

## FOREWORD

“I was pleased to hear that you are going to publish your book. After all, the only thing we leave behind us is a spiritual inheritance unto the generations.”

From a 1957 letter written by my brother Z”L.

Ten years ago I wrote: “Musicians and klezmerim throughout the generations played a major role at Jewish weddings. There is a saying: ‘There can be no joyous celebration (simcha) for a bride and groom without song.’ Or, in the words of the Maharil ‘There should not be a wedding without klezmer; they are the most important part of a Jewish wedding.’ In accord with the role that klezmerim filled in the cultural life of the people, it is fitting that they receive a more complete consideration than they have heretofore.”

Admittedly, when I wrote these lines, I didn’t know how klezmer functioned in the cultural arena of the Soviet Union since this information had not yet reached us. Meanwhile, we learned about a vast amount of material that accumulated in the archive of the Department of Jewish Folklore in the Academy of Science. To further extend our knowledge of klezmerim, a survey of more than 100 questions was drawn up relating to klezmerim, their lives and artistry.

The first fruits of the research were not long in coming. After four years, Bergovski published an informative monograph based upon this research and accumulated material. This 39-page book is divided into eight parts. Here are the names of a few chapters: Klezmer Music in Folklore; Klezmerim in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century; A Few Characteristics of Klezmer Music.

The Bialik Institute has just printed the first Hebrew book on klezmerim. The author, Joachin Stowchevski, is a well-known composer who has written articles on Jewish music. From time to time, he also published books dealing with music and musical folklore. The book deals with three areas: A. About Klezmerim; B. The World of Klezmerim; C. Klezmer Music.

My study and criticism deals with the first two parts. These examine klezmer from a cultural and historical point of view. To my regret, the musical aspect is not my field. I do not have the expertise to judge this part.

The Bialik Institute’s seal of approval has earned the trust of Jewish readers. This obligates that author, publisher and critic alike ensure that this book on klezmerim lives up to the Institute’s reputation. However, this is the first time that we have an author who himself testifies that his own book is not thorough and exact; an author who acknowledges that he didn’t aspire to completeness.

No author or composer ever attains completeness. This is not given to mortals – but no creative person is free from the *aspiration* to achieve “completeness.”

Already, in his forward to the book, the author justifies his methodology which, truth to tell, he lacks. The flow of factual material is not in chronological or geographic order. Rather, the order is established by when the material reached him.

At the end of the chapter dealing with “Famous Klezmerim” he repeats his words and justifies his methodology. Stowchevski writes, “It would be possible to bring the names of klezmerim from many different East European sources. However, those I mentioned above are sufficient. The

writing itself was not done in a set chronologic or geographic order. The lack of reliable information, exact dates, and trustworthy archival material dictates that one follows the path I have taken. I never aspired to the realization of the material in its entirety.”

These words, which I quoted above, appear in a book dedicated to “the memory of klezmerim who with their songs enriched the house of Israel in the lands of their exodus.”

In certain places we get the impression that the author created nothing from something. “Klezmerim from Eastern Europe,” the author writes, “had their own language, which greatly resembled that of thieves and cheats. There is no need to expand with details, we will be satisfied with bringing a few expressions” (page 71, comment 128). The question arises, if not here in this book, where else would one deal with this special language? Let’s say that for some reason there was no room to include a dictionary of this “secret” klezmer language (which, incidentally, is *not* that of thieves and cheats); it would have been correct to bring a short bibliography of published lists and to mention their authors, such as S. Weisenberg, A. Landau, and Yehuda Elzat.

The last one I’ll mention is the well-known folklorist and cultural researcher, Rav Yehuda Avida, who lives in Jerusalem. He presents much important material in a chapter on klezmerim. This includes different types of musical instruments in both classical Yiddish literature and folklore.

The author, Stowchevski, continues according to his own “system.” “We won’t speak at length about memorial books written about Jewish cities and towns in Eastern Europe. These have been printed in recent years and contain a lot of material including material about klezmerim.” (Page 133, comment 34). Again, we are forced to ask the question, Where else if not in this book? After all, in his forward the author asserts, “First and foremost we should see in this book a memorial written with respect and esteem.”

It is a pity that he didn’t include in its entirety the short chapter “Klezmerim and Weddings” from the memorial book on Rovno. It would have been worthwhile to include this one-page chapter in its entirety. I will mention only the end of this chapter: “A shocking and tragic undertone about the life of the klezmerim, was the klezmer who died while his violin was still in his hands: The reputation of the Rovno Klezmerim went before them. They were often invited to play at the homes of nobleman and landowners and were greatly esteemed. It was at one of these parties, at the estate of a non-Jew, that Zindel the violinist played his wonderful tunes with enormous feeling. Suddenly he collapsed and his violin, which had been his friend through the years, fell from his hands. His music ended...”

The author is well aware of the fact that “often the comedian and the musician appeared on stage together.” This mutual relationship is worthy of a separate chapter in the book, and not simply a comment that means nothing. Again the excuse, “This is not the place to judge the importance of the comedian.”

Since the author stuck to this “method,” there is no wonder that he didn’t even mention the chapter “Comedians and Klezmerim” from the bibliographical work of A Sendry (Bibliography of Jewish Music, NY, 1951).

(“Badkhn” means a professional entertainer whose function is to encourage an audience. He makes things happen. The modern equivalent would be “tumbler”.)

Some sources are cited without any bibliographic mention at all. This is especially so in relation to Bergovski’s book, which was a useful resource to the author in many, many respects.

Stowchevski cited it as only a “short article” and saw no need to mention it in the bibliographic details.

Sources, which I will speak about in coming chapters, were within the author’s easy reach, even if they were overseas. He who says: “Even in New York where there is a lot of material, most is in private hands. Accordingly, it was impossible to draw upon these sources,” holds American libraries up to scorn. These libraries are public, open to all. Did the author try to access them? Was he refused?

Had the author of this memorial book spent some time in New York where there are many Jews from around the world, he could have collected vast material from hundreds of landsmenschaftim including first hand accounts from actual witnesses.

I am sure that librarians and experts would not have prevented him from accessing this material. They would have made it possible happily, generously and with open hands.