

4. Number of Klezmerim

Stowchovski dealt briefly with the number of klezmerim in Eastern Europe. He devoted only 20 lines to answering the question “How many klezmerim existed in Eastern Europe?” He relied on Bergovski for most of his answer, with additions from the author Dagan.

Bergovski exaggerated when he wrote in 1937, “In the second half of the past century, in the Ukraine alone, there were a few thousand klezmerim.” He was more careful in his 1941 research, which was based on the wealth of material he had collected in the interim. “At the end of the 19th century, Russia had more than 3,000 klezmerim, of these more than 1,000 existed in the Ukraine; this number is the absolute minimum”. In the book’s summary he wrote with less certainty that there were more than 1,000 klezmerim.

Stowchovski depended on Bergovski’s facts and figures. Stowchovski wrote, “At the beginning of the 19th century there was a small number of klezmerim. According to Bergovski, at the end of the century there were about 3,000 klezmerim in Russia, 2,000 of them in the Ukraine (these figures excluded Poland and Galicia).” Stowchovski then adds, “This number evidently doesn’t reflect reality. One must surmise that there were more klezmerim. If we add countries such as Poland, Galicia and Litah, which had large Jewish populations, we’ll reach 4,000-5,000 klezmerim in Eastern Europe.”

Stowchovski, in dealing with statistics, is not precise. It seems to be a case of the greater the number, the greater the reward.

Stowchovski exaggerated and gave an inflated estimate that had no basis in fact. “We know,” he wrote, “that in the first part of the 18th century in Poland, there were “troupes of Jewish musicians in almost every town.” To whom is it known?

The historian Mahler, who drew upon primary sources, wrote that in the middle of the 18th century (1764) only 64 klezmerim were listed in 33 congregations. This barely amounts to two klezmerim in each town. In the two large congregations, Brody and Vilna, seven klezmerim were listed in each, though the Jewish population in Brody was twice that in Vilna.

However, Mahler came to the conclusion that the number of klezmerim was larger than their number in the official census of 1764; there is a basis for his conclusion. Even so, his estimate is far from the statement that Jewish musicians were found in nearly every town in Poland. In any event, the number of klezmerim listed according to communities is of great interest and teaches us a great deal about the klezmerim of the time.

One hundred years after the period Mahler dealt with, in one community, Berdichev, there was more than the number of musicians mentioned above (64). A. Chederboim noted that in 1870, 85 artist associations existed in Berdichev. Among them klezmerim formed one of the associations; they numbered 75. The klezmerim’s small meetinghouse already existed before 1865.

The klezmerim from Vilna also had their own small meetinghouse. Vilna had a reputation “not only for its scholars and intelligentsia, but also as a city of singers, cantors and klezmerim.” The ethnographer, Dyck, writing of this “Jerusalem of Litah”, (Vilna) wrote about comedians collecting money. (“During the day he collects charity for a lamp in the klezmer’s small meetinghouse.”) We know from this that the Vilna meetinghouse existed.

A general idea about klezmerim at the end of the 19th century came from a new section introduced at the time by the paper Ha'tzvira; this section dealt with Jewish life in all Russia. It dealt with the question "What work do Jews do?" from a statistical point of view. According to the paper from 1847, you can see that Stowchovski, when he wrote, "you didn't find a town without a troupe of klezmerim", indulged in hyperbole. Unfortunately, the editions of Ha'tzvira from that time are often missing pages and additions.

Descriptions of many cities and towns did not mention the artistry of the klezmer as a profession. One can assume from this that klezmerim didn't exist in those cities. This lack of klezmerim is interesting and deserves research. I will enumerate some cities and towns in which klezmer existed as a profession and from which klezmerim earned their livelihood. One can learn about the whole from the details.

Litin – (area of Podolia) approximately 2,000 Jews. Klezmerim 18, assistants 5.

S'mila (Kiev area) approximately 6,000 Jews, musicians 75.

Ravenna, Jewish population 7,350, players and repairers of musical instruments 22, assistants 4.

L'titshov (Podolia) 800 families, klezmerim 15.

Minsk, Jewish population of 36,221. Players and makers of musical instruments 40, students 30.

Area of Minsk, which includes 10 towns, Jewish population 17,510. Players and makers of instruments 13, assistants 3, students 2.

Krashnik (area of Lublin) 500 Jewish families. Musicians 4.

Voziniskoya, more than 700 families. Klezmer 1.

Davidahorodok (area of Minsk) 280 families, players 7.

Uman, (Kiev area), Jewish population 19,812, players 42.

Navahorodok, (area of Minsk) Jewish population 4,820, musicians 4, students 5.

Chodorkov, (near Kiev) 300 Jewish families, musicians 12.

Amdur, (Horodna) 1,850 Jews, 1 klezmer

Ozorkov (Kalish) 5,838. 1 klezmer, 2 comedians, 1 matchmaker

Bichuv Yashan (Mohilov) 1,300 Jews, klezmerim 5, assistants 2.

Krinitz (Horodna) 700 Jewish families, musicians 12

Certainly, one should not take this list as definitive. But, as it stands, it has numbers that add to our knowledge. It shows that the Ukraine took first place in the number of klezmerim. The reference to instrument makers is also important (Minsk and its environs) and instrument repairers (Ravenna).

In short, this chapter is open to further research and investigation.

5. KLEZMORIM in PICTURES and ART

The following relates to the pictures in the book.

There are 15 photographic plates comprising 23 pictures. The author thanks those who provided “valuable” pictures. In truth, most of the pictures presented in the book are not valuable, and those that are, are not presented in the book. A list of pictures and their sources appears at the beginning of the book. One can easily find these pictures in other books and libraries. For some reason, the author doesn’t mention plates 8-10. These comprise five pictures; Bergovski is the source of one of them. The 11th plate, a picture of the klezmerim of Knishin, was printed and reprinted in the Theater “Heften” (New York, 1944). It includes the comment that “On Purim they dressed up in army uniforms in order to collect money benefiting charitable organizations.” Even the Joseph Michael Guzikof picture is very well known (15th plate). It would have been worthwhile to bring, or at least mention, that there is a picture which greatly emphasizes the Jewish ambiance. This picture is much more attractive than those in this book on klezmerim. It appears that the 1888 picture of the Berdichev troupe was omitted. (Bergovski printed this picture.)

It is a pity that the author didn’t include the picture of the Lipianski troupe (page 71 in the footnote). I saw a picture of klezmerim in the collection of Prof. Bruno-Z’charyah Kisch, which was photographed during WW I (1915) in Kolecki, Volin. There is also a picture of the klezmerim from Ostrovska dating from the beginning of this century. It can be found in the Yivo collection. (Catalog of the exhibition “The Jewish Shtetl in Eastern Europe 1900-1939, New York 1959.)

A separate section deals with pictures drawn by non-Jews. Most of these were illustrations for gentile books dealing with Jewish customs and ways of life. (These illustrations include work from such artists as Shodett, Kirchner, Bodeshatz, among others.) The author brings only four of these pictures. (Plates 4-6). All the pictures are from the first third of the 18th century and not “from the beginning of the 17th” except for one which dates slightly later (1748).

Of all these, only the French painter Picard, had a complete picture included in the book (1722, plate 6). This does not portray “A Jewish wedding in Germany”, as the author says, but rather an Ashkenazic wedding in Amsterdam. Even the clothes testify that this is not a German wedding from that period. In the same year, 1722, Picard also painted a Portuguese Jewish wedding ceremony. In this picture, the bride is veiled prior to her going under the chupah. It would have been worth including, or at least mentioning it in the book, since the description of “the covering of the bride” from this early period is very rare. The musicians are to the right of the chupah in the courtyard of the synagogue in the first picture; in the second they are standing at the upper left.

It is a distortion to crop the klezmer from the pictures of Kirchner and Bodeshatz, and not bring the pictures in their entirety. Both artists present etchings describing a Jewish wedding, and the procession of the bride and groom, (two separate processions, of course). Bodeschatz even shows the different instruments. It depicts the chupah without klezmerim and after the chupah with klezmerim. I believe Kirchner also painted a “Dance of the Chupah”.

Jewish wedding pictures from the beginning of the 18th century are rare. Why are they missing from this book, which has a special chapter on “Klezmerim at the Wedding”? Why reduce the

size of the picture of the bride's procession? (Shodett's book, plate 5) The original itself isn't large, reducing it obscures the image still further.

The activities of klezmerim in the Jewish ghetto, apart from weddings, included their participation in the festive processions of the Jews of Frankfurt am Main and Prague in 1716. It's a pity the author did not include drawings depicting this troupe of musicians. If, for various reasons, the actual pictures were not included in the book, it would have been fitting to append a list of these unforgettable pictures, especially those from the 18th century.

Until now we spoke of the etchings and prints painted by non-Jewish artists who depicted the presence of klezmerim among descriptive renderings of Jewish weddings. Klezmer came into its own in Jewish art in the last 60 years. This began with the well-known drawings of L. Pasternak in the 1901 "Players" (klezmer). Bialik wrote about this drawing: "What has Pasternak given to his people during this period? Nothing, or almost nothing. Again, the same old crumbs. However, there is one small, charming picture of klezmer titled "The Players".

Many Jewish artists memorialized klezmer in their drawings as an integral part of the Jewish wedding. Non-Jewish artists cannot grasp the nuances of these occasions as Jewish artists can. Klezmer, in its own right, was a subject for imagination and creativity in the plastic arts.

It's enough to mention three pictures of klezmer drawn by Isascher ben Riback, one near the chupah and two at a distance from it. One must also mention the klezmerim from Safed painted by Ruben (Tel Aviv, 1931, 1937).

The well known picture "Mitzvah Dance" drawn by Elova emphasized klezmer. This picture portrays the bitterness of the klezmer's lot. "How sad is the sight of the worn out shoes of the klezmer especially in light of the wedding festivities." Fortunately, klezmer found favor in the eyes of the artist Ilya Schor. Schor worked in various disciplines: oils, drawings, etchings, and sculpture. I would like to point out his picture "Klezmer Troupe in its Own Home."

Let us not forget Chasidic klezmer troupes portrayed by Mane Katz and in an etching by Aryeh Mazer. It is also worthwhile to mention the sculpture "Three Klezmerim" by Avraham Eisenberg, and "Klezmerim Troupe" by Jacob Walberg. Chagall, in his paintings, also accords klezmer its honored place.

If we look closely, we can find more klezmer paintings by Jewish artists. I don't intend to present all the available material, rather to convey a little about the role of klezmer in Jewish art that the author did not mention.

Recently, I pointed out to researchers, especially those researching wedding customs, a whole series of postcards dealing with the Jewish Wedding in Galicia. Klezmerim and dancers have a recognized place in these drawings. They are examples of ceremonies and customs that are gone.

In regard to drawings of Jewish events, it should be mentioned that Druyanov in the forward to his book "Tel Aviv" wrote: "I've emphasized drawings because in my opinion they explain no less – and sometimes far more – than written and oral descriptions."

Before the 1st WW, I possessed a complete set of postcards preserved in a house in Lodz that was subsequently destroyed in the Holocaust. The Jewish Theological Seminary library has some of the original postcards.

I found the initials J.K. written on one postcard, the “Clown’s Dance.” I have no way of knowing the name of this mysterious person. Perhaps one of the readers will be able to cast light on this series and who created it.

6. ADDITIONAL COMMENTS on KLEZMORIM

I would like to add a few comments to what I have written in the previous chapters. I have chosen those points most characteristic of the Klezmerim's other roles in Jewish life and culture.

A. Dedication of the Synagogue

Mention of the dedication of the Firenze synagogue in 1793 is missing from the chapter "Italy" of Stowchevski's book (pages 28-33). Michael Bolaphi, who was the conductor of an orchestra and group of singers, composed an opera to honor this occasion called "The Joy of the Mitzvah". We have testimony that "Jewish musicians lived and worked in other cities and various settlements." It is not necessary to search for their "footsteps only in the rich Italian archive." We can find a great deal of material on the klezmer's participation in synagogue dedications in the Diaspora. The discovery of this material requires investigation and research.

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B. The Celebration of the Torah (Ushering in the Torah)

The author brings only one 1748 drawing dealing with this topic. In keeping with the author's lack of methodology, he writes, "for the sake of rounding out the role of the klezmer, one should bring a 1748 drawing from the city of Hildesheim, according to which a feature of the festive occasion of Hachnasat Torah, (Ushering in the Torah) was accompanied by lighted candles and music." (Incidentally, this is a custom also followed in Jerusalem.) How can he say, "rounding out" when the picture he writes about deals with a German wedding and not Hachnasat Torah? The author himself mentions the custom in "other places of the Diaspora". Why didn't he take the trouble to widen his references regarding this custom? It is possible to collect a great deal of interesting and varied material in this matter. Even here in New York, we see festive parades in Jewish neighborhoods from time to time. Many participants welcome the Torah into the synagogue accompanied by music. In an 1843 picture welcoming the Torah to the high synagogue in Dovrovna, "Reb Meier the klezmer plays the violin, Gedaliah the son of Friedman the barber plays the flute and two others danced before the congregation."

C. Welcoming the Sabbath

The custom of welcoming the Sabbath would have been seen in an entirely different light if the author had brought original sources, and was not satisfied with secondary and tertiary ones. The comment "The custom of playing in the synagogue before the Sabbath was practiced, particularly in Prague". Primary sources would have enabled us to see it differently.

The following sentence is inaccurate: "In the year 1680, in the Meizel synagogue, it was the custom to welcome the Sabbath by playing instruments and listening to the 'pleasing music' of Shlomo Zinger, who sang to musical accompaniment."

This was mentioned in a prayer book published in 1680. Actually, the practice itself existed in an earlier time. Since the custom is connected to a problem of Halacha, it is necessary to be exact and cite the original language. "The pleasing song of Reb Shlomo Zinger, performed in the Meizel synagogue in Prague was played with flutes and lyres *before* L'cha Dodi."

According to the travel diaries of Abraham Levi from 1719-1724, “the cantors sang additional songs which the klezmerim would play before welcoming the Sabbath. With the help of their violins not only did they sing L’cha Dodi, but after finishing they would continue singing other pleasant songs.”

The custom was not unique to Prague. According to Levi it was also the practice in Nicholsburg. “Here in Nicholsburg it is done exactly as in Prague with the playing of song and music, which often went on for a long time.”

In Italy, it was permissible for non-Jewish musicians to be hired to play on the Sabbath. This was done out of fear of the ruler’s anger and for the sake of maintaining peace. In 1720 “a judge was appointed, a powerful ruler of Ferrara. Each year it was the custom of the Jews to honor the appointment of the ruler. He would pass through the ghetto to the sounds of trumpets and flutes. It so happened that year the celebration fell on the Sabbath. On Friday the rabbis allowed the leaders of the congregation to tell the non-Jewish trumpeters to blow their trumpets on the Sabbath. These should be blown in the homes of Jews, through open windows, when his Excellency passed by in keeping with the yearly custom. It was permissible to have non-Jewish musicians fulfill this function. This is the sort of work that it is possible for the non-Jew to do for Israel.”

D. The Departure of the Sabbath

Not only was the Sabbath welcomed with music, it was also escorted out with music. The author quotes the words of Dov Schtock, “The light which fell from the end of the Sabbath to the beginning of the Sabbath was not that of color, but one of shadow.” I once pointed out that the Galician custom was to escort the Sabbath to the sound of violins; I learned this from a poem by Gross:

“Klezmerim will play at the end of the Sabbath
All houses will resound with song
Rest is over; The Sabbath has passed
The ‘fullness of the week’ will be fed by the sweetness of the Sabbath.”

Perhaps this custom originated with the Chassidim of Breslau. Their rabbi, R’ Nachman, thought it important that the violin be played during the dinner of M’lave Malka, which is the “meal of David the king”. This suggests David’s lyre, and the pleasant sound of the songs of Israel.

E. Welcoming the Rabbi

Klezmerim also had an important role when a new Rabbi was welcomed into a city or hamlet. I will bring but one description from about 50 years ago. It described the welcome of Zivo to Biton in 1912 and taught us about similar events.

“There was holiday in the hamlet on the day the rabbi came to Biton. The town prepared to welcome the rabbi and his family. The klezmerim played all the way from the railroad tracks to the hamlet. The workers of the town removed the reins of the horses and themselves pulled the rabbi’s carriage. This was an early custom in Biton. This is the way one welcomes a new Rabbi.”

F. A Woman's Song

Adolph Cohen wrote (in his book on the Brit Mila) about a Spanish custom in Jerusalem "He saw two women playing the drum. They accompanied the women who brought the newborn to the synagogue. They played through most of the ceremony and resumed playing with the return of the baby to his mother's home." From the 17th century onward, the daughters of Jerusalem followed in the footsteps of their sisters by adopting this custom.

There is a story about a woman in Prague, Bila the wife of Rabbi ber Ivschits, who was a teacher of music and dance. When her husband asked her to teach dance and music to the only daughter of Johan Christian Wangelzeit, (1633-1705) a professor of ancient languages, she answered: "It is wonderful that you wrote that I will play the tsimbl. However, you know that from the day of my mother's death I swore that I would not play any instrument. But, perhaps I will go teach her dance in my spare time."

At the beginning of this century, the orthodox of Jerusalem were generally satisfied with "two drummers, one for the men, and a young girl for the women who were in another room seated at the wedding feast.

The known klezmer, R' Chaim Shishi played. "He was ultra orthodox and in awe of the Almighty." He would sit on the windowsill with his back to the women dancers and would direct music toward the street. It was heard throughout the house and the women in back of him danced to the sound.

It should be noted that in the religious atmosphere in the Carpathian Mountains, Chaya of Kocherz participated in the troupe of Yankel Ivers from Sideloven. She was the same woman who was the lead violinist in this troupe.

G. The Apostate Chaim Tsimblist

"There was a court musician, Chaim Tsimblist, in the retinue of the well-known military leader Wallenstein; Tsimblist was a Polish Jew who converted." The author dismisses this renegade musician with these few words. He evidently didn't feel it worthwhile to at least mention that R' Yoel Sirkis judged this apostate. In his responsa, Sirkis tried to ease the suffering of Tsimblist's wife, who was an Agunah (a woman who remains bound to her husband if he's missing or refuses a divorce.) The author should have brought the testimony that was relevant to this occurrence and characteristic of similar incidents. "That the Jew known as Chaim Tsimblist was so named because he played an instrument called a tsimbl. Afterwards he converted and served in the army of Wallenstein. No other man in our midst (Poland) is known by this name; he is the husband of the woman from Torvin. In my modest opinion we should ease the lot of this agunah."

H. The Students of Podhazur

The author writes of Podhazur, the most famous violinist in the Ukraine and the founder of the Bardichev troupe, that "Podhazur himself did not accept students." The story "Klezmer", written by A. Drucker in 1940 denies this. Podhazur had his own school to which students flocked. Paysi, the talented hero of the story, was one of Podhazur's beloved students.

I. The Klezmer and Badchen Fiedelman

If we are in further need of testimony about how Stowchevski drew on the work of others, we have a comment regarding Eliyahu Alexander Fiedelman, the comic and klezmer. The author did not see fit to mention that Fiedelman's biography and picture are found in Tzeitschrift, Minsk 1926. The lexicon of Z. Rezin and Z. Silberzweig is the source for the author's comments on Fiedelman.

J. Synagogues Decorated with Musical Instruments

The author mentions that according to an 1853 witness, instruments were painted on the wall of a synagogue in the Rome Ghetto. In this regard, one can conduct research on the art of folk painting in the synagogue.

Who knows what secrets are yet to be revealed such as those discovered in wooden churches subsequently destroyed in Poland? The synagogues were decorated like those in Nove-Mietsto, Pashovorez and their like.