Menashe Unger, Wolf Younin, Chana and Yosl Mlotek, and others have compiled treasures through the years. Without these devoted workers, nothing would have been done.

Aside from collecting, which we have already done quite a bit of, analysis is very important; but we have done very little with analysis up to now. The folklorists who *have* attempted analysis of the collected materials have worked for the most part on three research problems. One problem is the source and history of a given song. Here we have in mind Sh. Pipe's examination of Dovid Edelshtat's folklorized song *ער אַרבעטער* ["The Worker"] and Walter Anderson's reconstruction of a hypothetical proto-form of the *Lid fun der mobilizatsye* [Song of the Mobilization]. (By the way, Anderson was not a Jew.)

The second research problem is the identification of the Jewish elements in the songs, an interest which grows directly out of the romantic-nationalist motivations of the early folklorists. The renown researcher Idelsohn attempted to identify: What are the specifically Jewish elements in the melodies? Saminsky and Joel Engel were also interested in this question. The third problem has to do with how the songs reflect Jewish life. Peretz, for instance, wrote on this subject at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Aside from the issues of derivation, Jewishness, and reflecting Jewish life, there were also, from time to time, attempts to study style that is, the language and metric organization of the songs and also reciprocal influences. The earlier research into these sorts of issues did not require much more information than the songs themselves, although they did require more or less precise transcriptions of the songs.

Today we try *not* to separate collecting from analyzing, because we understand that new theories demand new facts and that new facts inspire new theories. In my – opinion, collection or field work and analysis go hand in hand. Therefore, it is worth distinguishing two distinct activities: collecting as it used to be done and field work as it should be done now. Collecting means writing down or recording the texts and the melodies of the songs, more or less syllable by syllable. Y. L. Cahan, a scholar-collector, asked those who were notating the songs to transcribe the entire song exactly as the informant sings it and also the names of the informants and when and how they heard the song for the first time. Although the best collectors did write down a few details about the singer, the most important piece for them the thing of

value was the song itself. Collection and analysis were separate and independent activities. The great achievement of the collectors was the gold mine of notated songs which they left us. To this day, a great proportion of folklorists, both Jewish and general, are collectors, first and foremost.

Field work is different from collecting, first, because it entails a broad ethnographic approach, and second because it is organized around certain research problems, which, as previously mentioned, demand new theories and new facts. Consequently, information and research methods that are indispensable today were not necessary for earlier folklorists.

Now let's discuss two of the current research problems which demand other kinds of information and another approach to the study of Yiddish folk songs in general.

(1) We must, in my opinion, identify the field of research *not* as Yiddish folk songs but as songs that Jews sing.

(2) We must research not the songs but the songs in their living context.

These two concepts are linked together. Let us think through the implications of the approach we are recommending here. First of all, the difference between researching Yiddish songs and researching songs that Jews sing. Y. L. Cahan took issue with those folklorists who have no clear understanding of what distinguishes "folk song" from "song after the folk manner" from "theater song" and so forth. He very clearly defined "folk song," and he himself held strongly to the distinctions

among these categories, so that the folklorist would be able to separate out the authentic Yiddish folk songs and research only them. Thanks to Cahan's theoretical achievements we now far better understand what a folk song is.

Although folk songs and other types of songs need to be clearly defined, I do not agree that the folklorist must research only the folk songs – and principally the Yiddish folk songs – and that which relates directly to them.

In order to research songs that Jews sing we must adopt as an organizing principle not the Yiddish folksong, but the Yiddish folksinger. The Yiddish folk song never existed separately, in a vacuum. It always existed along with other musical traditions which the singers knew and which had a variety of influences on the development of the Yiddish folk song. The issue is not only that non-Jews sang *their* songs and Jews sang *theirs*, and that the influences came from what Jews heard. Many Jews were polymusical. They knew and sang non-Jewish songs. Thus, non-Jewish songs are also a part of Jewish life. In fact one can say that one of the chief features of Jewish culture is its polycultural tendencies. In order to better understand Yiddish culture and musical tradition we must investigate it as a heterogeneous whole and not limit our field of study to the specifically Jewish as an isolated unit. It is therefore preferable to take the singer as the point of departure and to take everything the informant sings both Jewish and non-Jewish, both folk songs and songs that are not folk songs. Only with such an approach can one research the role of singing in Jewish life, and, if one desires, the development and the role of

specifically Jewish musical traditions.

Let's take as an example Lifshe Schaechter-Vidman, a splendid traditional singer. She was born in Zvinyetchke, near Chernovitz, in 1893. Leybl Kahn and I recorded her singing over 200 of her songs, and we estimate that she knows some 250 songs and a fair number more. Of these, more than a hundred may be considered undoubtedly Yiddish folk songs. The rest are Yiddish and English theater songs, Ukrainian folk songs, and German art songs by composers such as Schubert. That is to say that her repertoire is very variegated. In fact, she participates in several musical traditions, in five languages, just as she speaks more than one language and is familiar with more than one culture. All of this is a characteristic feature of Jewish life in general. Those who know traditional singers know full well that Lifshe Schaechter-Vidman is not an exception but rather a characteristic, active bearer of our our musical tradition. Polylingualism, polyculturalism, polymusicalism are facts of Jewish life. Thus the singer is, in my opinion, more a microcosm of Yiddish culture than the authentic Yiddish folk song; and a study of of the singer and their repertoire can yield a better understanding of the cultural processes of transition and influence. These, then, are the implications of researching the songs that Jews sing rather than researching the Yiddish folk song in and of itself.

Now, a contrast between investigating the Yiddish folk song and investigating songs in their cultural context. To investigate songs as isolated units, as jewels...

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\*\*[gap in the recording here between Reel 01-333A and Reel 02-333B]\*\*

02-333B 00:00

...about the importance of investigating the process, the how – and not the song as aesthetic object. Investigating the songs in their cultural context is a key to an understanding of the processes. This sort of approach is not new in Yiddish folklore studies. Beregovski, better known as a collector of Yiddish folk songs, was first of all one of the best investigators of the theory, of the methodology, and of the history of Yiddish folk music. Already in the early 1930s he had attempted to convince our folksong researchers that they should employ a broad ethnographic approach and research Yiddish folkloric music in its cultural context. Our recommendations here are in the spirit of Beregovski. Both of these concepts—songs-that-Jews-sing and songs-in-cultural-context – are reminiscent of the appeal that Alan Dundes, the American folklorist, used to make: “Let's put the folk back into folklore.”

In short, despite having gotten off to a late start in investigating Yiddish folk songs, we have transcribed many songs and done some analyzing. The new styles in research issues which are of current interest demand field work so that we may be able to gain information that were in earlier times not required and not recorded. Our new research problems demonstrate how far the horizons of Yiddish folksong scholarship are now widening. Let us not forget that without the collecting efforts of yesterday we would not have a foundation upon which to build today. With the help of the tools and methods which current ethnomusicological practice afford us, we are building forward on the achievements of past generations of folklorists.

Now we will see several slides, and first of all from An-ski's ethnographic expedition in Europe before the First World War. An-ski recorded many Yiddish songs, aside from other folklore material, such as tales, superstitions, customs, beliefs, exorcisms, and so on.

After that, I will show you slides that are connected with my own field work. Five years ago, I recorded over 125 hours of Yiddish folklore from informants in Toronto. Among the more than 700 folk tales I received were several hundred folk songs. I tried as far as possible to record not only the songs but also their social contexts. You will hear what emerged. Finally I will say a few words about a YIVO project we are doing now. But we will leave that until the end.

[Slide 1]

...He was a co-worker of An-ski's, and he was on the expedition. He describes the expedition in his memoirs. And these photographs were in his memoirs.

[Slide 2]

This is also An-ski. That's how it was in Europe, when undertaking an expedition to collect folklore. That's, yes, Rekhtman, sitting here on the right, interviewing an informant. It was in towns such as these that they gathered their materials.

[Slide 3]

These are three *klog-mutern* (wailing-mothers), who have special lamentations which they voice at funerals; and An-ski liked to write down what they sang.

[Slide 4]

Here we have *klezmerim*...

[Slide 5]

And here we have something from my own field work. This is a photograph of an informant who gave me 140 tales, and I have a very interesting description from him: namely, recollections where he sings a song and describes exactly when and where he heard it. That's what it means to investigate songs in context; and I matched photographs to his description and we will hear a tape recording and see the photographs at the same time. (-What's his name?) His name is Jack Starkman. He comes from Klimentov (Klimont), and this a photograph from before he came to Canada. (He came in 1934, I think.)

02-333B 06:22

[Jack Starkman, speaking on recording, tells of being hospitalized in Warsaw as a young man and hearing the sung call of a man soliciting repair work. Starkman then sings the call as he remembers hearing it.]

[Slide 6]

Here we have a photograph... The informant, before he came to Canada,... right before he came, he took this photograph.

[Slide 7]

This is a kind of “transition” to my own field work and materials which I gathered here in Toronto. This is an image of Toronto, the neighborhood where I myself was in the 1940s and '50s.

[Slide 8]

This is one of my informants, who sang many interesting songs. She comes from a small town in Polesia [Belarus], and you will hear an example of one of her songs. This is a song which is also found in Y. L. Cahan's collection. This is an authentic Yiddish folk song.

02-333B 13:42

[Maryam Nirenberg sings on recording.]

Her name is Maryam Nirenberg, now living in Toronto, and she is a splendid traditional Yiddish folksinger.

[Slide 9]

The final two slides I want to show you in order to say that Yiddish folk songs are still alive in certain circles and on certain occasions. When conducting a festive meal, at Pesach or Simkhes Toyre, at various holidays, I remember from my childhood – and this is in fact a photograph from my childhood – that we sang a lot of Yiddish songs, and this is true to this day.

[Slide 10]

And this is a *melave-malke* [evening meal ushering out the Sabbath] in the hassidic community. And we know that one can hear many beautiful *nigunim* [melodies] and Yiddish folk songs on such occasions, that the Yiddish folk song lives on. That's what I wanted to say with the two final slides.

Thank you.

02-333B 16:58

*Transcribed from the Yiddish recording and translated by Josh Waletzky, May 2021.*