

# YIDDISH FOLKSONGS: A MIRROR OF LIFE

*Naomi Bell*

**Description:** The over-all sweep of Yiddish folksong : shtetl culture, work and struggle, poverty and protest, love and marriage, family life and child-rearing, customs and values, the Enlightenment and the growth of secularism, pogroms and persecution, emigration to America, love of Zion and yearning for the Holy Land.

**Naomi Bell** is a folklorist, lecturer and performer who approaches Jewish folksong as social history. She has collected and researched thousands of Yiddish and Hebrew folksongs, and has created programs on a wide variety of themes. In her numerous lecture-recitals and courses she sings, accompanies herself at the piano, and explains the historical and cultural background of the songs.

There is a popular saying that " A picture is worth a thousand words". Folksongs are like pictures. They arise from the everyday life of a society, and mirror historical events, economic conditions, customs and values, and personal attitudes and feelings. When we consider the thousands of Yiddish folksongs which have evolved from Jewish life, it would require many hours, and numerous photo albums to contain them. In the next hour we can only touch on the range of Yiddish folksong, and gain a brief glimpse of

their colour and variety.

Jews have always had a rich literature of religious folksong, both in the synagogue, and in the home on Shabbat and holidays. But in 19th century Eastern Europe, in the Russian Pale of Settlement, there occurred a remarkable flowering of Jewish SECULAR folksong, in the Yiddish language, that carried on well into the 20th century.

At a time when West European Jews were being accepted into society, East European Jews were becoming increasingly more isolated and oppressed. Reviled and persecuted by their neighbours and rulers, Jews in the Russian Pale of Settlement turned inward, and nurtured their own customs and ethnic identity. Within this tightly knit, insular society, there occurred a remarkable flowering of Jewish secular folksong, in the Yiddish language.

Yiddish was the language of daily discourse in the Shtetl: Jews may have prayed in Hebrew, but they SPOKE and communicated with each other in Yiddish. While pious Talmudic scholars confined their singing to religious Hebrew songs, z'mirot, for the lower working classes and, especially for women, Yiddish folksong provided a powerful emotional outlet.

In thousands of simple, heartfelt songs, men and women poured out their feelings, and documented every aspect of their lives. They sang of work and the struggle for livelihood, of mother love and parental expectations, of romantic yearning and the harsh reality of marriage.

And, as Jewish society changed and evolved, so did the tone and content of the songs. Shtetl folksongs reflected a simple, religious society, where Torah learning was considered the highest achievement, where parents arranged their children's marriages, and where impoverished workers expressed their frustration through humour and gentle satire.

The urban songs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, present a different picture: of angry and rebellious factory workers openly protesting their harsh working conditions; of the clash between tradition and secularism; and of the open expression of love and heartbreak voiced by young people, particularly by women.

Mass migration to America, and life in the New World; the birth of modern Zionism and Socialism; pogroms and persecution; and, of course the Holocaust; all gave birth to significant bodies of folksongs. It would take us several sessions, and many hours, to explore them all fully.

So, to give the next hour some focus, I'd like to present a comparison between Shtetl culture and urban society, as expressed through work songs and women's songs. But don't be surprised if a few other themes creep in!

## A BASIC LIBRARY OF YIDDISH FOLKSONGS

\*VOICES OF A PEOPLE -- The Story of Yiddish Folksong -- Ruth Rubin  
(University of Illinois Press)

MIR TROGN A GEZANG All three books edited by

PEARLS OF YIDDISH SONG Eleanor & Joseph Mlotek

SONGS OF GENERATIONS & published by the Workmen's Circle,  
45 East 33 Street, New York, N.Y., 10016

ANTHOLOGY OF YIDDISH FOLKSONGS -- 5 volumes  
published by The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Volume 1 -- Love songs & Cradle songs

Volume 2 -- Children's & Family songs; Weddings & Festivals

Volume 3 -- Humour & Satire; Poverty, toil & deprivation;  
Chassidic songs; Jewish Soldiers' songs

Volume 4 -- Struggle & Resistance; Ghetto & Partisan songs;  
Religious and national songs; Zion songs

Volume 5 -- The Mordechai Gebirtig Volume

distributed by The Hebrew University Magnes Press, P.O. Box 39099,  
Jerusalem  
91390, Israel  
Tel: 02-6586656; Fax: 02-5633370; Email: [magnes@vms.huji.ac.il](mailto:magnes@vms.huji.ac.il)

(For many older anthologies which are no longer on the market, contact  
the  
National Yiddish Book Centre in Amherst, Mass.)

Additional Songbooks, many of which are no longer available

\*YIDDISH FOLKSONGS IN RUSSIA -- S.M. Ginsburg & P.S. Marek  
A photo reproduction of the 1901 St. Petersburg Edition,  
Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991

YIDDISHE FOLKSLEIDER MIT MELODYES Y. L. Cahan (1912) (YIVO - 1957)

80 FOLKSLIEDER M. Kipnis Warsaw

LIEDER-ZAMLBUCH Z. Kesselgof Berlin - 1914

ALBUM OF JEWISH FOLKSONGS Isa Kremer London - 1930

HEBRAISCH-ORIENTALISCHER MELODIENSCHATZ -- A. Z. Idelsohn (1932)

OLD YIDDISH FOLK MUSIC -- collections & writings of Moshe Beregovski  
(pub. 1934)

-- edited by Mark Slobin; University of Pennsylvania Press (1982)

LIEDER FUN GETOS UN LAGERN -- S. Katcherginski (1948)

A TREASURY OF JEWISH FOLKSONG Ruth Rubin (Shocken - 1950)

YES, WE SANG! (Ghettos & Concentration Camps) -- Shoshana Kalisch  
(Haper &  
Row)

SONG OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH EXPERIENCE (Neil Levin, ed., 1976)

THE MUSIC OF ABRAHAM GOLDFADEN -- Erene Heskes, Ed., Tara  
publications