

December 01, 1986

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### Recommended Citation

Jacobson, Joshua R., "Some preliminary notes on a study of the Jewish choral movement" (1986). *Music Faculty Publications*. Paper 21.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20000796>

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## SOME PRELIMINARY NOTES ON A STUDY OF THE JEWISH CHORAL MOVEMENT

JOSHUA R. JACOBSON

At the end of the nineteenth century the European Jewish community was divided into several factions. For some Jews, life would continue exactly as it had for countless centuries. They had no use for the secular world; the spiritual realm guided their every move. For others, a more liberal attitude on the part of civil authorities signalled an opportunity for them to end their age-old isolation. While the assimilationists attempted to abandon as much of the Jewish way of life as was possible, others attempted to adapt Jewish practices to modern times. Inspired by the dreams and efforts of such men as Theodore Herzl and Eliezer Ben-Yehudah, Jews began to assert their identity in national as well as religious terms, and to reestablish their connection with the ancient homeland and its language. Seeking new modes of expression, Jews began to experiment with new forms of cultural nationalism.

In 1899 a Polish attorney, N. Shapiro, petitioned the governor of Lodz for permission to establish a Jewish choral organization. Anticipating the hostile reaction with which governmental officials greeted any gathering that smacked of political sedition, Shapiro asserted that his organization would serve patriotic aims by keeping the young people of Lodz away from the revolutionary and anti-government assemblies that were poisoning their minds. He ended his petition with the words, "Let these young kids amuse themselves with choral singing, then there will be none of that revolutionary foolishness on their minds."<sup>1</sup> Not only did the governor grant the petition, he instructed the police not to interfere with the choir's rehearsals or to interrupt them in any way from their patriotic work.

A certain Mr. Hartenstein was appointed the choir's conductor, but after a few rehearsals it became apparent that someone with more professional expertise would be needed. It was at this point that the 18-year old Joseph Rumshinsky was engaged to become the first permanent conductor of the chorus. Rumshinsky later recalled of that first rehearsal in his autobiography, "When we stood up and started to sing, a holy musical fire was kindled by the first Jewish choral ensemble in the world."<sup>2</sup>

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But all was not smooth sailing for the fledgling chorus; hostility was encountered on many fronts. The Zionist activists couldn't understand the purpose of choral singing as a form of nationalistic expression. The assimilated Jews derided the "Zhidn" who wanted to waste time singing their "Mah Yufis" (a derogatory term for Jewish songs). And the Chassidim were outraged that young men and women would be meeting together in the same room.

But after the first concert, the opposition seemed to melt away. Here is how Rumshinsky described that event in his autobiography.

About a year had passed by. Although the rehearsals were going well, people were still making fun of the chorus. At that time we decided two things: first of all to name our chorus "Hazomir," and secondly to give a concert in a major concert hall. After the concert was announced, within three days the tickets were sold out, eagerly snatched up by those Zionists and assimilationists who were ready to come and laugh at us.

I will never forget the feelings we had coming into the concert. We knew that this was the Day of Judgement for the Lodz Hazomir, and that our judges would be unforgiving beyond pity. I felt like a general just before leading his soldiers into battle.

After we sang our first number, "Al Mishmar Hayarden," the hall was silent. We were surprised and frightened. What was going on? Could it have been such a flop that no one would applaud? When I turned around to face the audience I saw an unbelievable sight: hundreds of people sitting as if mystified, jaws hanging down and glassy-eyed as if, G-d forbid, they were paralyzed. After what seemed like an eternity the audience awakened from its lethargy and thunderous applause broke out. There were cries of "bravo!" and "encore!" We had to repeat the opening song three times. Then with each succeeding number the enthusiasm grew and grew. At the conclusion of the concert hundreds of young people, including the assimilationists, the Chassidim and Zionists, became one great crowd and danced in front of the theatre. The victory had come. Jewish society now began to respect Hazomir and regard it as a serious factor in Jewish cultural life.<sup>3</sup>

Hazomir soon had branches in major cities of Russia and Poland. The flame even spread to the West. As Zari Gottfried points out in his article, "Yiddish Folk Choruses in America,"

The Jewish people were not alone among the many ethnic groups making their home in these United States to transplant their native culture to a new

soil. As part of their living cultural heritage the Scandanavian and Central European immigrants established choral societies in all major metropolitan centers. But while [these] immigrants were able to draw on well-established sources and traditions, the Jewish immigrants could claim no such sources or patterns. They were thirsting for all sorts of cultural expression [often] denied them in the countries of their origin. Despite the pangs of adjustment to the new land, the new immigrants in search of fulfilling their cultural drives began to organize amateur theatrical and musical groups and other media of cultural expression.<sup>4</sup>

In 1914 the first Jewish choirs in the United States were founded, the Chicago Jewish Folk Chorus, directed by Jacob Schaefer, and the Paterson (New Jersey) Jewish Folk Chorus, directed by Jacob Beimel. As immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe increased, Yiddish choruses began to appear all across the United States. Among them were the Boston Jewish Folk Chorus (1924) directed by Misha Cefkin, The New Haven Jewish Folk Chorus, the Philadelphia Jewish Folk Chorus (1923) and the Detroit Jewish Folk Chorus (1924), both directed by Harvey Schreiber, The Los Angeles Jewish Folk Chorus directed by Arthur Atkins, The American-Jewish Choral Society of Los Angeles directed by Miriam Brada, the New York 92nd St. Y Choral Society (1917) directed by A. W. Binder, the New York Workmen's Circle Choir (1925) directed by Lazar Weiner, The New York Jewish Philharmonic Chorus directed by Max Helfman, the Miami Jewish Folk Chorus (1943) directed by Bernard Briskin, The Newark Jewish Folk Chorus (1928) directed by Samuel Goldman, and The San Francisco Jewish Folk Chorus (1933) directed by Zari Gottfried.

In 1921 Jacob Beimel called a conference of Jewish singing societies for the purpose of establishing a central organization. Meeting at the YMHA in Paterson, New Jersey on May 29 and 30, the conference passed the following resolutions:

1. To create a federation named "The United Jewish Choral Societies of America and Canada."
2. To improve existing choral societies and establish new ones.
3. To publish choral compositions in Yiddish, Hebrew and English with Jewish textual content.

The list of elected officers was a veritable Who's Who of Jewish music: Jacob Beimel was President, Leo Low and A. W. Binder Vice-Presidents, Cantor Yosseleh Rosenblatt Treasurer, and Solomon Golub Secretary.

Alas, the United Jewish Choral Societies had a brief history, dissolving after but three years of existence. But in its final days it organized the largest Jewish Chorus ever seen in America. On April 15, 1923 a concert was given at the Hippodrome in New York City featuring nine singing societies, totalling over six hundred singers!

With the slackening of immigration and the assimilation of most Jews into the cultural fabric of American life, one by one the Yiddish Folk Choruses began to die out. By the late 1950s only one such organization remained, the Workmen's Circle Chorus of New York.

But in 1960 a new chapter in the history of the Jewish choral movement began with the founding of the Zamir Chorale in New York City. Under the direction of Stanley Sperber, this choir grew from a modest group of folksingers who had met at a Jewish summer camp to an impressive, disciplined ensemble of over one hundred voices. To a new generation of Americans growing up in the 1960s, searching for their roots and finding pride in the image of the new state of Israel, the Jewish chorus provided an attractive outlet for their cultural, social and religious sentiments.

Today the movement is once again fully alive. Through the medium of the choral art, men and women in cities from Boston to Los Angeles are proudly raising a cultural banner for the Jewish people.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Rumshinsky, *Klangen Fun Main Leben*, New York, 1944, P. 187. In all of the citations I have taken the liberty to paraphrase the authors. Translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup>Rumshinsky, p. 189.

<sup>3</sup>Rumshinsky, pp. 193-195.

<sup>4</sup>Zari Gottfried, "Yiddish Folk Choruses in America" in Mordecai Yardeini, ed., *Fifty Years of Yiddish Song in America*, New York, 1964, p. 49.