

# NOTES FROM ZAMIR

*published semi-annually by*

## THE ZAMIR CHORALE OF BOSTON



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The Zamir Chorale of Boston is a non-profit mixed chorus whose mission is to be the premier performer of Jewish choral music. The Zamir Chorale of Boston:

- Enhances appreciation of Jewish culture and strengthens Jewish identity by heightening awareness of the variety and quality of Jewish music.
- Serves as a worldwide resource for the dissemination of Jewish choral music through concerts, recordings, and publications, and by commissioning and premiering new works.
- Provides an opportunity for singers to share their passion for Jewish choral music in an environment that respects traditional Jewish observance.

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## Alumni News

Mazal tov to:

Joyce and Michael Bohnen on the birth of their grandsons, Yair Eliav Wall and Jordan Ethan Goldstein.

Heather and Richard Forrest on the birth of their daughter, Haninah Grace.

Silvia Golijov on the award of the MacArthur Genius Grant to her husband, composer Osvaldo Golijov.

Andrew and Heather Greene on the birth of their daughter, Alissa Rosalie.

Cantor Scott and Francene Sokol on the birth of their son, Samuel Harlan.

Nancy Sargon and Norman Zarsky on the bar mitzvah of their son, Isaac.

Michael and Serene Victor on the marriage of their son, Daniel, to Sabrina Assayaq.

Condolences to:

Janey Bishoff on the death of her beloved mother, Sophie.  
Andrew Greene on the death of his beloved grandmother, Rosalie.

Leila Joy Rosenthal on the death of her beloved father, Ralph.

Cantor Scott Sokol on the death of his beloved grandfather, Samuel Kay.

Phyllis Werlin on the death of her beloved uncle, Arnold.

## SAVE THE DATE!



**Zamir celebrates its double-chai anniversary in June 2005 with a weekend of exciting events for Zamirniks past and present. Mark your calendars now for June 3 through 5, 2005, and join us for plenty of song, celebration, and camaraderie! The festivities are capped off by the 36th anniversary concert on Sunday evening, June 5, featuring music Zamir has commissioned throughout its history and Ernest Bloch's *Sacred Service*.**

**The 36th anniversary weekend is chaired by Ronda Garber Jacobson. To volunteer your assistance or ideas, please contact Ronda at [36th@zamir.org](mailto:36th@zamir.org).**

## A Message from the General Manager

Shortly after I began my position as Zamir's General Manager last spring, I attended a rehearsal and heard the Chorale sing for the first time. I was immediately captivated by the gorgeous sound this group made, and by the aptness of Zamir's name—Hebrew for nightingale. Since then, I have come to appreciate the many other things, in addition to its sweet sound, that make the Zamir Chorale of Boston so special—its impressive accomplishments over the course of 35 years; its focused mission of perpetuating Jewish culture through music; and the extraordinary dedication of its singers, volunteers, board members, and donors.

I feel fortunate to have joined Zamir at an especially exciting time. The group's reputation has never been greater, and we receive inquiries from more presenters clamoring to have Zamir concerts in their communities than we can fit in one season. The Chorale has undertaken two international tours in the past year, has released its sixteenth recording this fall, and is enlarging its educational activities, expanding its collaboration with Hebrew College, and making exciting plans for the upcoming double-chai (2004–05) season. To support all this activity, Zamir is also opening a new office in January at 1320 Centre Street, Newton, Massachusetts.

The "nightingale" is poised to soar to even greater heights. Accordingly, we are launching a fundraising campaign this fall to support our increased musical and educational activities. When you receive a letter from Zamir this season, please consider providing leadership in this time of growth, by stepping up to a new giving level.

I look forward to meeting many of Zamir's friends and supporters this season, and I invite you to contact me anytime with your ideas and comments.

Rachel King

## 2003–04 CONCERT SCHEDULE

Nov. 16, 7 pm	<b>Temple Emunah</b> Lexington, MA
Nov. 23, 3 pm	<b>Temple Shalom</b> Newton, MA
Dec. 7, 4 pm	<b>Temple Tifereth Israel</b> Malden, MA
Dec. 24, 7:30 pm	<b>Temple Emanuel</b> Newton, MA
Feb. 12, 4:30 pm	<b>Church of the Covenant (American Choral Directors Assn. conference)</b> Boston, MA
Feb. 29, 1 pm	<b>Solomon Schechter Day School</b> Newton, MA
Feb. 29, 3 pm	<b>Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for Aged</b> West Roxbury, MA
Mar. 14, 7:30 pm	<b>Weymouth (MA) High School (with Hingham Symphony Orchestra)</b>
Mar. 16, 8 pm	<b>Jordan Hall (with Hingham Symphony Orchestra)</b> Boston, MA
May 5, 7:30 pm	<b>Hebrew College</b> , Newton, MA
June 6, 7:30 pm	<b>Casey Theater, Regis College</b> Weston, MA
July 11	<b>North American Jewish Choral Festival</b> , Ellenville, NY

**YES!** I wish to make **a year-end gift** to the Zamir Chorale of Boston.

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- Shir Chadash Circle (\$3,600+)** Receive above, two extra tickets, special event with Zamir, naming opportunities.
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## Special Events, Autumn 2003

On October 20, 2003, Zamir hosted a reception at Hebrew College in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, to thank its major donors and supporters of Zamir's Heritage Mission to Italy (see p. 17). *Photos by Joe Wertheim. Clockwise from right: Artistic Director Joshua Jacobson chats with Dr. David Gordis, President of Hebrew College; a Zamir ensemble performs Italian-Jewish repertoire from the Heritage Mission; guests survey photo montage of Italy by professional photographer and Zamir singer Jody Weixelbaum.*



### Zamir Gives a World Premiere



*Photo: Ronda Jacobson*

Zamir opened its 2003-04 season on November 16 with a world-premiere performance of "Harninu," by American composer Benjie-Ellen Schiller. Zamir commissioned "Harninu" from Schiller in honor of Rick Boyar, longtime singer, percussionist, and friend of Zamir, who passed away in October 2002. With both Schiller and Boyar's wife, Ronni, in the audience, the Chorale gave a performance notable for its great feeling and intensity.

"We are delighted to honor Rick Boyar with this beautiful new piece by our friend and collaborator Benjie-Ellen Schiller," said Joshua Jacobson. "'Harninu' represents Benjie-Ellen at her best: it reflects her classical training, as well as her love of folk music and her deep commitment to traditional Jewish music and the Hebrew biblical text." Zamir will reprise "Harninu" on other concert programs throughout the season. To hear a clip of the Chorale performing the work, visit [www.zamir.org](http://www.zamir.org).



# JEWES IN MUSICAL THEATER



This fall, Zamir is focusing on the role of Jews in musical theater. Since the destruction of the national sanctuary in Jerusalem some 2,000 years ago, the rabbinic authorities placed strict limits on the performance of any kind of music. Exceptions were made only for certain joyous occasions: divine worship, rejoicing with a bride and groom, and the celebration of the springtime holiday of Purim. In many communities, Purim was an opportunity for extreme frivolity; the commemoration of the rescue of Persian Jewry from Haman's genocidal plot was celebrated in a carnival-like atmosphere. The biblical story of Esther was acted out in a Purim-play (*purimshpil*) with costumes, staging, dialogue, and song. By the end of the nineteenth century, the *purimshpil* had been expanded beyond its once-a-year boundaries. In Rumania, Avrohom Goldfadn (1840–1908) began to produce musical plays year-round for the Jewish community. Goldfadn's project was received with great enthusiasm and spawned a plethora of Jewish theater companies in Europe and America. From this Yiddish theater came many songs that are still popular today, including "Rozhinkes mit Mandlen" (Raisins and Almonds), "Abi Gezint" (As Long as You're Healthy), "Ba Mir Bistu Sheyn" (I Think You're Pretty), and "Dona Dona."

The emancipation that began in the late eighteenth-century brought new arenas of expression for the Jews of Europe. No longer confined within the walls (both real and metaphorical) of their communities, Jews were now free to participate in almost all avenues of cultural life. Three of the greatest opera composers in nineteenth-century Paris were Jews: Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864), whose compositions made him one of the richest men in Europe; Jacques Offenbach (1819–1880), a cantor's son whose success in the Opéra Comique was established with his satiric *Orpheus in the Underworld*; and Jacques Halévy (1799–1862), another cantor's son who achieved great fame with his grand opera, *La Juive*. Other Jews who contributed to the world of European opera and operetta include Lorenzo da Ponte,

Karl Goldmark, Erich Korngold, Arnold Schoenberg, and Kurt Weill.

Jews were not only composers of musical theater in Europe, they were also seen as characters on stage. The stories of the Hebrew Bible inspired numerous productions, from the anonymous *Play of Daniel* (twelfth century) through such spectacles as Rossini's *Moses* (1818), Verdi's *Nabucco* (1842), Saint-Saëns's *Samson and Delilah* (1877), and Schoenberg's *Moses and Aaron* (1932). While characters from the Hebrew



A Purim play, Prague, 1741

Bible were presented as heroes, contemporary Jews were not always seen in a favorable light. The *commedia del' arte* scenes in Orazio Vecchi's satirical madrigal comedy, *L'ampfiparnaso* (1597), include the humorous depiction of a Jewish pawnbroker. Halévy's *La Juive* (1835) sympathetically presents the tension between modernity and the traditional Jewish way of life, a theme that would be revisited more than a hundred years later on Broadway in Jerry Bock's 1964 show, *Fiddler on the Roof*.

In twentieth-century America, Jews (comprising less than four percent of the population) seemed to dominate the field of popular musical theater. The roster of composers and librettists includes such luminaries as Harold Arlen, Irving Berlin, Leonard

Bernstein, Marc Blitzstein, Jerry Bock, Mel Brooks, George and Ira Gershwin, Oscar Hammerstein II, Jerome Kern, Lorenz Hart, Frank Loesser, Frederick Loewe, Richard Rodgers, and Stephen Sondheim.

On December 24, 2003, Zamir presents a program of Jewish characterizations from five centuries of musical theater. This concert, at Temple Emanuel in Newton, Mass., will include satirical portrayals from Italian Renaissance comedies, the spectacle of nineteenth-century grand opera, the sentimental songs of the Yiddish stage, the songs of Purim plays—old and new—and the hits of Broadway. We hope you will join us for this fascinating and entertaining program.

Joshua R. Jacobson  
Artistic Director

# Some Intersections of Jews, Music, and Theater

Prof. Mark Slobin

The following article is adapted and condensed, with the author's permission, from an original essay by the same title, which was published in *From Hester Street to Hollywood*, Sarah Blacher Cohen, ed. (Indiana University Press, 1983). For the text of the full article, please visit Zamir's website at [www.zamir.org](http://www.zamir.org).

In this brief essay we shall focus on a few key intersections of Jews, music, and theater in America. Several cases involve theatrical material that not only *is* entertainment but is *about* entertainment, more specifically about performers.

We begin with *Shloyme Gorgel*, a play by the indefatigable Joseph Lateiner, author of some two hundred potboilers.

Lateiner was a master theatrical "baker," to use the Yiddish term. Coming to America in the first massive wave of immigration (1882), he set up shop near his arch-rival from Rumania, "Professor" Hurwitz, and the two writers turned out at least one play a week during the brief season. *Shloyme Gorgel* probably dates back to the 1890s, if not earlier. Lateiner's scissors-and-paste method, as described by the theater historian B. Gorin, was to take a non-Jewish play, insert songs, dances, and comedy, change the names of the characters to make them sound Jewish, and tack on a lively title. Music was an integral part of this theater. An analysis of how songs function in a typical Lateiner work like *Shloyme Gorgel*, however, shows that they carry much of the implied message of the melodrama and even develop characters.

The plot of *Shloyme Gorgel* is labyrinthine. The title character is a gifted cantor who has fallen on hard times, living as a perennially drunken street singer. Thus, we are dealing with a play that comments on the musician's lot. His fall was precipitated by his daughter Hadassah's arrest and seventeen-year imprisonment for murdering her infant. However, Hadassah was falsely charged: a wealthy baker whose son, Mesholem, had secretly married and impregnated Hadassah, had the marriage annulled and the baby stolen, substituting a dead child to implicate Hadassah. The baker died, leaving Mesholem and the baker's wife, Gitele, ignorant of the plot. Shifra, the erstwhile infant, now seventeen, is meant to be Mesholem's wife, though she loves a baker's apprentice, Solomon. By play's end, Solomon gets his Shifra, Hadassah is vindicated and reunited with Mesh-

olem, and a double wedding is planned. Much of the happy ending is due to a missing right ear-lobe of Shifra's, which identifies her as Hadassah's child. This device, as well as the general style of plot and construction, indicates Lateiner's affinity with—and probably direct borrowing from—mainstream Euro-American melodrama.

The first song appears as a climax to the play's opening scene in court, where Shloyme Gorgel sings a bit of cantorial music for his daughter Hadassah, who has been so traumatized by seventeen years of imprisonment that she no longer recognizes her father. The relief provided by the music after the tense melodrama of the courtroom scene is very useful. The introduction of cantorial music has a three-

fold dramatic relevance: 1) the Jewishness of the characters, in the strained setting of a Polish courtroom, is vividly stated through music; 2) the better nature of Shloyme Gorgel, depicted heretofore as a rambling drunkard, is suggested; 3) the sentimental scene of the father-daughter reunion is expressively marked—no doubt tears flowed at this point in the old days.

The remaining musical numbers of *Shloyme Gorgel* are fairly formulaic. Thus, Hadassah is allowed an aria of joy when her name is cleared and her daughter is found alive, again letting music mark a highly expressive moment. Two more songs attack the rich and the faithless, followed by a closing congratulatory number to make a festive conclusion. Taken as a whole, all of the numbers contribute richly to the dramatic impact and cultural resonance of the play. Only one is strictly extrinsic, in a sense of being more a production number than a part of the action: Shifra's divertissement on the topic of the vileness of other nations as opposed to the Jews, a song theme found both in folklore and in other popular entertainment of the period. It is a sophisticated number, which moves from the French, who drink champagne and tell lies and dance (cue for the "Marseillaise") to the Germans, anti-Semites who guzzle and cavort to "Ach du lieber Augustin," and finally attacks the Russians, "Ivans" who "chew straw" and drink "strong rum" and dance to a *komarinskaia*. As for the Jews—they work hard all week, have lots of troubles, and get their satisfaction from going to the Yiddish theater; only a hot play will get them to dance; this bit of self-advertisement for the Yiddish stage ends the number.

The importance of this elaborate song-and-dance routine



Meeting of the Jewish Composers' Society.

Pictured, left to right: Alexander Olshanetsky, Abraham Ellstein, Joseph Brody, Joseph Steinberg, Joseph Rumshinsky, Harry Lubin, A.E. Markowitz, Sholom Secunda



is that its music moves outside the in-group world. While for their own internal reasons, Eastern European Jews were conversant with and able to satirize varied ethnic musics, they were to find that they had a skill that was marketable in the theaters of the New World.

However, mainstream American drama was slow to grasp the usefulness of the brash, electric Jewish entertainer as a subject for commentary. It was not until immigration had been slowed to a trickle that *The Jazz Singer* could be written. Prior to that time there appeared in 1908 a play of major importance, also centering on an immigrant Jewish musician: Israel Zangwill's *The Melting Pot*. This overripe vehicle for a simplistic social philosophy made a tremendous impact when it first appeared, helping the term "melting pot" to become part of our permanent national vocabulary.

Zangwill was a flamboyant English Jewish writer and public figure whose sympathies fluctuated from one cause to another. Inspired by Theodore Roosevelt, to whom the play is dedicated in the most grandiloquent terms, Zangwill set about showing America its future, using as his mouthpiece David Quixano, immigrant violinist and composer from Russia.

Everything about the social situation portrayed rings false, beginning with the hero's very name. Quixano hardly sounds Russian-Jewish, but there is no doubt about David's rather quixotic nature. The house he lives in with his uncle is given as being in "the Richmond, or non-Jewish borough of New York"; the incongruity of this immigrant-based drama taking place on Staten Island needs little comment. As part of his program, Zangwill introduces a broguish Irish servant, Kathleen, who little by little takes on the ways of David's old Yiddish-speaking, Orthodox aunt, so that by Act IV she is busy keeping kosher. David falls in love with a non-Jewish Russian emigre settlement worker, Vera, with the rather odd surname Revendal, who despises her father, a baron. The latter turns out eventually to be the leader of the infamous Kishinev pogrom of 1903, an event that stirred great sympathy for Russian Jews worldwide; he is also the murderer of David's family. Yet this cold-hearted anti-Semite, when confronted with David, relinquishes his pistol to the Jew and asks to be shot. David merely walks off the stage mumbling, and the only dramatic moment of the play fizzles like a wet firecracker.

What makes the play of interest to us is the use of music as the agent for Zangwill's propaganda. David, who loves going to Ellis Island on visits because of his fondness for immigration (!) dreams of writing an American Symphony to express his passionate belief that America is the destined producer of a future super-race.

In general, the play reads more like a work of socialist realism than like a Broadway production, even one of 1908. Cartoon characters representing American wealth, acculturating ethnics, and dastardly Europeans float by. How Zangwill succeeded in making a powerful statement out of David's effusive, rhetorical flights on the glories of the American Melting Pot is hard to understand at a [historical] distance. It is certainly one of the more curious intersections of the Jew, the musician, and American theater. Yet certain of its images seem to have struck a responsive chord. The idea of the American Symphony has echoed through the corridors of Hollywood. Even in the postwar Marx Brothers movie, *The Big Store*, much of the film was devoted to preparation for, and performance of, a work called "The Tenement Symphony." This turns out to be a piece with

melting pot ideals subtly skewed toward the emerging liberal ideal of cultural pluralism; the ethnic groups are allowed to sing their traditional tunes before fusing in the Crucible.

A young man named Samson Raphaelson did understand the inherent dramatic possibilities of the rise of the immigrant entertainer. While still in his twenties, Raphaelson wrote a short story called "The Day of Atonement," and then turned it into a highly successful Broadway production

of 1925 called *The Jazz Singer*. It starred George Jessel, who apparently gave the performance of a lifetime. Indeed, some New York reviews concentrated on the remarkable dramatic skills of the vaudevillian and even presumed the play was put together as a vehicle for Jessel's crossover to legitimate theater. It was, however, a goal far from Raphaelson's mind. The author laid out his own agenda with extreme clarity in a preface to the published version of the play:

In seeking a symbol of the vital chaos of America's soul, I find no more adequate one than jazz....Jazz is prayer. It is too passionate to be anything else. It is prayer distorted, sick, unconscious of its destination....In this, my first play, I have tried to crystallize the ironic truth that one of the Americas of 1925—that one which packs to overflowing our cabarets, musical reviews and dance halls—is praying with a fervor as intense as that of the America which goes sedately to church and synagogue....

I have used a Jewish youth as my protagonist because the Jews are determining the nature and scope of jazz more than any other race—more than the Negroes from whom they have stolen jazz and given it a new color and meaning. Jazz is Irving Berlin, Al Jolson, Sophie Tucker. These are

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Jews with their roots in the synagogue. And these are expressing in evangelical terms the nature of our chaos today.

You find the soul of a people in the songs they sing. You find the meaning of the songs in the souls of the minstrels who create and interpret them. In “The Jazz Singer,” I have attempted an exploration of the soul of one of these minstrels.

Notice Raphaelson’s insight into the linkage of the Jew “with his roots in the synagogue” with the social ferment here loosely generalized as jazz. There are both literal and metaphoric truths lurking in his purple prose. Literally, he is correct: many of the main figures of Jewish-American, internal entertainment began their careers as choirboys; in addition, a figure like Irving Berlin had similar experiences, and Jolson himself really was the son of a cantor. Metaphorically, the sense of the star entertainer as being



A Seder scene from *Yankele*, starring Yiddish comedienne Molly Picon, center

on a par with the ecstatic, shamanistic ritual of the evangelist and medicine man is an insight regarding American popular culture that was just beginning to emerge in 1925. Raphaelson had grasped the fact that the immigrants could wield power through entertainment, and that their power stemmed from an ability to channel their indigenous expressive systems into strategic, socially rewarding directions. It is no accident that he calls these entertainers “minstrels”: they literally were minstrels. Virtually every major entertainer—Jolson, Cantor, Jessel, Sophie Tucker, even the Yiddish comedienne Molly Picon—appeared in blackface early in their careers. Some of them explicitly state, in memoirs, the comfort they derived from putting on that all-American mask of burnt cork. In blackface, they were no longer

the immigrant—they were one with the soul of America as represented by the grotesque co-optation of the slave’s persona. As bizarre as such a phenomenon must have been for Eastern European Jews, so completely unfamiliar with the concept of black vs. white as cardinal principle of social organization, they quickly understood its value for them: the ritual mask of the powerless gave them, the underdogs, sacred strength in this strange and dangerous New World.

The plot of *The Jazz Singer* is almost laughably simple. Jackie Rabinowitz, now Jack Robin, a cantor’s son, is posed on the edge of great success—he needs only to appear at opening night in a lavish Broadway revue. This, however, coincides with Yom Kippur, holiest day of the Jewish year. His father dying, Jackie/Jack is implored by his mother and the community to sing the powerful Kol Nidre chant in the old cantor’s place. After much soul-searching, the jazz singer acquiesces.

What is important about *The Jazz Singer* is not its stature as a play, or its success as a ground-breaking talkie, but its mythmaking quality. Where Raphaelson departs from formula melodrama is at the very end. It is rather unclear as to whether the hero will return to the stage or, moved by singing Kol Nidre in his father’s place, will stay in the ghetto as a cantor. In this realm the screen adaptation makes the most telling shift. After we see Jolson sing at the synagogue, we are immediately transferred to the vaudeville theater, where he sings a mammy song for his sweet old mother, who now has no compunctions at seeing him in blackface. This is a major change of focus for *The Jazz Singer*; since a play’s ending always illuminates the meaning of its entire span. In the Broadway version, we are meant to be disturbed by the internal tension of the hero and of the group to which he belongs—immigrant entertainers. On the larger level, the story is meant to apply to immigrants in general, who face the agonizing decision of throwing away their cultural birthright in the pursuit of successful assimilation. By suggesting that the decision may be to reject success, Raphaelson has in fact flirted with a heretical statement; neither the Jewish nor the mainstream audience of 1925 would be likely to find it palatable. One imagines Jessel to have implied, through his magnetism as vaudevillian, the inevitability of the hero’s return to the stage.

The fact that the film version allows the hero to be both cantor and vaudevillian is somewhat more banal, but it is an ending which packs more mythic muscle. In effect, the film is an endorsement of the emerging doctrine of cultural pluralism in its early form. While the New Ethnicity of the 1970s proclaimed the long-range possibility of being good Americans and colorful ethnics simultaneously, the earlier tendency of cultural pluralism was to imagine that ethnic heritages, valuable as they might be, would slowly pale as assimilation to mainstream culture took place. The acceptance by the Jolson figure’s mother of blackface vaudeville

**continued on page 15**

# The Father of Yiddish Theater

Prof. Nahma Sandrow

The following article is adapted and condensed, with the author's permission, from *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (Harper & Row, 1977; Syracuse University Press, 1995). For the text of the full article, please visit Zamir's website at [www.zamir.org](http://www.zamir.org).

Avrom (Avrohom) Goldfadn was the father of Yiddish theater. He took that title himself, and no one has ever disputed it. Goldfadn combined in his own personality and career many of the elements that had come together to produce Yiddish theater. He was a folk singer and folk poet, product of the popular Yiddish cultural tradition of the *shtetlekh* (townlets) of the Eastern European countryside. He was a Russian *maskil*, heir to modern European secular enlightenment. Furthermore, by nature he was a trouper, an artist, a dreamer, an intellectual, a hustler, a scrapper, a con man, a romantic, a dandy, an optimist, and a one-man band—and his child was a chip off the old block.

Goldfadn circled his destiny for years before 1876, when he finally committed himself to Yiddish theater. By then he'd developed a reputation as poet and songwriter; before he was out of school, in fact, he had published two volumes of lyrics, and his compositions were in the repertoires of many of the Broder singers.<sup>1</sup> But all these activities did not seem to him to be the real business of his life.

At the "real business of life" he seemed to be a flop. He tried teaching school for a while, but couldn't earn enough to eat. He opened a ladies hat business in Odessa, but went bankrupt and had to leave Russia to escape his debts. In Vienna he tried medical school, without success. Then he edited several Yiddish journals. Though he enjoyed the work, the newspapers always collapsed. In 1876, at the age of thirty-six, Goldfadn went to Jassy, Rumania, because a friend had advised him to try to start a local Yiddish newspaper there.

In his autobiography, Goldfadn records that he went one evening soon after his arrival in Jassy to a wine garden, Shimen Mark's *Pomul Verde*—Green Tree. He went especially to hear his songs sung by a very successful Broder singer named Israel Grodner. The thought occurred to him that the material would be much more interesting if it was integrated into a play, as he had seen in non-Yiddish plays in Western Europe, Rumania, and Russia. He sent for Grodner and they were off.

Goldfadn himself appeared that same week at the Green Tree cafe and was a terrible flop. Dressed in his frock coat, white gloves, and top hat, he stood up in front of the crowd of working people out to drink wine and have a good time. He began to read a poem about the Jewish soul through the ages. Dead silence. Believing, as he himself ruefully admitted later, that they were simply too overwhelmed to applaud, he gave an encore: more silence. He gave another: people started to whistle and boo, and some even started toward him, apparently to beat him up. After all, they had paid extra because of him and they were being cheated. He had to be bundled home in a carriage, out of harm's way.

Despite this failure, Goldfadn was stage-struck. He saw that he was no actor, but the very next day he started writing Yiddish plays. And for the rest of his life he devoted himself to writing and producing. He created a whole theater. He conceived, wrote, directed, produced, publicized, promoted, and painted scenery. In the process, he shaped the repertory, acting style, and even the theatrical lifestyle that were to characterize Yiddish theater from then on and in all parts of the world.

Yiddish folk art was essential to Goldfadn's career. The jesters were an early influence on him. In fact, his father's nickname for him when he was a boy, in the 1850s, was "*Avromele badkben*" ("Little Abie the jester") because he so enjoyed listening to *badkbonim* (wedding jesters). He imitated them by playing with words and making rhymes. Another early influence was the Broder singers. The boy began to write tunes and lyrics in the popular mode, and soon his songs became familiar to the working people around his hometown of Alt-Konstantin in Russia.

Goldfadn's home was middle class, and his father a committed member of the Enlightenment (*haskole*) movement that was steadily widening its influence among Russian Jews. From his youth Goldfadn was acquainted with Western history and literature, and he shared the *haskole* conviction that Yiddish culture had to develop its own secular aesthetic.

In the 1860s Goldfadn went to the Zhitomir Rabbinical Academy. This was one of the crown schools established in the hopes of training Westernized Jewish leaders who would lead their people toward assimilation. The Zhitomir Academy was especially known for its lively intellectual life. In 1862, a new headmaster arrived, a scholar named Slonimsky. His wife was an energetic, sophisticated lady, fresh from big-city *haskole* social life. She brought with her

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Avrom Goldfadn



continued from previous page

a manuscript copy of Shloyme Etinger's play *Serkele*. Reading the play aloud in the familiar living-room fashion of the *maskilim*, which had become so widespread a custom that publishers were printing and selling plays in Yiddish for reading, was not enough for Madame Slonimsky. She felt bored in provincial little Zhitomir and wanted to make a splash, so she directed a "real" production of the play, with student actors. Young Goldfadn played the title role. He was also stage manager, property man, and improviser of scenery and costumes. This was his first theatrical experience, and it was a rare one for Yiddish boys in those days.

At that time, Jews, especially middle-class Jews like Goldfadn, were expanding their intellectual horizons as a result of the permissive policies of Czar Alexander II, absolute ruler not only of Russia but also of areas that are now Poland, Lithuania, and other Eastern European countries. Crown schools like the one at Zhitomir were part of a larger policy of access for Jews to a greater number of schools and universities. As intellectual possibilities widened, traditional Yiddish-speaking society was breaking up, changing, becoming dislocated.

The early plays Goldfadn devised in Jassy were hardly what we consider scripts. He handed plot scenarios to Grodner and Grodner's boy helper. The little company, which Goldfadn later described as an actor and a half, operated like the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, with which Yiddish folk theater had so many original similarities. Goldfadn made up the plot, wrote the songs, and explained to the actors the characters they were to play. Then the two actors, like *bakdlonim*, had to improvise their own words and actions.

When Goldfadn first began to write out his plays in neat Yiddish script in notebooks, they were of little literary value. Yitskhok Leyb Peretz was later to reproach him: "If I had had your talent, I would have constructed my dramas and comedies around much more significant and revealing aspects of Jewish life." But Goldfadn answered all such charges in his autobiography and in various articles, claiming with some justice that his audience, at least in the early years, could not have absorbed any more sophisticated material than he gave them: a song, a slapstick, a quarrel, a kiss, a jig. When he tried to offer them higher drama they were resentful, felt cheated, didn't understand; they demanded a good laugh over a glass of wine to help forget their troubles.

In the *haskole* tradition, Goldfadn justified his plays as didactic instruments, however popular and even crude their form. He was gradually educating his Jews both to the art of drama and to enlightened ideas. He later described himself as reflecting: "Since I have a stage at my disposal, let it be a school for you. You who had no chance to study during your youth, come to me to see the faithful pictures

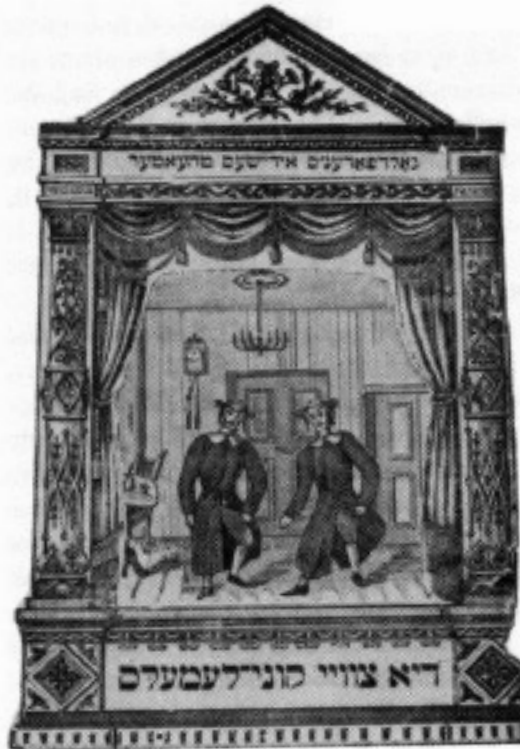
I will draw you of life...as in a mirror...you will take a lesson from it and improve by yourselves the errors which you make in family life, and among Jews, and between Jews and their Christian neighbors. While you are having your good laugh and are being entertained by my funny jokes, at that very moment my heart is weeping, looking at you."

In 1877, within a year of his debut, Goldfadn was already writing out plays of some substance, and by 1880 he had written *Shmendrik* and *The Fanatic, or; The Two Kuni-Lemls*. These plays concentrated on the battle against traditional abuses, especially matches forced on young people by *hasidic* families. Their message found an enthusiastic audience. But the real reason why both were instantly favorites, and have continued to be revived ever since, is simply that they're so funny.

Shmendrik, the protagonist of the first play, is a *yeshive* student and an ass, but an ass of such a distinctive type that "shmendrik" entered the Yiddish vocabulary as a humorously contemptuous description. He is deeply stupid, but with flashes of cross-eyed, almost drunken, shrewdness. He is rude and suspicious, lazy, and intent on his infantile pleasures, especially honey cake. Jerry Lewis, whining and mugging and walking on his ankles, is a Shmendrik type. But Shmendrik has a certain charm and a mother who thinks he's a genius; she only worries that he may strain himself by overwork. In the end, the girl to whom he's betrothed manages to evade the marriage by a trick. She marries her sweetheart, leaving Shmendrik to a suitably foolish bride.

The institution of Yiddish theater was growing rapidly. As Jews became more worldly, the theater's public expanded. The Russo-Turkish War brought to Rumania sophisticated Russian Jews. They had seen good non-Yiddish theater in Russia, where drama was more highly developed than in Rumania, and they could afford to patronize the theater.

Goldfadn's company increased, and his actors came from varied backgrounds. Jacob Adler was a young businessman



The Two Kuni-Lemls

in Odessa. He hung around the Russian theater because there was no Yiddish theater to hang around. Goldfadn arrived in Odessa on tour and gave him a bit part. Within twenty years Adler was considered the Yiddish stage's greatest tragic star. Sigmund Mogulesko was a seventeen-year-old *meshoyrer* (choir singer) in a Bucharest synagogue when Goldfadn arrived there on tour. *Meshoyrerim* were sophisticated musically, and were notorious for being freethinking and irreverent. As soon as Goldfadn arrived in town he heard about a young cutup who was the life of local parties, imitating scenes from Rumanian comedies and mimicking the dignified cantor he sang for. Within a year Mogulesko had become the comic genius of his generation.

As might be expected, a number of Goldfadn's actors were Broder singers and *badkhonim*, *meshoyrerim* and cantors. Some were cabaret entertainers and some were actors or singers from the non-Yiddish stage. Some new Yiddish actors were simply stage-struck youngsters. Maybe they had seen Russian or Polish dramas or operas. Maybe they had never seen anything like a play, except perhaps a *purimshpil*, until Goldfadn blew into town. And they were dazzled. They were drawn to the makeshift stage; or they hung around the inn where those glamorous and worldly beings the *artistes* were staying. When the troupe moved on, they moved on with it, as chorus members or bit players or errand boys. Often this amounted to running away from home.

At the beginning, Grodner acted old women and Goldstein young women. As in Purim plays and various other theaters, including Shakespeare's, the audiences accepted the convention. But Goldfadn soon began to feel badly the lack of an actress, especially in the cabaret atmosphere in which his company most often performed. By 1877 there were several actresses on the Yiddish stage, all claiming to have been the first. But most likely the very first Yiddish actress was a sixteen-year-old seamstress named Sara Segal, who became stage-struck as soon as Goldfadn and his two actors arrived in Galatz. She had a sweet soprano voice and lively black eyes. They would have been delighted to take her along, but her mother refused, so finally they left town without her. She stayed home and pined. At last her mother told her in exasperation that once she got married, she would be her husband's headache and could do whatever she liked. When the company heard the news, they deliberated. Goldfadn and Grodner were married, young Goldstein was not. Sophie (more elegant than Sara) Goldstein joined the cast at once.

Goldfadn was clever at tailoring roles to suit individual actors, just as Shakespeare did at the Globe. For the young cutup Mogulesko he created Shmendrik. For one of his earliest actresses, who was still too scared to open her mouth onstage, he wrote *The Mute Bride* so all she had to do was look pretty.

Their playing conditions oscillated between violent extremes. They played sometimes in the well-equipped opera houses with red plush lobbies that the Russian government helped maintain in many large and even medium-sized towns. Or they played one-night stands in drafty local theaters, where the actresses' shoulders had shivery goose flesh under their flimsy gowns and where the actors elbowed each other to make up at one mirror, by the flights of narrow stairs from the stage. Or, more primitive still, they made do with a makeshift platform in the courtyard of a village inn.

Although when Goldfadn started his was the only Yiddish theater company, within a year that was no longer so. New companies proliferated. At first, most of them were made up of actors who had worked with Goldfadn and left him. Grodner quit soon after Mogulesko joined because Mogulesko was stealing his scenes. Grodner founded his own company. When Mogulesko in his turn fought with Goldfadn and quit, he joined up with the group that Grodner had founded. Then Grodner went off, leaving that group to Mogulesko, and

started a third company. Companies were constantly forming, taking on new members, traveling, breaking up, multiplying, and reshuffling. That was to be the permanent condition of Yiddish theater, and not only in Eastern Europe, but wherever in the world Yiddish-speaking Jews immigrated.

Often these were repertory companies, divided into "lines": a prima donna, a soubrette, a lover, a comic, a villain, a villainess (or "intriguer"), an older man and woman for character roles, and one or two more for spares as a plot might require. Bigger companies had their own musical director, and anything from a single fiddler to a little orchestra. Sometimes they included a chorus as well, though more often they hired a chorus and extras from outside to fill their need. Smaller companies might consist of nothing more, all told, than two actors.

Family troupes were very common, as they had been for centuries in all languages, throughout Europe and America. Yiddish actors not only recruited their wives onto the stage when they needed women, but it was also natural for actors and actresses, constantly together and constantly wandering, isolated from normal society, to marry among

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themselves. So a second generation of Yiddish actors grew up in theater trunks. By the age of five they were old pros at piping a little song and bobbing a little bow.

### **Fame, But Not Fortune**

By the 1880s Goldfadn was famous, both as a poet and as the father of Yiddish theater. But he moved through this widening world, fighting for existence like the rest. He kept touring, every season and sometimes every few days, in Rumania and Poland and Russia. Often he had to go ahead to get money so he could send for his actors. He scrambled for enough customers to pay the hotel bill. He put up posters. He contacted patrons in every little town. He even crushed a rival company that was playing Bucharest when he was: offering the rival leading man a higher salary, he stole him away in the middle of his engagement. At the same time, of course, he kept writing.

In the rough-and-tumble competition for a livelihood, other companies often took advantage of his plays. Actors who'd worked with him simply remembered lines and songs and used them. Sometimes an outsider recorded a Goldfadn play and sold it to a rival. One particularly flagrant case of plagiarism occurred when the actor Leon Blank found that he and Goldfadn were to arrive in a certain town on the same day. Everyone had heard reports that Goldfadn had recently been having huge successes with his biblical operetta *Akeydas Yitskhok* (*The Sacrifice of Isaac*). Blank found someone who had seen the play and remembered it, songs and all. He rehearsed the play with his company, managed to open a day before Goldfadn, and stole Goldfadn's thunder and box office receipts. When Goldfadn, goaded this time beyond patience, took Blank to court, the actor blandly told the judge that the story after all was in the Bible; surely Mr. Goldfadn wouldn't claim to have written the Bible, would he?

In the early 1880s, Goldfadn's plays changed. From crude scenarios built around songs, they became more complex, subtle, and dramatic, reflecting the drastic changes that were taking place in the situation of Eastern European Jews—which affected the stability of Goldfadn's troupe too.

The most dramatic change in the Jewish situation occurred in Russia, which included Jews in the Pale and part of Poland. Goldfadn happened to be playing in Odessa in 1881 when Czar Alexander II was assassinated. Under Alexander III, a reactionary wave swept Russia, affecting Jews very harshly. Pogroms broke out in southern Russia and the Ukraine. New regulations paralyzed Jewish life with legal disabilities. Outside Russia the situation was just as bad. A "cold pogrom" of legal economic persecutions made it doubtful whether Rumanian Jewry would survive. Polish Jews in Galicia were starving. Millions emigrated, most of them to the United States. The Eastern European Jewish community was in fact on its way to extinction.

Eastern European Jews were as distressed psychologically as they were materially. Not only were Jews physically leaving home, either dislocated by authorities or escaping to "Columbus's Nation"; they were also scattering spiritually. Under these pressures, the Jewish population's mere economic ability to support Yiddish theater became severely limited. Development ceased as Goldfadn's company and all the others had to struggle just to survive.

As the community that produced Yiddish theater and should have been its audience began to break up and emigrate, Goldfadn, like all other Yiddish artists, became a part of the vast swirling movement westward. He, too, had to keep moving to stay afloat, trying to establish companies wherever he found a potential audience. He continued writing plays, recruiting actors, training them, moving on, and starting again. His plays had their premieres wherever he happened to write them. Between 1881 and 1903 he had premieres in Lemberg and Paris, Bucharest and New York.

Yiddish actors became nomads, not just to follow their audiences, but also because they were actually outlaws. The Czar banned Yiddish theater in 1883 as part of his suppression of Yiddish culture. Yet even though Yiddish theater was deviled by its particular problems, it was part of a larger current in Yiddish literature. Paradoxically, this continued to be a period of flowering for Yiddish literature, not only in Eastern Europe but wherever emigrants brought it. Yiddish writers redefined their responsibilities. It began to seem less useful to criticize Jewish community behavior, less imperative to try to make Jews as Western and modern as possible. Jews had been going to the logical extreme of that position and assimilating, often even to the point of conversion. (Conversion, moreover, offered material benefits by opening up schools and jobs.) Now pogroms and oppressive legislation made Jews realize that a Jew remained only a Jew, and stiffened their pride in reaction.

### **Pride in Yiddishism**

Nineteenth-century Romantic nationalism took shape in Eastern Europe as Slavophilism, causing the oppression of resident aliens, including Jews. But the Jews echoed, as always, the ideological currents of their environment. They responded to Slavophilism with Yiddishism. True, there was no geographic territory called Yiddishland, but there was such a thing as secular Yiddishism, and to that concept it was becoming possible to feel patriotism. The Yiddish language itself became a national language, associated with pride and striving.

Goldfadn had already begun changing his subjects to give his people what they needed. In *The Capricious Bride*, or, *Kaptsnzon et Hungerman* (1877), instead of making fun of *hasidic* tradition, he makes fun of the enlightened younger generation who go foolishly overboard. Goldfadn also began to write dramas and operettas based on the Bible, on Jewish history and legend. His audiences were hungry for



this sort of play. It was romantic escape at the same time it was a kind of supportive historical affirmation.

The play from this period that is perhaps most often performed is *Shulamis*, or, *The Daughter of Jerusalem*, a pastorella set in ancient Judea. It's a love story in the tradition of nineteenth-century romantic Hebrew novels, especially Mapu's *Love of Zion*. Absalom rescues Shulamis from a well in the desert. They fall in love and vow to be faithful forever, calling as witnesses to their pledge the well and a wild desert cat; these will avenge any betrayal of their love. Absalom continues on his way to Jerusalem, where he was going on a pilgrimage to the Temple, and there he meets another woman. He forgets poor Shulamis, marries, and has children. But years later his two children die, one drowned in a well and the other killed by a cat. He remembers his pledge and returns to Shulamis, who has been waiting for him all along, fending off suitors by pretending to be mad. Despite its dark notes, the overall atmosphere is lyrical, light, and sweet.

These plays set in ancient Palestine reflect a further Jewish communal impulse of the times. In the 1890s the Zionist movement swelled until it took shape in the First World Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s Theodor Herzl organized meetings and made speeches claiming that there was no use pretending any longer that Jews could survive in other people's countries; they needed a country of their own. With this conclusion Goldfadn increasingly concurred. He became a speaker for Zionism, especially in the late 1890s, when he lived in Paris, and his plays reflected his convictions.

By the turn of the century, Goldfadn had created a mass of plays and songs that were the staple repertory of every acting company, every songfest or amateur recitation. Yiddish theater companies were now proliferating across Europe and America, and even in Africa, as part of the mass emigration of Yiddish-speaking Jews. A number of other Yiddish playwrights were writing with great success. But Goldfadn's works had become classics.

Goldfadn began as a songwriter and his cabaret predecessors, the Broder singers, were also primarily musicians. Music was an integral element in Goldfadn's theater and was to remain essential in the majority of Yiddish plays. Goldfadn would call a play "a comedy with music" or "a musical melodrama" or "a romantic opera." But what his public expected in every case was music. Goldfadn wrote

that in every play he gave them, sometimes against his will, "trios, duets, solos, choruses," and all the actors had to have good voices.

Many of Goldfadn's songs keep a sort of open folk-song quality, which echoes his earlier career. Even when they're sung by a full chorus to the elaborate orchestral accompaniments that later arrangers scored, both music and words reinforce the plays' special quality, which is popular, theatrical, unselfconsciously Yiddish, with images often unique to Yiddish culture. The lyrical melody serves the play, as did

the tunes of Goldfadn's contemporary Sir Arthur Sullivan.

Though Goldfadn had since his youth a great gift for creating lilting, hummable melodies, he could only pick out a tune on a piano with two fingers. The melodies often came to him in the night, and once he'd been inspired, he had to wake someone else to transcribe them for him. For this reason, he preferred to hire actors who could write music. Mogulesko was very useful to him, for he could arrange a score to suit a full-size orchestra as easily as one fiddle and an accordion.

Goldfadn's musical sources were often, consciously or unconsciously, other people's music. He drew from liturgical music, influenced by knowledgeable cantors who had in their turn enriched their chants with elaborations of more worldly motifs. He drew from the operas and operettas that were the

rage in European capitals at the time: Meyerbeer, Halévy, Weber, Bizet, Wagner, Handel, and Mozart. For a while he incorporated the triumphal march from *Aida* into one of his productions; when a local opera company presented *Aida*, all the Jews in town believed that Verdi had stolen it from Goldfadn. He also drew from folk-song motifs, which are what his audience really preferred: Yiddish, Rumanian, Russian, Greek, Turkish, Oriental—some twenty-two distinct ethnic strains in all.

As Goldfadn slowly created this repertory, slowly changing from a young to an elderly man, in character he remained much the same. He had become a sort of folk hero in both the Old World and the New. On the Lower East Side of New York, sweatshop workers were humming his tunes to the rhythm of their sewing machines even before *Koldumye*, or, *The Witch* (the first Yiddish play in America) opened there in 1882. One scene that illustrates his prestige took place near the end of his life, after he had followed his fame to New York. He had an extravagant sweet tooth, and passing a fancy Lower East Side delicatessen, he went in

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and made up his mind, after thought, to buy a small package of imported figs. That was all he could afford; in fact, it was probably more than he could afford. But when he asked the shopkeeper the price, the man replied calmly, "What do you care?" The shopkeeper picked up a big box and went from shelf to shelf, filling it with confections. He refused to explain himself till the box was full. Then he turned solemnly to Goldfadn. "Mr. Goldfadn," he said, "I have been waiting for you for fifteen years." And he sent his delivery boy home with Goldfadn, to walk behind the great man and carry his box.

But a folk hero can be something of an embarrassment to those who have to deal with him. He was famous, yes. His portrait hung at the Hebrew Actors Union headquarters in New York. His plays were performed in Polish, Russian, and Hungarian translations. His own public, the Jewish masses, loved him. But he was broke.

### **The Father and His Children**

Goldfadn had no solidly based community to maintain him. If he had been able to found a sort of subsidized Yiddish theater somewhere, things might have been different. As it was, he talks in his autobiography about walking down the street in various cities and hearing the sound of his music coming from the windows of comfortable bourgeois houses. People were gathered around pianos singing his songs while he kept walking, hungry, without a coin in his pocket to buy dinner.

It was in 1887 that Goldfadn tried his luck for the first time in the growing center for Yiddish theater, New York City. The producers of one of the major Yiddish theaters on the city's Lower East Side had brought him over from Europe as a director. There were several companies of actors in America by that time, and most of them had worked for Goldfadn in Eastern Europe, Paris, or London. When he walked onto the stage of New York's Rumanian Opera House, the actors who were assembled there to rehearse all walked out. They even picketed against Goldfadn outside the theater while he found another company and rehearsed with them. Goldfadn's overbearing ways had set up an almost Oedipal hostility among his spiritual children. Now they were asserting that they were grown up; they even had their own playwrights, and they could get along without him.

He went ahead with the show. But he flopped miserably. He was unprepared for the flash and hustle that the Lower East Side theater had taken on in five short years. His play and the production he offered seemed clumsy and corny to an audience straining every muscle to polish away any traces of the small-town greenhorn. Ironically, he couldn't present any of his better, surefire plays precisely because they were so popular; they'd been done again and again. Every passing company that needed an assured box office did them, and for the moment everyone was tired of them. The Rumanian Opera House fired him.

At last he fled back to Europe for five years, and made bitter fun of America's "streets paved with gold." By the time he returned in 1902, New York had become the mecca for Yiddish theater. There were two major theater companies on the Lower East Side. One was controlled by Goldfadn's former bit player Jacob Adler, who was a star by then. The other was run by another star, Boris Thomashefsky.

In 1907, Goldfadn completed his last play, the messianic *Ben-Ami*. Adler bought the rights to the script but then lost interest in it. Goldfadn suffered. Naturally he longed to have the play performed. Besides, he needed the money that a production might bring in. Adler finally allowed Goldfadn to read the script to his company. The experience was traumatic. The actors squirmed and snickered through two acts, after which a minor actor took it on himself to tell Goldfadn, publicly, that the play was old-fashioned and dumb, and that Goldfadn was clearly so senile that he himself didn't know what he'd put down on paper. Goldfadn was crushed. In the less than a year till his death he kept begging his wife and friends for reassurance that he was not senile.

### **A Dramatic End**

The very last act of Goldfadn's life was as melodramatic and sentimental a reversal of fortune as any playwright could wish. It even included the standard tearful repentance by ungrateful children around a father's deathbed. Goldfadn begged for the rights to *Ben-Ami* and sold them to Thomashefsky. Thomashefsky's cast reading was enthusiastic. Vindication became Goldfadn's obsession. He wanted a wild success for the play, to prove he was not senile, and then he wanted to die. And *Ben-Ami's* opening night, on December 25, 1907, was a success: applause, curtain speeches, tears and kisses, toasts and flowers. Goldfadn walked home along Second Avenue exhilarated, with an entourage of friends and fans. At his doorstep he paused to arrange a great wreath of flowers around his shoulders and then burst in like a conqueror, calling to his wife, "Paulina, Paulina, they gave me laurel wreaths. I'm not senile, Paulina, I'm not senile"—and then he burst into tears.

The next five nights in a row Goldfadn watched *Ben-Ami* from a box. During the fifth evening he felt sick, and that night he died. The entire Lower East Side mourned the death of the "father of Yiddish theater." A funeral procession of some thirty thousand accompanied his bier to Washington Cemetery in Brooklyn. Thomashefsky beat his breast publicly in the name of Yiddish theater artists: "If not for our old father Goldfadn, we none of us would have become tragedians or comedians, prima donnas, soubrettes, playwrights. If not for Goldfadn, we'd be plain and simple Jews: cantors, choir singers, folk singers, *badkhanim*, *goyishe* writers, clothes peddlers, machine sewers, cigarette makers, Purim players, wedding jugglers, clothes pressers and finishers. Goldfadn went out like a light in his dark room while, we, his children, ride in carriages, own our own houses, are hung with diamonds."

It made a wonderful curtain, and possibly all of it was true. And *Ben-Ami* played for months to packed houses. B

I. Broder singers were minstrels who wandered around Europe in the nineteenth century, performing their own songs in wine gardens and inns.

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#### Some Intersections, continued from page 8

is an embracing of America—for the first time, the Jewish mother and the black mammy are viewed as synonymous. In this sense, the screenplay goes a step farther than Zangwill's melting pot in asserting that even a black component can tinge the emerging New American.

In 1933 one of the most extraordinary theatrical events in American history was produced by the Jewish community. This was the grand pageant called *The Romance of a People*. Produced first at the Chicago World's Fair, it was restaged in New York and then toured to various cities. Its first performance was seen by 200,000 people, resulting in a \$60,000 profit, and the New York re-run was witnessed by nearly a million, with a \$450,000 gross. All funds were used to facilitate the emigration and resettlement—largely in Palestine—of European Jews who were feeling, already in 1933, the pressure of Nazi policies.

*Romance* was truly popular drama at its grandest, using a performance space 550 by 330 feet and a cast of thousands, drawn from Hebrew schools and communal organizations. Its action consisted of a set of scenes designed to cover the course of Jewish history, culminating in the coloniza-

tion of Palestine. No energy was spared in creating the light and sound aspects of the production, and a separate musical component was assembled, based on the scholarly collections of the major researcher of Jewish music, A. Z. Idelsohn. Despite the pretentiousness and propagandistic nature of the show, *The Romance of a People* was an important milestone in Jewish-American dramatic achievement. Exposing one's history to the full glare of non-Jewish secular scrutiny, daring to build the biggest production in American theater history to evoke sympathy for oppressed brethren—these are substantial goals that were successfully carried out. The self-confidence of the Jewish Americans who could boast the great civic and educational infrastructure capable of supplying *Romance* was formidable. That it was so ephemeral is not surprising; one need make such a point only once.

We have seen Jewish Americans evolve a set of complex responses to American life, using drama, the image of the entertainer, and music, and take their message to the mainstream audience in diverse ways. The purely internal reflections on life in Europe embodied in a melodrama such as *Shloyme Gorgel* was nicely complemented by the acculturated playwright Zangwill's insistence on the Jew's dissolving into the mainstream. By the time of *The Jazz*

*Singer*, a Jewish-American playwright could depict the conflicts aroused by the end of mass immigration and the beginnings of cultural pluralism, still centering on the crucial personage of the Jewish musician. *The Romance of a People* showed a community capable of taking its internal feelings and aspirations and projecting them on a huge scale for all to see, a project that met with praise and financial success in the context of sympathy for the Jewish cause.

MGM Home Entertainment The 1960s brought about the reinterpretation

of the European past through Jewish-American eyes, produced for the general world, not just for the American public. Reflected in the harsh light of the Holocaust, the New World experience sought re-definition through re-evaluation of the Old World in many literary, musical, and artistic genres after 1945. Nostalgia was the pleasantest road to follow, and the one most likely to open the doors to popular entertainment. Despite the success of *The Diary of*

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*Anne Frank*, it was only at the tail end of the 1970s, via television, that the saga of the destruction of European Jewry could be truly mass marketed through *Holocaust*. The 1960s demanded a lighter touch, and the fiddler, not the SS, was placed on the roof.

Of the many aspects of *Fiddler on the Roof* that merit analysis, one that is suited for our purposes is the re-shaping of the Old World via changes in the thrust of Sholom Aleichem's stories about Tevya the Dairyman, the fictional accounts of the Jews of the southern Ukraine that form the basis for the musical's book.

The most obvious decision was to omit the fate of the remaining daughters of Tevya, Shprintse and Beilka, and concentrate on the first three (Khava, Hodel, and Tsaytl). Doubtless the format of a stage presentation is too short to contain five whole fates, and even Maurice Schwartz's elegant Yiddish film version of the stories doesn't attempt full coverage. Yet one might detect a certain pattern of treatment of the Old World theme that makes it logical that these particular daughters be omitted. Shprintse commits suicide after her romance with the son of a wealthy family humiliatingly falls through. Beilka succeeds where Shprintse failed; she catches a rich man, only to find herself alienated from her father in the city, and then her husband is ruined financially, and she has to emigrate.

These *are* tragic stories quite different from the material chosen for *Fiddler*. Tsaytl marries the sweet little tailor instead of the well-to-do but coarse butcher. Hodel sacrifices herself for the sake of secular idealism by linking her fate to that of the revolutionary Perchik. Khava commits the ultimate social crime of marriage to a non-Jew. The predicaments of Hodel and Khava *are* those of modernism vs. tradition. Tsaytl falls into the same category through rejecting an arranged marriage. Tsaytl's internally raised and resolved problem is of a fairly minor order; the major crises are those relating to the outside world of Christianity and revolution, specters that haunt the traditional Jewish world.

With Shprintse and Beilka, Sholom Aleichem was continuing an earlier type of in-group social commentary, one satirizing and condemning the class structure of the Eastern European Jews, for which these daughters pay more heavily than did Tsaytl. The repulsive game played by the rich folks, which kills Shprintse, and the unpleasantness of Beilka's foray into a foreign socioeconomic world are clearly not material for nostalgia, even the hard-headed nostalgia of *Fiddler* which admits of occasional (though bloodless) pogroms.

That this is not merely an accidental attitude of the Broadway show is underscored by two smaller, but significant, changes of the Sholom Aleichem original. *Fiddler* ends up being very unsure about Khava, the renegade. In the original, the reader is left poised on the agonizing knife-edge of the question of Tevya's indecision when faced with Khava's interest in reconciliation at the point of Tevya's

forced departure from his village. Sholom Aleichem leaves the matter unresolved, though perhaps implies a "yes" answer to the question of whether the father should take the daughter back. In *Fiddler*, not only is the entire theme avoided, but the matter of Khava is drastically bleached out by having her appear with her Ukrainian husband Fedka and announce that they mean to "go to Cracow" out of indignation against the orders forcing Tevya and other Jewish villagers off their property. This wholesale avoidance of the social and domestic problems raised by the Tevya stories points toward the general weakening of thrust already indicated by the omission of two whole daughters.

The secondary extraordinary alteration of the stories is the assumption of America as Tevya's final destination. This is diametrically opposed to the sense of the original. There Beilka and her ruined husband have to go to America; Tevya means to proceed to Palestine. The unerring introduction of America is, of course, completely suited to the postwar Broadway audience, who would like to see all of the Yiddish heritage as prophetic of their successful rise to comfort in the New World. It is also an internationally acceptable way to end the show on a hopeful note, as musicals should end.

The music of *Fiddler* is rather like the show in general. Jerry Bock's score aims largely at being Broadway, with a *souppçon* of ethnic flavor. No systematic Jewish elements are introduced; one merely finds an occasional reference to the melodic turns and scale types that characterized Eastern European Jewish folk music. Many songs have no ethnic content whatsoever. Even the hodgepodge of tunes assembled for *The Romance of a People* was based on Idelsohn's collection of folk tunes. *Fiddler* is a commercial, not a nationalistic effort, and succeeded world-wide, using its own formula of ethnic local color.

The rewriting of Sholom Aleichem by the *Fiddler* crew is consonant with a general unstated policy of self-censorship of the past apparent in the Jewish-American community. Even *Fiddler*, when it first came out, was subject to the usual "what will *they* think" wonderings such as rose sharply to the surface with the publication of Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* in the same era. With the rise of the New Ethnicity of the 1970s, however, a great deal more of the Jewish past came to light in dramatic works. The Lower East Side has come increasingly to be "the Old Country" for younger Jewish artists. It remains to be seen whether new examples of musical theater will develop that interpret the Jewish experience in innovative ways. B

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*Mark Slobin is Professor of Music at Wesleyan University and past president of the Society for Ethnomusicology. His books include Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants and Fiddler on the Move: Exploring the Klezmer World, both of which received the ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award.*

## Returning Italian-Jewish Music to Its Birthplace

Joshua R. Jacobson

Jewish life in Europe was more than just a fiddler on the roof. The oldest Jewish community in Europe is neither Ashkenazic nor Sephardic; it is Italian. In Renaissance Italy, Jews had their own orchestras, professional theater companies, dancing teachers, and composers. In fact, Jewish music (in the sense of polyphonic composition) began in Mantua 400 years ago. So it was natural that Italy would hold an attraction for Zamir.

Last July we led a musical mission back to our artistic home, bringing this beautiful and ancient music to its land of origin. In Mantua, we performed compositions of Salamone Rossi, who in 1622 published the first collection of choral music for the synagogue. In Venice, we sang Carlo Grossi's *Cantata ebraica*, commissioned by the Jewish confraternity *Shomerim La-boker* in 1681. In Casale Monferrato, we sang music from an elaborate service for voices and instruments composed by Giuseppe Vita Clave in 1732. In Rome, we sang under the Arch of Titus, erected over 1,900 years ago to mark the defeat of the Judeans. As we gazed at a depiction of the menorah and silver trumpets that had been looted from the Temple in Jerusalem, we declared that the culture of our ancestors had survived and returned in glory.

We were struck by the extraordinary beauty of the Renaissance art and architecture that greeted us everywhere. But we learned that the appreciation of aesthetic values was not the exclusive province of Christians. The Jews of Italy (who don't hesitate to remind you that they antedate the Christians) built their synagogues with a sense of style designed to rival, in miniature, the splendor of their neighbors' churches. And in some communities the Jews also commissioned music in the style of ecclesiastical polyphony.

Wherever we sang—in churches, synagogues, palaces, and concert halls—we reveled in the beautiful sound we were able to produce. The Italians created gorgeous acoustical environments. In the Gonzaga Palace in Mantua we sang in the "Hall of Mirrors"—an important salon where great composers, including Monteverdi, presented their compositions. We sang a madrigal by Rossi, "Dir mi che più non ardo," in the room where it may have been first performed. Singing and blending the voices seemed effortless. We realized that this was the acoustic environment that the composer had in mind.

The San Marco cathedral in Venice is more than just an architectural wonder. In the late sixteenth century, it was



Casale Monferrato synagogue members receive Zamir CDs from Joshua Jacobson (right).  
Photo: Jody Weixelbaum

the center of a lavish musical tradition presided over by such luminaries as Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli and Claudio Monteverdi. San Marco was best known for the polychoral style, in which two or more choirs sang together from opposite balconies. When we visited San Marco, we were probably the first choir to sing in Hebrew "Eftakh Na Sefatai," a seventeenth-century polychoral synagogue motet by Rossi.

Throughout our journey, audiences were delighted and responded with enthusiastic applause. The now-small Jewish communities were grateful to us for reviving their glorious heritage. Non-Jews were surprised and glad to learn about an unknown chapter in their history. All were thrilled to hear our joyous music—American, Jewish, and Italian.

We were greeted by a variety of luminaries: the Bishop of Casale Monferrato, the Vice-Mayor of Sabbioneta, the Chief Rabbi of Florence.

In the end, we felt that we had accomplished our mission: to revive the rich musical culture of Italian Jewry, return it to the land of its origin, and present it to audiences of Jews and non-Jews. In the coming months we will bring this marvelous program to a much wider audience. This fall we have released a compact disc of Italian-Jewish music. And, contingent on funding, we hope to follow that up with a multimedia interactive educational CD-ROM on the history and culture of the Jews of Italy. Stay tuned! B

## Crossing *Sacred Bridges* to Italy

Ronda Garber Jacobson



The Bishop of Casale Monferrato  
Photo: Ronda Jacobson

“I consider [this event] to be a great spiritual revelation. The psalms which we, as Christians and Jews, share in common, served this evening as a source of joy and exaltation, and of our aspirations for peace.”

—Bishop of Casale Monferrato diocese, at Zamir’s July 1 concert

It was an honor and privilege to perform Giuseppe Vita Clave’s *Adon Olam* where it was first performed in 1731. The synagogue’s president and the bishop of the city, along with priests from the locale, enthusiastically thanked us for sharing our music with them and their many co-religionists that evening.

We delighted in seeing congregants sitting with visitors (often wearing *kippot*, or yarmulkes) during our concerts in church venues. Of course, when we sang informally in museums, on bridges, or at street corners, we attracted international, multicultural, mixed religious audiences.

We now face two challenges:

- We dream of creating a CD-ROM and an accompanying curriculum guide, an educational product that will explore the rich history of Jewish music in Italy and share Zamir’s inspiring experience. We envision integrating concert clips, photographs of historic sites, journals of participants, background information from a number of sources, and lectures by our scholar-in-residence Professor Benjamin Ravid of Brandeis University.

All it will take to create this tool, which we would like to distribute to schools and institutional libraries throughout the country, is funding. According to early cost estimates, we can realize this dream if we raise an additional \$50,000. We invite you to help by making a special contribution to this project, and by sharing your funding ideas.

- We would like to continue this important work on the local and regional level. If your community would like to offer a *Sacred Bridges* program, please contact Zamir’s General Manager, Rachel King, at [manager@zamir.org](mailto:manager@zamir.org).

The work of creating these *Sacred Bridges* has been very fulfilling. Thank you for your continued support. B

*Ronda Garber Jacobson is Chair of the Sacred Bridges Committee*

For more than two years, the Zamir Chorale has dreamed of crossing *Sacred Bridges* to Italy, the seat of the Roman Catholic Church. We saw this dream fulfilled this past summer thanks, in large part, to the generosity of contributors who recognize the important role this initiative plays in Zamir’s educational program, and to the assistance of the organizations represented on the *Sacred Bridges* Steering Committee: Andover Newton Theological School’s Theology and Arts Program, the Anti-Defamation League, the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College, Hebrew College, JCRC’s Catholic-Jewish Relations Program, Our Lady Help of Christians Parish, and the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts.

The trip was an overwhelming success. We realized our mission—bringing Jewish choral music to sites where it was composed, and bringing Jewish music to the Jewish and Catholic communities, often simultaneously. Everyone on the trip was delighted with the country, the hospitality, and the warmth of the people—and we were rewarded, in turn, by the enthusiasm of our audiences.

Our first concert, in the historic synagogue of Casale Monferrato, was a perfect example of how the *Sacred Bridges* vision was realized. The town, once home to a vibrant Jewish community, now has just two Jewish families. Services are held on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, unless a bar mitzvah is scheduled, usually by families from the town but now living in other countries. Jewish families from the region support the synagogue, which houses a museum of exquisite objects from the synagogue’s thriving past, and a contemporary gallery. On a very hot night, Zamir’s audience packed the sanctuary, which reverberated with applause.



## With Zamir in Italy

### Sherry Israel

When people ask me how my summer was, the first thing I tell them about is my trip to Italy in July with Zamir. Mostly, I gush: it was wonderful! Sometimes, I go on to tell them why.

First and foremost, of course, was the music. I've been a Zamir "groupie" for years, and I think all their concerts are excellent. Sure enough, the chorus on this trip, even with only part of its usual complement of singers, was superb. But even more special were the settings. We were hearing the music of the Jewish Italian Renaissance sung in the country—and sometimes the very cities—

where it was composed. The performances reminded us all of the vitality of Jewish life and of the long history of Italy's Jews. The resonances were powerful, and I don't mean just the musical ones.

One example from the very first concert, in the town of Casale Monferrato, in the north. The small sixteenth-century synagogue there is now maintained as a museum and local cultural center, as there aren't enough Jews in the area to sustain it as a regular house of worship. I suspect that every Jew from anywhere around was there, but the audience was mostly not Jewish. Josh Jacobson gave the introduction he had written and had translated into Italian—with an accent so authentic one would never have known that he wasn't a fluent speaker—explaining the music and its background. But for an encore, he had the chorus sing "Hatikvah," without an introduction. There were enough of us who knew the music and stood up, and everyone followed our lead. That was moving in itself. But then the two local ladies behind me asked, "Why did people stand?" In my primitive Italian I explained, "That was the song of the country of Israel." "Oh," one said in Italian, "the national anthem." I nodded, and she said, "Ah, bene, bene."

And so it kept going. Seven scheduled concerts in all, some in Jewish settings, some in concert halls, some in churches. Audiences of Jews and non-Jews, all appreciating this gorgeous music. In addition, as we were touring, Josh would stop the group in spots that had great acoustics or special meaning, and the chorus would sing a number from



*Zamir and friends at the Arch of Titus, Rome. Photo: Jody Weixelbaum*

the repertoire: in the Hall of Mirrors of the Gongaza Palace in Mantua, in the great cathedral of San Marco in Venice, in the small, nearly hidden synagogue in Siena.

My favorite non-scheduled singing happened in Venice. The concert for that evening was taking place in an acoustically and artistically gorgeous little church in a somewhat out-of-the-way location. People feared there hadn't been enough publicity, so as we took the twenty-minute walk from our hotel to the church, Josh had us stop at every promising piazza (the equivalent of street corners in Venice); the chorus sang a number, while we non-chorus members handed out flyers. And many of the people who stopped and listened came along to the concert. Great fun!

The other wonderful part of the trip for me was the people. About forty chorus members and accompanying musicians and recording folks, plus about twenty-five of us "tourists." People were friendly. We grouped and regrouped, for touring on our own, for meals not taken in the whole group, for the bus rides and concerts.

The trip was all I had hoped for. I got to hear wonderful music, travel with interesting, fun people, see marvelous scenery and sights, and feel part of a very special Jewish event. Oh, yes, and eat some great gelato! B

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*A longtime friend and supporter of the Zamir Chorale, Sherry Israel lives in Newton, Mass.*





Photo: Jody Weixelbaum



Photo: Jody Weixelbaum and Irene Waschler



Photo: Jody Weixelbaum

Clockwise from top right: Zamir in front of the Florence Synagogue; Leon Modena's grave in the Jewish Cemetery, Venice; Sabbioneta Vice-Mayor Claudio Luccini with Joshua Jacobson; Zamir singing in front of St. Peter's, Rome; Group portrait in the Casale Monferrato synagogue; Zamir performing in Sabbioneta.



Photo: Joshua Jacobson

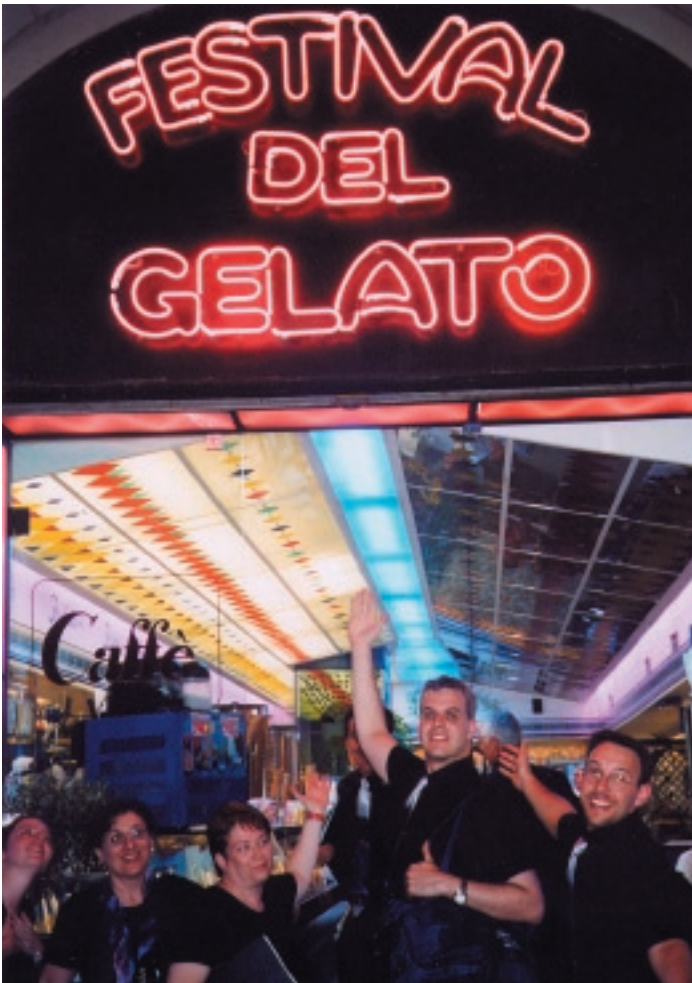


Photo: Ronda Jacobson



Photo: Jody Weixelbaum





Zamir singers (from left) Deborah Melkin, Deborah Sosin, Phyllis Werlin, Ben Krefetz (behind), Michael Krause, and Martin Wahl indulge their newfound passion in Florence. Photo: Susan Rubin

## On Gelato

Deborah A. Sosin

Before “Italia,” I didn’t know why the fuss—seemed to me marketing wizards simply repackaged ordinary ice cream, assigned a foreign name and, presto, a gourmet trend! But I was wrong. So wrong. *Real* gelato is creamy, almost frothy, succulent . . . spiritual.

I had my first hit at the Milan airport as we awaited the bus. Airport gelato? Surely it would taste cheap and diluted. Surprise! *Molto delizioso*. A-

By Venice, Day 4, most of us could discriminate A- from C- on sight. So the icy treat became a driving force in our performances: sing, sweat, smile, bow, then line up for GELATO! “How is it tonight?” someone at the back of the line would shout. “B+! Go for it!”

Clusters of black-garbed Zamirniks, with colorful scarves or ties, heat-flushed, on a post-concert high, descended on curious but grateful merchants in *piazzas*, corner *trattorias*, or at sidewalk carts.

And imagine the ecstasy of choice presented at Florence’s “Festival del Gelato”—75 seductive possibilities. *Copetta o cono? Una gusti o due?* (Cup or cone? One flavor or two?) Ordering in Italian was half the fun. Sometimes I picked *straciatella* (something about stripes, looked like chocolate chip) just so I could say the operatic syllables aloud. *Amarena, giardinelli, nutella, maricopa, dulce de leche*. Next stop, La Scala!

News flash: Gelato-crazed singers from American Jewish chorale single-handedly boost sagging Italian tourist economy. Film at 11. B

*Deborah A. Sosin is a writer now in her tenth season with Zamir.*



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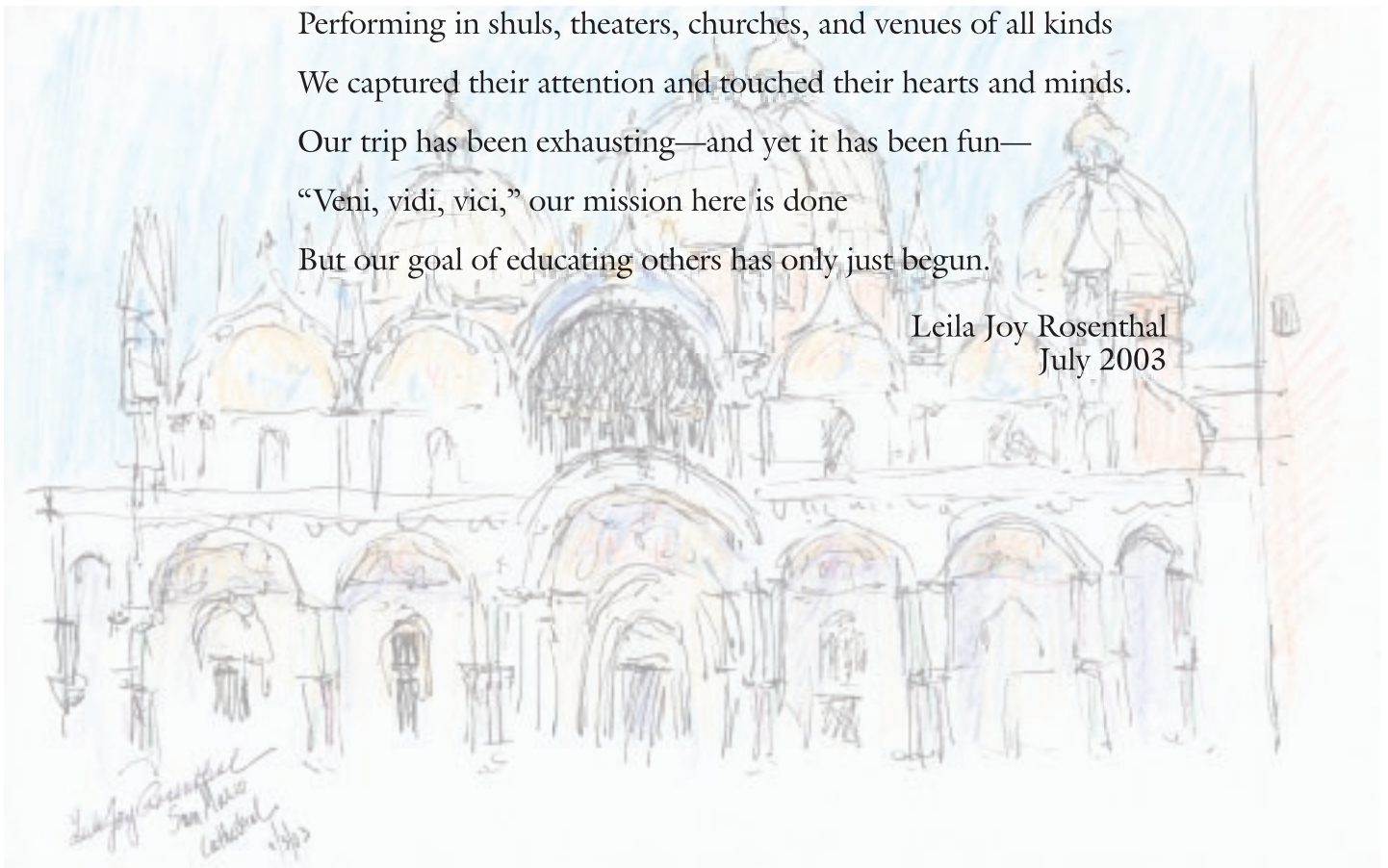
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# C O D A

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“Veni, vidi, vici,” or so Caesar said  
We came to honor the living and also pray for the dead.  
We came to share our music—to show its common root—  
To build a bridge of understanding and tolerance to boot.  
We saw the shuls as relics where Jews no longer are  
And some that draw the faithful few from areas afar;  
Despite the varied format and the different sound of prayer  
There is a strong connection: the tradition that we share.  
Singing for the locals and tourists who abound  
As we stroll to concerts handing flyers ’round  
Performing in shuls, theaters, churches, and venues of all kinds  
We captured their attention and touched their hearts and minds.  
Our trip has been exhausting—and yet it has been fun—  
“Veni, vidi, vici,” our mission here is done  
But our goal of educating others has only just begun.

Leila Joy Rosenthal  
July 2003

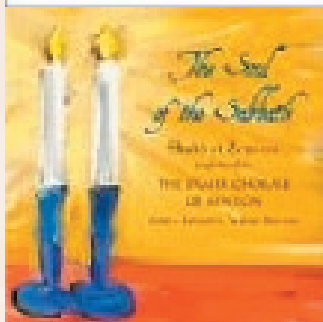




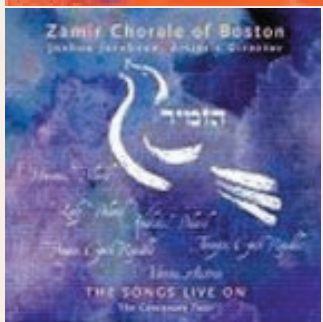
# Zamir Recordings



**Jewish Composers in America** This album explores the cross-pollination of Jewish and American musical influences. The first half of the album focuses on Jewish liturgical music written by Americans; the second half reflects the Jewish influence in American popular music. Recorded live at Zamir's hugely successful Jordan Hall concert and other performances in the past two years.



**The Soul of the Sabbath** This album presents a sampling of *zemirot* from various traditions and in various styles. Some of these *zemirot* are presented as they were originally conceived, simple folk songs intended for families to sing as they sat around the Sabbath table. In other cases, the traditional melodies are presented in artistic choral arrangements. Some selections are newly composed works, reflecting contemporary responses to the ancient texts.



**The Songs Live On** In the summer of 1999, the Zamir Chorale of Boston celebrated its thirtieth anniversary as well as the centenary of the Zamir movement with a concert tour of Eastern Europe. In Warsaw, Lodz, Auschwitz, Krakow, Prague, Terezin, and Vienna Zamir gave honor to the dead and hope to the living. This live concert recording, is a witness to the excitement and spiritual intensity of this odyssey.



**Shirei Yisrael** A collection of many of our favorite songs from Israel, from the early days of the *chalutzim* through the songs of peace from recent years.



**Seasons of Our Joy** Music for the Jewish festivals, including *Amen Shem Nora*, *Pit'chu Li*, *Mah Nishtanah*, *Shavu'ot*, and *HaTikva* (*Tikvateinu*).

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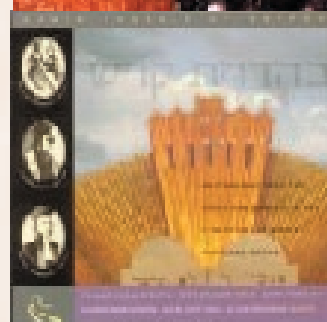
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