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Of Bread and Freedom: The Emerging Political and Social Consciousness of Working Class Jewish Immigrant Women in America, as Represented in Song, 1880-1930.

By Sheila D. Case

This thesis contains two sections, the first detailing the immigrant experience of Eastern European Jews. Under this section are subsections including background on the history and culture of Eastern European Jews including their experiences in the labor movement and the work force in Eastern Europe. Many Jews in Eastern Europe were skilled as artisans in a trade. And, many young women excelled in dressmaking, embroidery, and other needle trades. The paper follows Jews from Eastern Europe to America where many found work in the garment industry. This section of the paper then discusses the primary importance of music in building solidarity between the workers, enabling them to form unions.

The second section of the paper discusses the music the Eastern European Jews brought to America with them, and the music written by them while in America. The paper begins with background on the Eastern European modes, common to folk music and to *chazzanut*. The character of this music was once shared by the entire Eastern European culture, but once it migrated to America, these modes became associated as solely Jewish. Many songs were written about America, the land of promise, the *goldene medine*. But there are also songs of disenchantment, when dreams were not realized. Labor poets such as David Edelstadt and Morris Rosenfeld wrote poems about sweatshop life which so resonated with the people they became popular and revolutionary songs. Also mentioned are songs including women in the union experience that speak of women as equals and as sisters, and even as rallying the men. Some of the most famous of the union songs are the American union songs, such as "Solidarity Forever." Also important are songs written about the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire. The fire was pivotal in setting off a series of strikes and revolts which won the workers better working conditions.

In this paper I hoped to demonstrate that various factors led Jewish immigrant women to the front line in fighting for workers' rights; namely, their trade skills and their political and cultural ideologies that they brought with them from Eastern Europe, and also, that music helped to unify them with sister and brother workers in fighting for not only bread, but freedom too.

The sources I drew from were books, journal articles, musical anthologies, as well as the Y.I.V.O. music archive, and their Bund archive, The archive of Folksong in the Library of Congress, The music archives at the Lincoln Center Library, as well as their music library.

Of Bread and Freedom:
The Emerging Political and Social Consciousness of Working Class Jewish Immigrant Women in America as Represented in Song, 1880-1930.

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Master of Sacred Music Degree

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Introduction

For countless immigrant Jewish women, the garment industry became their home away from home, a place where they spent sometimes fourteen hours a day, six or seven days a week. For the immigrant garment workers, "the sweatshop *was* America."[1] Whether exaggeration or not, it is certain that much of Jewish women's world view was colored by their experience in the sweatshops, as well as their former experiences in Eastern Europe. Together these factors help to define the Jewish immigrant woman's place in the history of working class America.

In the pages that follow, I will attempt to answer what the factors were that raised the social consciousness of Jewish women and led to their politicization in the American unions. Some of the questions that help to define this are: How did the skills which Jewish women brought to America help them? How did their experience in the work force in both Eastern Europe and America lead to their involvements in unions? How did their political beliefs and participation in Eastern Europe define their political stance in America? I will also argue that music played a role in their solidarity. How did the music bring the women together? Who wrote the songs, and why were they written? Why did the songs become so important?

Yiddish labor songs strengthened the solidarity of Jewish workers because of the common language, familiar Eastern European musical modes, and texts that expressed both shared political ideologies and shared work experiences. Songs truly are the statement of a people. You can learn more about listening to what people write about in song than in any other way. The workers saw themselves in the texts of the songs: "no sooner did I lay down to

[1] J. Schlossberg in Susan Glenn, Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 2.

sleep, I must get up again." "I sew by day, I sew by night, but I have yet to sew my wedding dress." "I sew and tread until my braids turn gray." "Where lives wither at machines... and where tears flow and teeth gnash, that is my resting place. I am a slave." The songs made them realize they were not alone, and they soon unified with the help of song: "Awake, open your eyes, and see your own strength... and fight for your sacred rights!" "What force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one? ... But the union makes us strong!" The unions brought workers together by the hundreds of thousands who collectively lifted their voice; United by song, they were strong.

PART ONE
THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE OF OF EASTERN EUROPEAN JEWS

Background: The Jews In Eastern Europe

Jewish women's status in turn-of-the-century Eastern Europe was a paradox: on the one hand, women were excluded from leadership roles in civic and religious authority; while, on the other hand, they were responsible for contributing economically to their households and maintaining religious ritual within the home. The strong, capable woman was the cultural ideal in Eastern Europe, as opposed to the Western ideal of the same time period that valued woman's exclusive relegation to the home. *Halakha* (Jewish Law) barred women from assuming public roles within the synagogue. Women were expected to be pious, but learned their prayers in Yiddish, the vernacular language and not in Hebrew the *lashon kodesh* (holy language). Likewise, formal religious education was offered only to males. Most girls received no education at all. Women's work, both in the home and outside of it, was considered a necessity for the Jewish people's physical and cultural survival, it was also devalued and considered inferior to the work of men. Although not all women in the Old World were employed outside the home, they were part of a society where women's economic contributions were a vital source of family income. The Jewish population in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Eastern Europe was stratified and patriarchal. The most respected and elite were the religious scholars, that is, men who were devoted to full-time Torah study. Scholars who did not receive a paid rabbinic position had to find a means to support themselves. Most looked for a wife who could both manage the household and be the breadwinner so as to enable them to be devoted entirely to Torah study. Women's work was thus indirectly regarded as a

religious obligation.

Although some men were fortunate enough to belong to the elite group of full- time scholars, most men did not have the education or resources to become full-time scholars, so they worked as business men, merchants or artisans. At the same time, however, women's work became acceptable in every stratum of Jewish life, as a necessity. If the scholar's wife worked, why shouldn't the wife of a merchant or a tailor? Jews who supported their families in an artisan trade often relied on the labor of all family members, including wives and daughters. Although women remained in a subordinate position, their breadwinning partnership gave them "some family authority, a knowledge of the marketplace, and a certain worldliness" [2] that would later help some of them acculturate to life in America.

In Eastern Europe, women would often look after their husband's or father's stores in his absence, or sometimes have a stall of their own. In some cases, the head of the household traveled, peddling his wares, and the stores and businesses remained in the care of the women. The scholar Susan Glenn cites the work of Yiddish novelist Isaac Meyer Dik who wrote in 1868:

> The hamlet looks dead during the whole week; it has the semblance of a gynocracy, that is, a kingdom inhabited only by women. Men spend the week until Friday in the country, they wander from village to village... In the hamlet itself remain only women, children, communal officials, students, and a few unemployed men. [3]

Roles began to change for women with the onset of the *Haskalah*, or the Jewish Enlightenment movement, which began in the early-ninteteenth century, leading to the rise of secular Yiddish literature in the 1870s. The *maskilim*,

[2] Glenn, p.16.

[3] Ibid.

followers of the movement, believed that the key to Jewish emancipation and equality was the reconciliation of Judaism with modern Western ideas and practices.[4] Some of the tenets of the Haskalah promoted equality among women and men, such as secular education for boys and girls. Here was a link between education and liberation for girls and women. Women were seen as oppressed, overworked, and not included in all facets of Jewish communal life. The Haskalah, influenced as it was by Western bourgeois standards, maintained that women belonged in the domestic sphere only, stressing their maternal and homemaking functions. These views differed from the gender roles ascribed to the Eastern European Jewish woman, whose physical strength and economic activity in the marketplace were the norm.[5] During the early stages of Russia's industrialization in the 1880s, many women found work in the industrial trades. The Industrial Revolution in both the East and West helped to push women into the work force. Often this meant factory work at wages half of what the men were making.[6] By the end of the century, thousands of women were working to help support their families. Nonetheless, factories were considered inappropriate places for Jewish wives to work; not only did factory work keep women away from home all day, but it meant women were under the direction of other men. Home work was considered a better alternative since the entire family could sit and do it together, and women could arrange their own work schedules.

[4] Howard M. Sachar, A History of the Jews in America (New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, 1992) p.199.

[5] Glenn, pgs. 33- 44. Also in Paula Hyman, Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), pgs. 69- 70.

[6] Ibid p. 18.

Outside of a business, a skilled trade was the most highly regarded form of women's work. Families hoped their daughters would become artisans. And many became skilled artisans in the needle trades. The predominance of Jews in the needle trades dates back centuries and may be rooted in traditional religious practice. Since Jewish law forbids Jews from wearing blends of wool and linen, only Jewish tailors and seamstresses were trusted to follow this rule.[7] Women were prolific in the sewing trades as well. The largest percentage of female artisans were employed in some branch of the sewing trades, which assured them a good livelihood. Much of the clothing was made by individual artisans in their own shops, which were stratified by their products and by their clientele.

Technology played an important role in the drive toward immigration. After 1890, small production shops began to emerge and produce ready-made garments. As small, independent artisans were forced to close because they could not keep up with the new technology, some began to migrate to America. Jewish would-be-emigrees had faith that prosperity awaited them in America. Young women apprenticing to the needle trades in Russia heard stories of their classmates already in America, including the high wages they were earning. Their families often chose to send over their young working-aged daughters, skilled in the garment trade. They hoped they would secure lucrative positions in the growing industry in the United States and then send money to their relations in their homeland, so they too could join them in America. This was "the golden trade," the "trade with a future," a trade a girl could depend on to earn a living.[8] Thus Jewish daughters who entered the garment industry in the United States came as highly skilled needle workers, dressmakers and

[7] Ibid. p.19.

[8] Ibid. p. 21.

seamstresses. They had a sense of pride in their work, as well as a sense of confidence, and understood the legitimacy and necessity of women being included in the labor force.

The Mass Migration

There are several sociological factors which determine how a particular immigrant group will succeed after arrival in a new land:

1. Was the motivation for leaving mainly political or economic?
2. What skills did the immigrant possess in relation to the jobs available in the new land?
3. Did immigrant groups develop self-help communities?
4. How strong were the ties to the country of origin?
5. To what degree was there political mobilization, access to power, or a power association with their ethnic identity?

The mass migration of Jews from the Pale, beginning in the 1870s resulted from deteriorating political, social, and economic conditions in Eastern Europe. Between 1885 and 1898, over 400,000 Jews joined their *landsmen* in America. By 1914, over one million more had joined them. These people came to America, the *goldene medine*, seeking new opportunity and increased economic gain. Young women, young men, married couples, entire families-- all came seeking a better life and the political freedom that America offered.[9] During the migration years nearly two million Jews from Eastern Europe, of whom 43 percent were women, settled in The United States.[10] By the turn of the century over 200,000 immigrant men and women would make their living in the

[9] Baum, Hyman and Michel, The Jewish Woman in America (New York: Dial Press, 1976), p. 95.

[10] Paula Hyman, Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), p. 93.

garment industry."[11] Among these were many skilled artisans in the needle trades.

Because of the skills Jewish women brought with them from Eastern Europe, their experiences in the New World were different from those of females of other immigrant groups. The experiences these woman had in Eastern Europe-- working outside the home and helping the family economically, and actively participating in radical politics helped them adjust to and expand their roles in the American immigrant community, and the community at large.

There were several factors that grew out of the social context of the period that led to an emerging political and social consciousness on the part of immigrant Jewish women. Jewish women were both aware of and participated in both the labor movement and the labor force in Eastern Europe. Once an immigrant family came to America, young women continued to work outside the home as breadwinners in order to help support their families. In so doing, they became subjected to the inhumane conditions of the sweatshops. While work outside the home does not always lead to politicization, the political beliefs held within the family and its social structure play a large role in promoting women's political activism. Jewish women felt entitled both to work and to work in an ideal environment.

Immigrant Jewish women had much in common with other early-twentieth century immigrant women, but their experience was influenced by their Jewishness as well as their gender, and by their particular experience coming out of the culture of Eastern European Jewry. Other immigrant groups, such as the Italians, who arrived in America concurrently with the Eastern European Jews, did not regard themselves as permanently immigrating to the United States. Men often came alone in hopes of returning to Italy rich men,

[11] Glenn, p. 90.

better able to support their families. Often illiterate and unskilled in a trade, they often did heavy manual labor on the shipping docks. At the same time, there was no *landsmen* group or immigrant aid society of Italians to make their adjustment to life in America easier. Life for Italian women was even more difficult. If a woman worked outside the home, she was escorted to and from work by a male relative who intended to protect her. Instead, Italian women were not afforded an opportunity to attend union meetings or rallies like their Jewish peers. It was not until after World War Two that Italians began moving their families to the United States and became involved in communities and politics.

The norms of East European Jewish culture, in which the ideal occupation for men was a full-time scholar, allowed women a role in the secular public realm, as well as opportunities for experience with labor organizations and working outside of the home. Women had often worked in commercial businesses as skilled artisans, or worked in factories doing unskilled labor. Some married women brought home work from a factory or shop, allowing them extra income and the time to manage their household and complete their work on their own schedules. Women had a great deal of autonomy in order to help support their families, and were active in social welfare. At the end of the nineteenth century, socialism also enhanced the status of Jewish women by proclaiming a commitment to equality. Women and men would work together to make a revolution. Though gender roles for Jewish immigrant women and men remained different, Jewish women were granted more autonomy than women in other immigrant communities. These factors were influential in determining Jewish women's role in the spheres of political and social activism in America.

Working in America

Cultural norms in bourgeois America dictated that a wife working outside the home was a sign of failure on the part of the husband to provide for his family. In other words, female labor was seen as a necessary, but only temporary, evil. Jewish women and other immigrant women saw work outside the home as a temporary phenomenon that took place after the completion of their education and before marriage.[12] Housewives, too, did work outside the home by helping their husbands with their businesses, taking in boarders, or bringing home piecework. This sort of work was acceptable for married women. But the bulk of women in the work force were young unmarried girls and women who gave their unopened pay envelopes to the head of the household. Often a girl's marriage would be delayed until another child entered the work force who could earn enough to replace her wages.[13] But though these young girls regarded their role as wage earners as temporary, they took an active interest in their jobs and fought to improve the conditions for the girls who would follow.

When immigrant Jewish women entered the work force, they often found that their gender affected their job placement and stature. A woman working full time in a shop, for example, earned only 60 percent of what her male peers earned.[14] Women mostly participated in the typical Jewish trades, most commonly the needle trades, working in the garment industry. Eighty percent of the workers in the trade were women; 70 percent of them were between the ages of sixteen and twenty five, and 65 percent of them were Jewish.[15] Because

[12] Glenn, p.5, and Hyman, Gender and Assimilation , p. 68.

[13] Glenn, p. 84.

[14] Judith R. Baskin, Jewish Women in Historical Perspective (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, (1991), p. 227.

[15] Baum, Hyman and Michel, p.141.

of their work experience in Eastern Europe, Jewish women tended to be more highly skilled than other groups of employed immigrant women, but often did not hold white collar jobs, which were mostly filled by men. The immigrant women were often highly skilled seamstresses, but much of the women's skilled craftsmanship did not easily transfer to the assembly line type of production that was used in American factories. Instead of one woman working on a piece from start to finish, a person might sew only sleeves and then pass the item along to the next person. In the garment shops, men worked in the most highly-skilled and thus most lucrative positions within the shops, whereas women were reduced to the status of unskilled workers.

> Most of the so-called factories were located in old wooden walkups with rickety stairs, splintered and sagging floors. The few windows were never washed and their broken panes were mended with cardboard...In the winter a stove stood in the middle of the floor... but its warmth rarely reached the workers seated near the windows. In the summer months the constant burning of gas jets added their unwelcome heat and smell to an atmosphere already intolerably humid and oppressive...There was no drinking water available... Dirt, smells, and vermin were as much a part of the surroundings as were the machines and the workers.[16]

Bosses treated all workers poorly. Both men and women suffered hazardous work conditions, long hours and low wages, but women were subjected to uniquely difficult conditions unrivaled by male workers. Shop managers took advantage of newly-arrived immigrants, paying them lower wages than the other shop girls for the same work, unbeknownst to them. Sometimes bosses created racial tension between Jewish and Italian workers by telling Italian workers that the Jews were striking because they did not want to work with Italians. Due to the language barrier and the inability of the Italian

[16] Annelise Orleck, Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-class Politics in the United States 1900-1965, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p. 32.

women to participate in union meetings, they believed the bosses. Workers often had to buy the machine they worked on and were charged for needles and for the cost of the electricity needed to run the machines. Moreover, workers were fined for being late, timed during their trips to the ladies' room, and charged triple the cost of the garment if a mistake was made on it. As well, working conditions were dangerous due to overcrowding, the weight of the machinery, and the flammable materials used. In short order, the ill treatment experienced by the workers led to their rallying together to fight for fair wages and hours, and to express shock at the work conditions in factories, which led to political action, drawing hundreds of thousands of women workers into unions in the early-twentieth century.

Another factor influencing the politicization of the garment workers was the political affiliations often imported to the United States by Eastern Europeans. Those involved in the Bund, Socialism, Zionism, Russian Revolutionary populism, and Yiddish cultural nationalism in Eastern Europe generally maintained their convictions after immigrating to America. Jewish immigrant women were more attuned to political questions and were more sure of their right to act politically on their beliefs than their immigrant peers. Women's political action commonly manifested itself in four areas: consumer protests against high food and rent costs, concern for the welfare of the worker, a drive for education for women, and women's suffrage.

The New York City Kosher Meat boycott of 1902 and the Lower East Side rent strikes of 1904, and 1907-1908 are examples of female-initiated and female-led activism which effectively displayed to the immigrant community and the labor movement women's political potential. After wholesalers to neighborhood kosher butchers would not reduce their prices, women began

calling for a strike. They organized a mass boycott, and after canvassing the neighborhood for support, thousands of women broke into butcher shops, threw the meat on the ground and declared a boycott. Stores were patrolled, and "scabs," or those who bought meat despite the boycott, had their purchases destroyed. Women also spoke at synagogues to rally the support of men. The boycott was successful, resulting in the temporary closing of butcher shops until a fair market price, affordable to the working class, was agreed upon.[17] The Rent Strikes followed the same tactics employed earlier by the leaders of the Kosher meat boycott. Women went door to door and elicited signed statements from tenants refusing to pay rent. In both cases immigrant women found a vehicle for political organization around the issue of the high cost of food and rent. Realizing their power both as consumers and domestic managers, they used it to band together to fight and beat the system. This set the stage for later activism among Jewish immigrant women.

In the years that followed, women garment workers united in unprecedented displays of labor militancy. Between 1909 and 1915, uniting together with the male workers, they led a paralyzing series of strikes. So influential were these women that this period has been called "The Great Revolt." Rose Schneiderman, Clara Lemlich, and Pauline Newman spearheaded the women's uprisings. These women became political leaders and helped create political change, which came out of visions originating during years spent working in the garment industry.

Women workers were instrumental in winning the public over to supporting unions, the first case being the "Uprising of the 20,000" in 1909. The uprising was set off by the mismanagement of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company

[17] Paula Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer protest: The New York Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902," American Jewish History vol. 70 no.1 (1980): pp.91-105.

and the Leiserson shop, followed by appeals to the Waist Maker's Local 25. This in turn, put pressure on the larger International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (IGLWU), and then, Clara Lemmlich, a young worker in the Leiserson shop, issued a call for a general strike. The result: 20,000 to 40,000 workers struck for union recognition, better wages and working conditions, including year-round work, a shorter work week, fixed wages, and a strict adherence to safety and health regulations. Though the union officials were predominately male, it was the women who were on the front lines, picketing, subjected to arrest, fines and assault by hired thugs and police. Girls on the picket line were compared to streetwalkers in an attempt to sully their reputations. Bosses even hired prostitutes to infiltrate the picket line so the comparison could easily be made. But the young women would rather be labeled streetwalkers than "scabs." These "ghetto heroines...[were] willing to lay down their lives for an idea, or to live for one."[18]

This battle against unsafe and poorly paid jobs helped pave the way for unionism in the garment industry, as well as inspiring workers in other industries. We do not know definitely whether the women who participated in the uprising came from homes where their mothers had participated in community-based strikes and boycotts, such as the Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902 and the ensuing Rent Strikes in 1908-1909. But we can assume that the memory of one's parent or neighbor protesting in the streets on behalf of consumers had an effect and may have served as inspiration to their bread-winning daughters who joined in this strike and in campaigning for unions. Despite the inspiration the uprising gave to workers everywhere, after a thirteen week strike the "bosses" won, and workers were forced to compromise on some issues, including primarily their health and safety. Thus, workers returned to the

[18] Sydney Stahl Weinberg, World Of Our Mothers (New York: Schocken, 1988), p. 200.

same unsafe shops they had been protesting against. Though the strike was not entirely successful, it set off a decade of labor unrest in the garment trades, including the general strike of the cloakmakers in New York in 1910, and the men's clothing workers' strike in Chicago, also in 1910.

Music and Unions

Song played a significant role in unifying the women workers, and creating solidarity among all workers. Women sang in the garment shops, on the streets while striking, and in union meetings. Clara Lemlich was a popular entertainer at union meetings; she had a vast repertoire of revolutionary songs.[19] Songs were sung in Yiddish, English, or Italian, with texts written by Yiddish labor poets or the women themselves, and sung to popular tunes of the day. While picketing in pairs in front of the factories, the women sang these working class songs to keep their spirits up, and to pass time, as well as send out their ideological message. Songs were written about seamstresses wasting away "chained" to their machines, addressed to all women who were protesting the unfair and often dangerous working conditions. Machine oil could easily ignite causing a shop fire. Pressers and launderers often caught tuberculosis the *menchen fresser* (man eater). Songs also talked about actual events. One song "Bread and Roses", to which there is also an Italian version "Pane i Rosa", was written after Rose Schneiderman's speech to coatmakers in Cleveland in 1910. The phrase "bread and roses" came to represent all that the women were striking for; lives filled with beauty, friendships, education, the arts, dances, fresh air. Pauline Newman similarly expresses that "A working girl is a human being"[20] and not a shop-drudge. In addition, there were several

[19] Orleck, p. 49.

[20] Orleck, p. 16.

elegies written about the most famous shop fire of that era, the Triangle Fire.

On March 25, 1911, a tragedy struck, which served as a catalyst for women's political action, and which ultimately galvanized the cause of unionization. "The Triangle Fire" began on the ninth floor of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, which occupied three floors in all (the eighth, ninth and tenth floors of the Asche building on Washington Place). One hundred and forty six people were killed. Those who did not die behind the locked factory doors threw themselves out the windows and met their death on the pavement below. Had the strike against the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory for union recognition been won, and had doors remained unlocked during business hours and fire escapes made available, this tragedy could have been avoided. However this destruction of lives was among the pivotal events that united workers to fight for their rights and unionize.

A folksong about the tragedy of the Triangle fire became popular which articulates the perspective of a bereaved mother who finds her daughter dead after the fire:

> *Oy vey* my child!
> The mama tears her hair.
> For a piece of bread, a terrible death robbed me of my only child.
> My little girl lies dead,
> Shrouds instead of a wedding gown,
> Woe is me,
> A child of 16,
> *Oy,* mame, mame
> Woe is me![21]

Indeed, the Broadway musical "Rags" which debuted in 1986 has its own elegy to the victims of the Triangle fire, a beautiful, and heart wrenching version of the mourner's *kaddish.* The tragedy of the Triangle Fire affected the entire

[21] Eleanor Gordon Mlotek and Joseph Mlotek, Pearls of Yiddish Song (New York: The Workmen's Circle, 1988), pp. 251-253.

city, uniting everyone through political issues. The Jewish community especially was affected by the fire due to the large number of Jews in the needle trades. There was many a friend, relative, or *landsman* working there that day, or who had worked at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in the past. Moreover, many had worked under similarly unsafe conditions and so identified with the victims. Rose Schneiderman, who had lost friends in the fire, made an impassioned speech at the Metropolitan Opera House, which helped to win sympathy and support for the union from the so-called uptown Jews, as well as from Gentiles. The tragedy of the fire gave impetus to unionization, and the labor movement rose in acceptance by the public.

Following the Triangle fire, more strikes ensued: the New York City furriers' strike of 1912, the general strike of men's clothing workers in New York, 1913-1914. Although unionization came slowly, the workers in the garment trades were among the most organized of the labor force.

The Formation of Unions

Two unions benefited from the labor unrest. The ILGWU, which was founded in 1900, began with only a few thousand members prior to the 1909 uprising. By 1920, it had 102,000 making it one of the largest unions under the American Federation of Labor (AFL). A new union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACW) attempted to organize the semi-skilled immigrants who dominated the industry. By 1920, it too had grown immensely, increasing in number to 170,000 to encompass the majority of the men's clothing workers in the industry. Women accounted for two-thirds of the membership of the ILGWU and one-third of the Amalgamated members.[22]

[22] Glenn, p. 171.

Although women made up a large percentage of the union membership, the union leadership was predominately male, and often indifferent, and even antagonistic, toward the organizing of women workers. They felt that since women were only temporarily in the labor force, there was little to gain from organizing them. The AFL opposed female wage work claiming it was destructive to family life and threatening to the economic position of men. The AFL only reluctantly began organizing women workers, in part to protect male wages. Though a handful of women occupied salaried positions in unions and served as officers, even in female-dominated unions the highest authorities were the men. Though they used the socialist terms of brother and sister to address one another, the relationship remained big brother and little sister. Women began to struggle with their desire for equality and their commitment to class solidarity. At the same time, though, Jewish immigrants of both sexes responded to the dehumanizing conditions of the shop with a special sensitivity. They had traveled to America expecting a land of freedom and opportunity and a better living for themselves. They did not plan on returning to their homeland after making some money, as did other immigrant groups. They viewed America as their home. Having come to America in search of liberty, they discovered quickly that as a worker "you would have to strike for it."[23]

The philosophy of the young women unionists was that unions should do more than negotiate for fair hours and wages. They sought a good quality of life, hoping not to work hand to mouth. They wanted education, culture, health care, and vacations. Women workers had different needs than men. They did "double-shifts" working all day in a factory, and coming home to do household chores. Rose Schneiderman said, "The working woman needs bread, but she needs roses, too," attempting to broaden the vision of trade unionism. Unionism

[23] Id. p. 180.

served to expand the woman's realm into the struggle to establish a better industrial and social order. Jewish women struggling to build the labor movement saw themselves working for social justice for all women, and just as they had always worked side by side with men earning wages for their families, they now wanted a voice, and to become integrated with the men.

To that end, women-only unions began. The National Women's Suffrage Union was formed in New York City in 1907. It owed much of its support to the Jewish garment workers on the Lower East Side and in Harlem. Its members staged demonstrations, and meetings were highly attended. They leafletted factories and formed alliances with workers on union and labor issues. The Equality League of Self Supporting Women began in 1907, and was established by Harriet Stanton Blatch, who also became active in the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL). She became aware of the interest of young Jewish working women in suffrage and began to organize the working class toward that endeavor.

Within The Woman's Suffrage Party (WSP), 17 percent of its founding members were Jewish and up to 64 percent of its members were Jewish in the largely-Jewish districts. It became the major suffrage organization in New York City. Together with the WTUL, The Wage Earners' League was established in 1911 as an attempt to enlist working women and immigrants to join in a suffrage march. The idea was met with such enthusiasm that the League was formed, with a large constituency coming from the Jewish working-class immigrant women on the Lower East Side. The goals stated in the Wage Earner's League's constitution were threefold: "to urge working women to understand the necessity of the vote, to agitate for the vote, and to study how to use the vote

when it has been acquired."[24] Working class women wanted to use the vote to redistribute power to the working class as a whole and to institute important labor reforms and social changes.

A 1911 leaflet of the Wage Earner's League demonstrates the feeling that a woman's power to vote could bring about social changes for the betterment of society. The following is from the minutes of a Wage Earner's meeting:

> Why are you paid less than a man?
> Why do you work in a fire trap?
> Why are your hours so long?
> Why are you all strap hangers when you pay for a seat?
> Why do you pay the most rent for the worst houses?
> Why do your children go into factories?
> Why don't you get a square deal in court?
> BECAUSE YOU ARE A WOMAN AND HAVE NO VOTE.
> VOTES MAKE THE LAW.
> VOTES ENFORCE THE LAW.
> THE LAW CONTROLS CONDITIONS
> WOMEN WHO WANT BETTER CONDITIONS MUST VOTE[25]

More than any other immigrant group, the Jewish community supported woman's suffrage at the polls in the New York City elections of 1915 and 1917. The Socialist party within the Jewish community also supported woman's suffrage. And trade unions provided an outlet for suffragists to come in close contact with young working women. For example, Clara Lemmlich and Rose Schneiderman were members of both the Socialist party and the Women's Trade Union League, and were affiliated with the Woman's Suffrage Party. Both made use of their positions to further the cause of suffrage.

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[24] leck, p. 96.

[25] eck, p. 100.

Like their working sisters, married women too, played a role in the ge movement in their neighborhoods on the Lower East Side and in m. Yiddish leaflets were sent out aimed at recruiting tenement mothers vives to rally the vote to solve their housing and food problems. Some of echniques employed in spreading the message of suffrage were the same niques developed a decade earlier during the Kosher meat Boycott and Strikes. Jewish women canvassed the neighborhood to speak about en's suffrage. For each apartment they visited they made a card noting the l of the household's attitude toward each issue.[25]

The success of the Women's Suffrage Movement relied on the ability of women to convince the men to share their political power. Socialism was parably linked to the workers' rights movements. Socialists hoped to enlist ng women workers and labor unions who, given a voice, would in turn elect slators sympathetic to pro-labor legislation. Meyer London, a prominent / in the Socialist Party, said, "The last persons to oppose granting suffrage... uld be the foreign-born men who had fled the political oppression in their n countries."[27] Similarly, within the trade unions, women's votes were sidered beneficial to union politics, and given the vote, it was hoped that men would help advance the interests of the worker and the Jewish nmunity. Women's Suffrage also gained the support of Rabbi Stephen S. e who was a founding member of the Men's League for Woman Suffrage. e said, "The Woman's movement is not a feminist movement at all, but a nan movement." [28] He continued: "If you believe in Democracy, you cannot

Baskin, p. 236.

ner, "Jewish Involvment in the New York City Woman Suffrage Movement," American Jewish 70 no. 4 (1981), p.457.

57.

escape the inevitibleness (sic) of woman suffrage."[29] When the women canvassed the neighborhood, the results of their survey yielded that 75 percent were in favor of suffrage. This figure affirms the acceptability of women's involvement in the public sphere.

Jews' attitude toward the suffrage movement was reflected in the music of the Yiddish stage. There is an operetta called *Dzeni Lauft fur Meyer* ("Jennie Runs for Mayor"), and there are songs on women's rights such as *Frauen Rechts* ("Women's Rights") and *Vayber Macht Mir Fun Prezident. ("Women make me President").* In the musical *Di Sheyne Amerikanerin* ("The Beautiful American Girl") by Tomashefsky, there is a paradoxical representation of the appropriate place for women. The chauvinistic viewpoint is expressed in a song *Der Hersher iz alts der Man* ("The Man is still the Ruler"), and the female stance on women's liberation is expressed in *Vayber Macht Mir fun Preszident.*[30] The Chorus of the latter song is as follows:

> Get together women, and make me President. You'll see women,
> How we'll have the men in our hands! Take hands, Take hands!

"Women's Rights" by Perlmutter and Wohl is another song on this theme:

> The times bring us a lot of news...
> The women will be equal with the man.
> They struggle to have rights!
> Women from all races sit and think of plans...
> They make speeches in the streets, to make a strike with men,
> So, obey this good plan!
> Don't listen to the man if he comes in late,
> Get his mind off things, stand strong, cry out right away...
> LONG LIVE WOMEN'S RIGHTS![31]

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bid. p. 457.

Mark Slobin, Tenement Songs:The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants (Urbana: University of Illinois ss, 1982),pp.129-131.

ranslation for "Women's Rights" by Chana Mlotek.

Jewish Women's political activism had a positive impact on the cause of pro-labor legislation and on gaining rights for workers, as well as on the cause of woman's suffrage. We have much to thank our predecessors for, and should look to them as role models. Their generation fought for human rights and advanced political and social activism; rallies, marches, protests, strikes, soliciting membership, and leafletting all became normal and acceptable daily activities. Their activities won for us both the bread and the freedom we expected when our ancestors arrived in the *goldene land,* a land of promise and freedom.

PART TWO

THE MUSIC OF THE EASTERN EUROPEAN JEWS IN AMERICA

This chapter demonstrates how song was used by Eastern European Jews before and after their arrival in America. It focuses on Jewish folk music in general, on the modes that were commonly used in Eastern European song, and on the various categories of song. The chapter then becomes more specific in discussing particular Jewish folksongs and the Jewish musical elements they contain, and what these songs came to mean to the people who sang them. Music was primary in the Solidarity of workers. Jewish workers were able to sing Yiddish labor songs together. They were able to identify with different songs about the lives of seamstresses toiling in shops. The shared language, shared ideologies, and shared experience unified them in the drive to unionize.

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Song was a central feature of Eastern European Jewish culture. People sang at gatherings, while working, and around the *shabbes* table. Jewish Immigrants transported these customs overseas from the Old World. In America, too, "natives" and new immigrants used story and song to symbolize their struggles, including the problem of adjusting to life in America. In America, there was a division between educated and uneducated Jews, and there were as well self-imposed divisions based on one's town of origin. The *landsmanschaft*, or benevolent societies of immigrants from the same town, where earlier arrived immigrants helped the "green" immigrants, fostered this division. Despite these divisions, however, Jews in America shared a culture based on the Yiddish of Eastern Europe, the oppression they suffered as Jews

in Tsarist Russia, and, now, the common lot of the newcomer.[32] Ethnomusicologists believe that music is just as important in helping people define who they are as language, religion, social organization, politics, types of clothing, and housing.[33] The Jews felt unified during the immigrant years through folk and popular music and entertainment, which cut across class, regional, and ideolological lines.

The music contained many elements which are now associated as Jewish. For example, it employed the modal system of Eastern Europe, which was common both to Eastern European folksong and to *chazzanut*. In this way, the lines between traditional music and music of tradition is blurred.[34] For example, Irving Berlin's first biographer Alexander Woolcott wrote of Berlin's music in 1927: "Behind him are generations of wailing cantors to tinge all his work with melancholy."[35] Composers used the "melancholic" sound of the minor mode, which gave immigrants their sense of musical identity. While the minor mode was commonly interpreted as sad, in fact, it was not always used to portray grief. Much of Eastern European folk music is in the minor mode, while Central and Western European music is often in a major key, though it is not necessarily happy.[36] The Jews felt that modes such as *Ahavah Rabah* (named after a Sabbath morning prayer) *Adonai Malach* (named after the 93rd psalm), as well as the *Ukrainian Dorian* mode, were theirs exclusively, but they were also used in non-Jewish folk music and by non-Jewish folk musicians in

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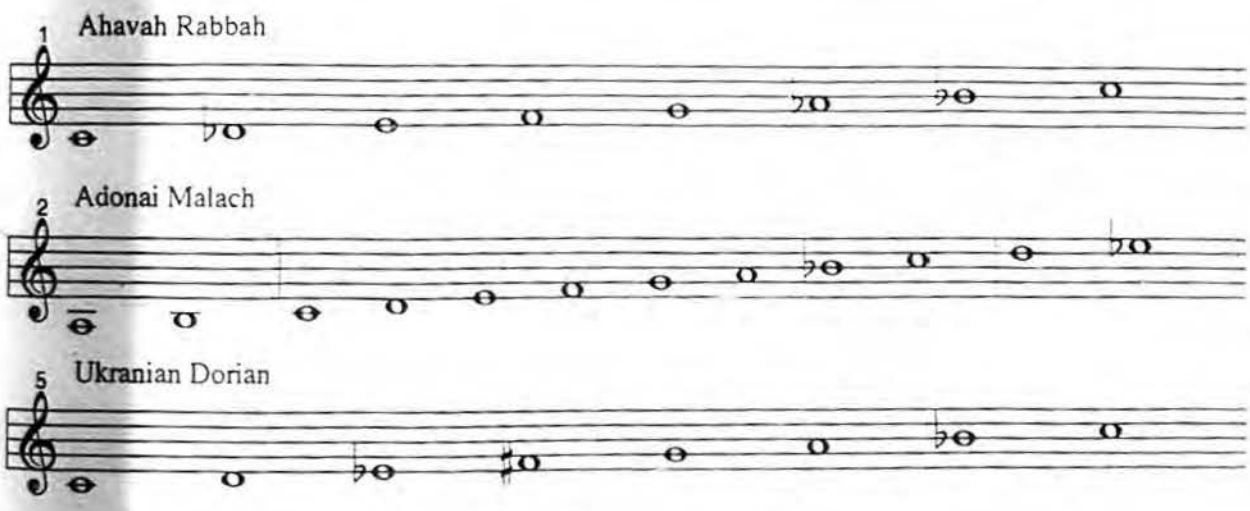
Slobin, p. 198.
Ibid. p. 56.

Bohlman, The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) 57.

Slobin, p. 182.

Slobin, p. 182.

Eastern Europe. Since migration. these modes have been solely associated with a Jewish sound.



From Isadore Freed, Harmonizing the Jewish Modes, (New York: Sacred Music Press,1990)

Ahava Raba is a minor mode that has an augmented second between the 2nd and 3rd scale degrees and a lowered 7th. The *Adonai Malach* scale is related to the major modes characterized by a lowered 7th in the upper octave, but a natural 7th below the octave. The *Ukrainian Dorian* mode probably originated in Rumanian popular melodies. It is characterized by its raised fourth scale degree. A piece cannot be entirely in *Ukrainian Dorian* in *chazzanut* , but its presence is strong in *klezmer* and in folk song.

The texts of the songs often reflected current events, as well as social and political issues, and espoused Eastern European Jewish values, such as a strong work ethic and political identification. Songs also held lofty ideals, such as those written by labor poets wanting to inspire the worker. In fact, the folk song became the very vehicle for this poetry. The transformation of this folk

music into working class music required the workers to cohere ideologically as a community.[37]

Immigrant groups brought folk music from the Old World. That music remained constant as long as boundaries kept it protected from outside influences, and as long as new immigrants continued to arrive to renew the spirit of the Old World and to replenish musical talent. In turn of the century America, and even more so today, ethnic groups do not live in isolation from one another. Multiculturalism and pluralism insure cultural exchange. As long as Jews lived in a so-called Ghetto, the folk music culture remained intact, but once Jews and other immigrant groups wanted to acculturate, musical traditions became attenuated, absorbing characteristics from other groups. Folk music is not, therefore, according to the musicologist Phillip Bohlman, the sole property of one ethnic group.[38] According to musicologist Mark Slobin, popular culture held a special place in the history of immigrant adaptation because of its ability to "sympathize with the bereaved, comfort the rootless, to unite the community in outrage against Jewish suffering... [and act as a] cultural adhesive, covering over the cracks of immigrant society and hardening its edges."[39]

Songs of America

Much of the Yiddish music of Jewish immigrants is devoted to the theme of the immigrant experience. Songs of emigration/ immigration bring out the conflict inherent in moving from the old to the new: they include the nostalgia and yearning for the homeland versus songs containing words of optimism and hope of what life in America would bring. America was the dream of millions of

Bohlman, p xix.

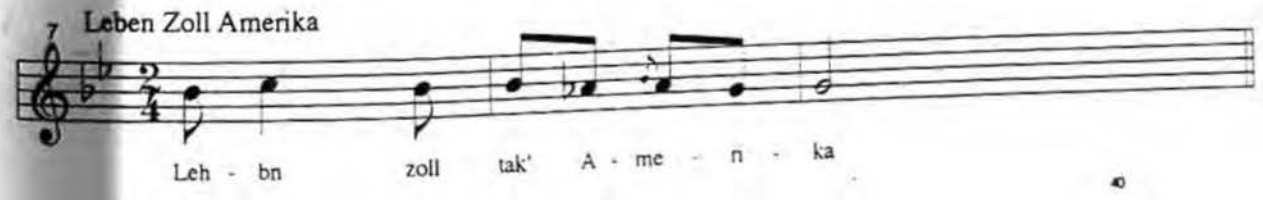
Ibid. p. 57.

Slobin, p. 6.

Eastern European Jews. To them, America was the *goldene medine*, a land where one could get rich, where social strata were not sharply defined, where one could have political and religious freedom. Impressions of the *goldene medine* were often gleaned from the letters of those already in America. Much of the Yiddish music of Jewish immigrants is dedicated to the immigrant experience. There are pro-American songs praising the land of freedom such as *"Leben zoll Amerika"*:

> Long live America! How good and fine the Jew can live here. He feels as if he is in the Garden of Eden, and everyone here has equal rights. Oy! how good... It is a free country here. Every Jew feels made alive (by living here in freedom). Long Live America!

This song is in a G minor mode with a hint of the Adonai *Malach* scale. There are echoes of *Adonai Malach* in B flat with a lowered seventh (A flat), and in G minor, a flatted second (A flat). The immigrant voice is still using the musical language of the *alterheym* in praising America.



The use of the East European modes recalls memories and emotions of times past. When the music of the Old World is brought to life in the New World, it is a way for the immigrant to be both American and Jewish.

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* The Music for "Long Live America" I found in sheet music at YIVO with the help of Chana Mlotek. It was originally published by A. Teres Publishers in New York. The translation is by Marianne Sanua.

There are songs about the immigration process as well. Several discuss the experience of immigrants who were rejected from Ellis Island, and sent back to their country of origin, such as Smulewitz's *"Ellis Ayland."*[1] Once in America, immigrants often become disenchanted with the conditions they encountered. The *goldene medine* became a sarcastic epithet, as immigrants discovered that the harsh realities of immigrant life were in conflict with their dream of America. Many songs focus on the anger and despair found in daily life. *"Di nyu-yorker trern"* ("New York Tears")[2] is a tragic story of violence in the city. The famous song *"Di Grineh Kuzine"* ("The 'Green' Cousin")[3] with music by Abe Schwartz, tells of the transformation of a rosy-cheeked "greenhorn" cousin to a sallow-faced lass who curses Columbus for discovering America. This song was immensely popular, as many immigrants could identify with its message. They felt bitterness as their dreams dissolved. America was no land of milk and honey. Similarly, the short-lived Broadway musical *Rags*, which debuted in 1986, but depicts a life seventy years earlier, has a song of the same name "Rags" which expresses the sentiments of a Jewish immigrant girl who is disenchanted with America, and angry with her father for bringing her here. She wishes to escape the poverty of the Lower East side and live the life of wealth and freedom that she was promised. Composer Charles Strouse wrote this piece in a contemporary theater style which utilizes ragtime rhythms and melodies in order to portray the era the Jewish immigrants lived in. The lyrics follow:

Neil Levin, ed, Songs of the American Jewish Experience (Cedarhurst, NY: Distributed by Tara ublications, 1976), p.58.

Jerry Silverman, ed, The Yiddish Song Book (New York: Stein and Day, 1983), p.162.

Norman Warembud, ed., Great Songs of the Yiddish Theater (New York: J. &J. Kammen Music Co., 75), p. 45.

Open your eyes Bella! No, open yours Papa.
Mine are open wide and let me tell you what I see...
Rags!
This Land of freedom we had to run to,
where now we're free just like everyone to wear rags.
It's all day seeing them, all day smelling them,
all day listening to peddlers selling them, rags.

Rags, I live in rags, and so I'm right in style
All the while, sewing sewing, see us sewing...
Hags, we turn to hags, it happens bit by bit,
Picture it, papa, there I sit sewing buttons on rags.

Oh, Papa was it so necessary, to cram us on to
That stinking ferry, and drag us here to become
American Rags.

Papa, I know you had to leave,
I know how much you wanted to be free,
Just don't say again, that you did it all for me
Cause all I've got is rags!

Dreams, you gave me dreams
of such a Golden place...
Silk, and lace.
Milk and Honey, oh that's funny!
Lies, that's all it seems, and the dreams have flown
Use your eyes papa, no more lies, papa
Leave me alone![4]

Strouse wrote this song for a low female voice, and since the focus is on the text, stylistically the singer must scream out some of the phrases in a speech rhythm to show the anger and frustration of a sweatshop worker. Harmonically, Strouse modulates abruptly between E flat minor and E flat major. He uses the sharp contrasts between the parallel major and minor keys for shock value, perhaps showing the disjointedness of immigrant life. Musically, the percussive syncopated rhythms in the opening of the piece interrupt the dialogue. This is contrasted with the simplicity of the vocal line which is a parlando recitative.

[4] Charles Strouse and Stephen Schwartz, Musical Selections from RAGS (Miami: CPP Belwin, 1992), 30.

The interlude is full of chromaticism and romanticism, which lead the character out of her ragtime world of peddlers and organ grinders on the Lower East side into Uptown, where she experiences quite a different scenario. As she watches a couple "dancing by in their fancy clothes" the melody stays the same through the text, but the harmony in the accompaniment is constantly changing, leading to the climax of the piece and foreshadowing what is to come. Both parts, vocal and accompaniment, accelerate to the climax of the piece when the singer cries out, " I'm just one more Jew, in her rags!"

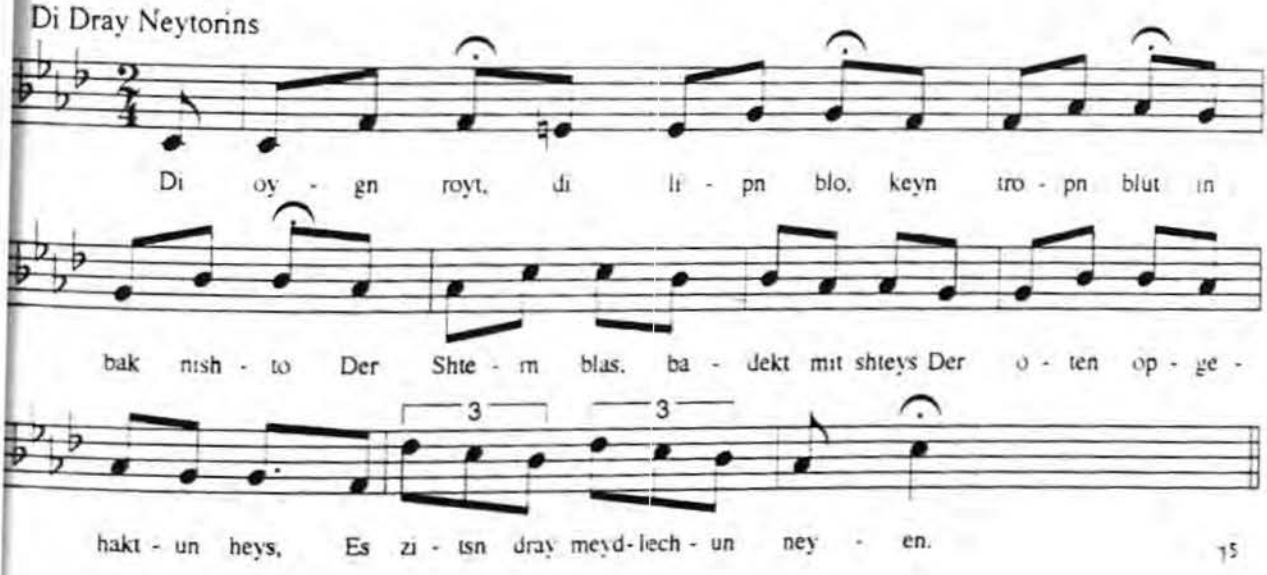
Songs of the Sweatshop

Like Bella, the character in the above song, many Jews worked in the garment industry in the sweatshops in order to sustain themselves. As discussed in Part One, the conditions were overcrowded, dirty, and unsafe; workers were paid poverty wages for long hours. Song after song attests to the miserable conditions of the sweatshop worker, and more poignantly so for young women. The song *"Di Dray Neytorins"* ("The Three Seamstresses") with text by Y.L. Peretz describes three young women toiling as seamstresses in a factory, and each regards her life with a sense of despair:

> Their eyes red, their lips blue, cheeks bloodless, foreheads pale, covered with sweat, their breath sweet and hot, three girls sit and sew.
>
> The needle gleams, the linen is like snow. One girl thinks: I sew by day and by night, but I have yet to sew my wedding dress. What's the point of sewing?I neither sleep nor eat. If I could give alms for charity, perhaps I'd find a widower or an old man with children who would marry me.
>
> The second girl thinks: I sew and tread and tread until my braids turn gray. My head burns, my temples throb, and the machine beats in rhythm. I understand that man's wink. Without a wedding, without a ring, It would be a game, a dance, a year long affair. But what then?

The third girl coughs blood and sings: All I sew is illness and blindness.
My breast is pierced with every stitch, and he's getting married this week.
I wish him no harm. Forget the past. The community elders will provide
A shroud and a bit of earth so I may finally sleep, sleep.

This folk song is in a minor key and is strophic--a simple structure that pervades folk music. The minor mode helps paint a picture of the misery of the lives of the shop girls.[6] The melody sequences step wise up a third and back down again. The editor writes fermatas over the phrase which creates a gasping feeling. There are triplets at the most desperate moment at the end of each final phrase, which musically also calls to mind the whirring of the machine.



[6] Mlotek, eds., Pearls p. 70.

Songs of the Labor Poets

Both the songs of the American sweatshops and the labor songs written in Yiddish by American labor poets made their way back to Europe where they were adapted for use by the Jewish workers who remained in Russia.[45] The labor poems had their roots in the *Haskalah* movement. Adherents of the *Haskalah*, in their drive for secular knowledge, began to use Yiddish to convey the ideals of secularization to the Eastern European Jews. Many of the short poems were called *lieder* or *folkslieder* (songs or folk songs) by their authors, and were in fact adopted as folk songs across the Yiddish-speaking world.[47] In America, workers' choruses were formed. Wildly popular were the songs of the labor poets, which were rooted in the Enlightenment movement but written in America by the poets who were themselves emigrees to America. The ideologies of the texts rang true for the newly American workers, and thinking of relatives and friends still working in Eastern European factories, the texts made the transatlantic journey back to Eastern Europe where they became integrated into the folk song tradition there.[48]

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, there was a political awakening among Jewish working men and women in the Pale. Many social movements such as socialism, communism, Zionism, and nationalism emerged, and Jewish workers translated and adapted Russian revolutionary songs for their causes. Many marched, fought, sung, and died for the cause of the Russian Revolutions in 1905 and 1917. The themes of the songs ranged from fighting for a better life to the hopelessness and misery felt in their situation. There were worker songs which called people to meetings and songs that kept

[45] Ibid. p. 25.

[47] Ibid. p. 24.

[48] Ibid. p. 25.

marching time for use in demonstrations.

The growth of social awareness within the labor movement led to the production of poems, some of which were set to music. These poems call the working class to action, using revolutionary sentiments. They were representative of the intense Jewish involvement and leadership in the cause of organized labor. The advancement of organized labor was helped in part by the Jewish groups in the early twentieth century which began unionizing the garment industry. Songs such as those by the labor poets show the solidarity of the Jewish people in the fight for organized labor. The most prominent American-Yiddish writers of labor poems at that time were David Edelstadt, Morris Winchevsky, and Morris Rosenfeld.[49]

David Edelstadt (1866-1892) arrived in America in 1881 after witnessing the Kiev pogrom of that same year. Upon arrival, he began working in a sweatshop and contracted tuberculosis, which ended his life early. He was the most widely sung of the labor poets, partially due to the fact that his poems were regularly published in *Di Varhayt*, an anarchist newspaper. Approximately fourteen of his poems have been set as songs. Among his songs is "*Vacht Oyf*" ("Awake!") which was commonly sung at workers' meetings and rallies.[50] The text is as follows:

> How long will you remain slaves and wear degrading chains?
> How long will you produce riches for those who rob you of your bread?
> How long will you stay with your backs bent- humiliated, homeless and weak? It's daybreak, Awake! Open your eyes, and see your own strength.Ring freedom bells everywhere, gather together suffering slaves, And fight for your sacred rights![51]

[49] Rubin, Title (City: Publisher, Year), p. 348.

[50] Ruth Rubin, Voices of a People (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1963), p.305.

[51] Translation from Chana Gordon Mlotek, and Joseph Mlotek, eds., Mir Trogn a Gesang (New York: Workmen's Circle, 1982), p. 88.

Morris Winchevsky (1856-1933) arrived in America in 1894 after living in England for fifteen years. He is considered the founder of the socialist press, and often called the "first Yiddish proletarian poet." Among his poems set to music are *"Der frayhayts gayst"* ("The spirit of freedom"),[52] which tells of freedom breaking shackles and ending the oppression of the masses, and *"Hert ihr kinder"* ("Children do you hear ?"),[53] which tells of the workers' realization of the power of the worker.

Morris Rosenfeld (1862-1923) came to America in 1886 and toiled in a sweatshop where he witnessed the humiliation of that life. His poems often expressed the theme of the sweatshop. Because of his firsthand experience, he was able to vividly depict the lives of working class Jewish men and women. In his poem *"Mayn ruhe plats"* ("My Resting Place"),[54] he describes a worker who feels chained to the machines, waiting for her love. The poem follows:

> Don't look for me where the myrtles grow,
> For you will not find me there, my love.
> Where lives wither at machines-- That is my resting place.
> Don't look for me where birds sing, you will not find me there.
> I am a slave, and where chains ring--that is my resting place.
> Not where fountains splash,
> But where tears flow and teeth gnash.
> If you love me truly, come lighten my heart and sweeten my
> Resting Place.

Mayn ruhe platz"[55] is a through composed song which is one of the most beautiful melodies in Yiddish folk song. It is reminiscent of a Schubert Lied. The first phrase's range is contained within an octave, but the next one opens up beyond an octave in an arpeggiated triad. The last phrase *"dortn iz mayn*

[52] Levin, ed., p. 102.

[53] Ibid. p. 103.

[54] Rubin, p. 353.

[55] Levin, ed., p. 75.

ruhe platz" changes meter from a waltzing 3/4 to 2/4. This creates a diminution in the phrase, perhaps signifying the smallness of the singer's resting place. This phrase seems to sigh: the singer is resigned that "here" in the shop is where she will die.

The labor song "*Di Shvue*" ("The Oath") was used in the context of rallying for a cause. The words call to mind the earlier struggle of the French Revolution and the later fight for the founding of the State of Israel where people were willing to die for what they believed in. It created a sense of solidarity, hopefulness, and of impending victory. This is expressed through the rhythmic march-like 4/4 section which is rousing, inspirational, and set like a hymn. The rhythm stands out as the most important element of the song so as not to lose the words-- that is, to make clear the message of the text. The second section of this through composed piece, beginning on *himl* (heaven), is more melodic. The composer melody line goes up on the word *himl*, and down on the word *erd* (earth), illustrating the text with the music. *Di Shvue* is the anthem of the Jewish Labor Bund, and was sung by Jewish Workers and socialists both in Eastern Europe and America. The text was written by Sh. Ansky, author of the Dybbuk. This popular revolutionary song shows men and women as partners in the class struggle:

> Brothers and Sisters in toil and struggle
> Dispersed everywhere, swear an oath together before our flag,
> Waving in wrath, stained red with our blood.
> Heaven and earth will hear us,
> The stars will bear witness to our oath of blood, our oath of tears.[55]

[55] Mlotek, eds., Mir Trogn a Gesang , p. 98.

Women and the Unions

As trade unions were being formed, working women were becoming class conscious, and middle class reformers were pushing for legislative labor reform. Slowly, men in the trade unions began to realize that their economic advancement was inextricably bound with that of working women. In an attempt to rectify the handicap of women, who at the beginning of this century did not have the right to vote, women were accepted into unions. Labor songs began to reflect this unity. This song, sung in 1865 at a meeting of female sewing machine operators with their male "colleagues" in attendance, reflects this feeling of unity:

> Welcome sisters, to our number
> Welcome to our heart and hand:
> At our post we shall not slumber,
> Strong in union we shall stand.
>
> No angry passions here should mar
> Our peace, or move our social band,
> For friendship is our beacon star,
> Our motto, union hand in hand. [57]

The use of music was central in union meetings that were attended by thousands. Singing songs about a shared ideology was very powerful. At the turn of the century, most of the needle trade workers in the New York area were Jewish. Most of these women were members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (I.L.G.W.U). In 1909, over 20,000 shirtwaist workers waged a strike for three months against the intolerable conditions in the sweatshops. Most of these girls were Jewish immigrants. Before striking they raised their right hands and took a Jewish oath: "If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may my right hand wither." This quote is an oath taken from

[57]Evelyn Alloy, Working Women's Music: The Songs and struggles of Women in the Cotton Mills, Textile Plants, and the Needle Trades (Somerville, Mass:New England Free Press, 1976), p. 11.

Psalms.[58] The fact that the workers knew this oath, and could substitute "union" in the place of Jerusalem, demonstrates how the Jewish labor movement used resonant Jewish imagery in their vision of unionizing. It also demonstrates the conflating of the Old with the New: they used Jewish tradition to rally for a modern cause. The following is a song written after the Uprising of the Twenty Thousand in 1909 as a tribute, called "Hail the Waistmakers." This type of courage and pride displayed by the women shirtwaist strikers was noted by popular culture, and their fighting spirit was preserved in song:

> In the black winter of nineteen-nine
> When we froze and bled on the picket line,
> We showed the world that women could fight
> And we rose and won with women's might
>
> And we gave new courage to the men,
> Who carried on in nineteen-ten
> And shoulder to shoulder we'll win through,
> Led by the I.L.G.W.U.
>
> Hail the waistmakers of nineteen-nine,
> Making their stand on the picket line,
> Breaking the power of those who reign
> Pointing the way, smashing the chain.[59]

Just as the songs above were written for use during strikes, women too, sang while on strike:

> It is the first strike I ever saw which sang. I shall not forget the curious lift, the strange, sudden fire of the mingled nationalities at the strike meetings when they broke into the universal language of song. And not only at meetings did they sing, but in the soup houses and on the streets.[60]

[58] "If I forget thee O Jerusalem, may my right hand wither and my tongue forget its speech" Psalm137:5-6.

[59] I.L.G.W.U., Everybody Sings (New York: Department of Education, 1947), p.17.

[60] Alloy, p. 13.

Some of the songs that might have been heard are: "The Eight Hour Day," "The Banner of Labor," "The Internationale," and "Bread and Roses," as well as some of the labor anthems by Yiddish poets such as Edelstadt, Winchevsky, and Rosenfeld.

The International Ladies Garment Workers Union (I.L.G.W.U.) compiled a booklet of workers' songs to be used at meetings and when marching on the picket line, as did many other unions and social movements. Some of the songs received their titles based on what the women were striking for. To take one example, "Bread and Roses" was based on a speech of Rose Schneiderman who spoke on behalf of working women who want not only bread for sustenance, but also culture, and some of the finer things in life. Similarly, the song "Bread and Freedom" from the 1986 musical *Rags* about turn of the century immigrant life is about the power of immigrant workers and their certainty that the unions will bring them not only bread to eat, but the freedom to enjoy life and not be oppressed behind a sewing machine.

A song about the rebel spirit of the working woman, like those who waged a strike for what they believed in and who became an inspiration to their male counterparts, is "The Rebel Girl" by Joe Hill, written in 1915:

There are women of many descriptions
In this queer world, as everyone knows.
Some are living in beautiful mansions,
And are wearing the finest of clothes.
There are blueblooded queens and princesses
Who have charms made of diamonds and pearls:
But the only thoroughbred lady
Is the Rebel Girl.

That's the Rebel Girl
To the working class she's a precious pearl
She brings courage, pride and joy to the fighting Rebel Boy.

Yes, her hands may be darkened from labor,
And her dress may not be very fine;
But a heart in her bosom is beating,
Warm and true to her class and her kind.
And the grafters in terror are trembling
When her spite and defiance she'll hurl:
For the only and thoroughbred lady
Is the Rebel Girl.[61]

The best known song about women in the labor movement is Woodie Guthrie's "Union Maid", written in 1940 at a Union meeting in Oklahoma City. It quickly became one of the most popular union songs. It speaks of the union maid's ability to look adversity in the face and stand her ground. It is written in simple American folk song style and is in a major key.

There once was a union maid;
She never was afraid
Of goons and ginks and company finks
And the deputy sheriffs that made the raid.
She went to a union hall
When a meeting it was called,
And when the company boys came round
She always stood her ground.

The union maid was wise
To the tricks of the company spies;
She couldn't be fooled by company stools;
She'd always organize the guys.
She'd always get her way
When she struck for higher pay;
She'd show her card to the National Guard
And this is what she'd say:

Oh, you can't scare me , I'm sticking to the union,
Till the day I die.[62]

[61] Alloy, p.14.

[62] Edith Fowke, Songs of Work and Freedom (New York: Dover Press, 1973), pp.17-19.

American Union Songs

The most popular union song in North America is "Solidarity Forever". Written by Ralph Chaplin, the poet, writer, and organizer of the Industrial Workers of the World in 1915, it quickly became so popular that it is now thought of as the anthem of the American labor movement. It was commonly sung at rallies, protests and strike meetings, including those of heavily Jewish unions, such as the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and the I.L.G.W.U. It is sung to the melody of the old American song "The Battle Hymn of the Republic":

1. When the union's inspiration through the worker's blood shall run
   There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun.
   Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one?
   But the union makes us strong.

   Solidarity forever!
   Solidarity forever!
   Solidarity forever!
   For the union makes us strong.

2. They have taken untold millions that they never toiled to earn,
   But without our brain and muscle not a single wheel could turn.
   We can break their haughty power,
   gain our freedom, when we learn
   That the union makes us strong.

3. In our hands is placed a power greater than their hoarded gold,
   Greater than the might of armies magnified a thousand fold.
   We can bring to birth a New World from the ashes of the old,
   For the union makes us strong.[63]

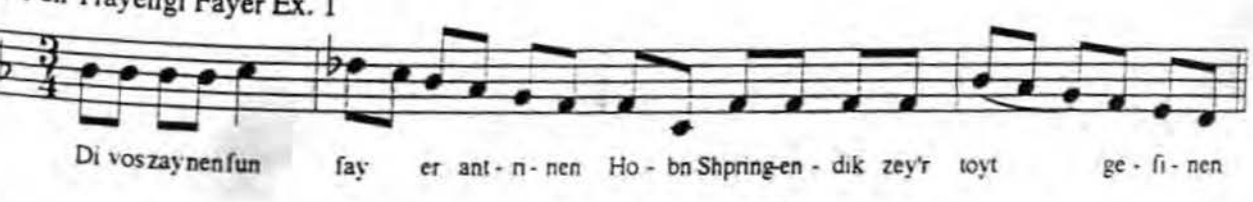
[63] Fowke, p. 13.

The Triangle Fire

Despite the strong union, and a rebel spirit among the workers, there were some tragedies. The Triangle Fire of March, 1911 was an event that impressed itself deeply on the working class, as well as the middle and upper classes. This event led to an outpouring of shock and outrage. Poets, journalists, playwrights and writers of folk song, added their sentiments on the deaths of 146 young women that could have been prevented had the union won their earlier fight. The fire in the Triangle Shirtwaist factory became a catalyst for further striking, gained the support of wealthy benefactors who wanted to help the plight of the factory worker, and ultimately helped the union cause.

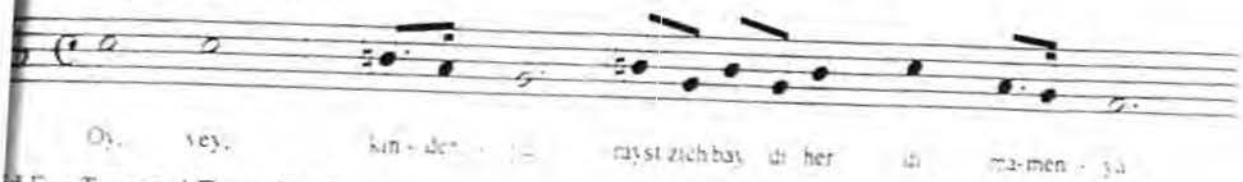
As mentioned in part one, the folk song *Lid fun Trayengl Fayer* describes the tragedy of the Triangle fire from the perspective of a bereaved mother who finds her daughter dead after the fire. This Yiddish folk song is in a minor mode, but hints at various Jewish modes used in traditional Jewish music, thus conveying an "ethnic" sound that has come to be identified as Jewish. The opening is like a melodic recitative, the phrase *"Di vos zaynen fun fayer antrinen"* hints at the *Adonai Malach* mode by using a lowered 7th. On the phrase *"Oy vey Kindenyu"* the key is C harmonic minor, but it dwells on it so much that *Ahavah Rabah* based on G is implied. The very last line, *"Mame, mame, vey iz mir"* is in Ukrainian dorian because of the raised fourth.

d Fun Trayengl Fayer Ex. 1



[64] Mlotek, eds, Pearls , pp. 251-253.

Fun Trayengl Fayer Ex. 2



Fun Trayengl Fayer Ex. 3

Another folk song on the subject of the Triangle fire, written by Ruth Rubin in the 1960s follows the model of the American ballad. Here there are no modal characteristics which identify this as a Jewish song. Each verse has the same tune and progressively tells the story. It is in minor, and one could say it has a sad or mournful quality to it which lends itself to the expression of the text:

In the heart of New York City, near Washington Square
In nineteen eleven, March winds were cold and bare;
A fire broke out in a building, ten stories high.
And a hundred and forty six young girls in those flames did die.

On the top floor of that building, ten stories in the air,
These young girls were working in a sweatshop there;
They were sewing shirtwaists at a very low wage,
So tired and pale and worn out they were at a tender age.

The sweatshop was a stuffy room with but a single door,
The windows they were gray with dust from off that dirty floor.
There were no comforts, no fresh air, no light to sew thereby.
And the girls they toiled from early morn, till darkness filled the sky.

Then on that fateful day, dear God, most terrible of days,
When that fire-trap broke out it grew into a mighty blaze.
In that fire-trap way up there with but a single door,
So many innocent working girls burned, to live no more!

A hundred thousand mourners, they followed those sad biers.
The streets were filled with people, weeping bitter tears.
Poets, writers everywhere, described the awful pyre,
When those young girls were trapped to die in the Triangle fire.[65]

[65] Levin, ed., p. 86.

Jewish Immigrants were able to define themselves both through Eastern European folksong and new American compositions. In Eastern Europe modal scales were in common usage and the Jewish music there was similar to the music of other ethnic groups around and among them. A non-Jewish group of Ukrainian or Russian *klezmers* played at Jewish celebrations, and Jewish street musicians traveled from region to region with their songs, passing on melodies to a multitude of towns and people. Upon coming to America, where music was based on Western scales and harmonies, Jewish immigrants wanted to preserve the "ethnic" character of their music from the homeland in the folk songs written in America. There was a great deal of nostalgia attached to the modal melodies, and they became representative both of the Old World-- a time gone by-- and a means of Jewish identification in a society where many cultures came together with the common goal of becoming American. Holding on to the Jewish component within the music allowed them to hold on to their Jewish identity as well.

Conclusion

The rise in social consciousness and the politicization of Jewish immigrant women from Eastern Europe was largely based on the skills they brought to America with them from Eastern Europe. Jewish women were familiar with urban and industrial work patterns before immigration to America and many had worked in the needle trades. So, they came to America as highly skilled workers in a field which was very much in demand and were able to find jobs in the garment factories.

In Eastern Europe the onset of the *Haskalah*, which resulted in the rise of Yiddish literature in the 1870s, promoted equality for women and men, and employed secular education for girls as well as boys. Western secular philosophy, socialism, Zionism, labor activism and trade unionism, the Bund, and Russian revolutionary ideas all were prolific at this time. There were thousands of Jewish workers, a significant number of whom were women who joined the Bund. After the Russian Revolution, many Bundists came to America, taking an active role in American trade unions. The cultural ideal for East European women was assertiveness and practicality. She was also accustomed to having a central economic role and making decisions. When Eastern European Jewish women came across unfair conditions in America, they felt entitled to the freedoms the so-called *goldene medine* offered but did not always grant. They used their political know how to protest for fair food and rent prices as in the Kosher Meat Strike of 1902, and the Rent Strike of 1904, or to protest unfair wages and working conditions as in the Shirtwaist Strike of 1909 and the many that followed during the period of the Great Revolt.

A large part of any union meeting or strike was song. The labor anthems written by Yiddish proletariat poets served to unify the Jewish workers through shared language, common political ideologies, and the fact that they could see themselves in the songs. They described a worker leading a life that consisted of working day and night, wasting away while "chained" to a machine. This was powerful imagery-- they realized that their fellow workers also felt oppressed, they were not alone. Even more powerful were images such as the text of *Di Shvue* : a flag waving in wrath, stained with workers blood, with God as a witness to the oath they are swearing to labor's cause. These revolutionary ideas were familiar to them from Eastern Europe and served to rally the workers with familiar political messages, unifying them to fight for worker's rights. Women workers sang these songs not only for rallying, but also for entertainment. They also used song in an attempt to recruit other shop workers to the unions. For instance, "Bread and Roses" is a song in English based on Rose Schneiderman's speech about the woman worker's need to enjoy life instead of working hand to mouth. It was translated into Italian and sung in the shops and during strikes in order to include Italian women in the movement, to build solidarity between the two ethnic groups, despite bosses efforts to pit the two against one another. Songs clearly were statements of the people; statements of sorrow and unfulfilled aspirations as well as of strength, unity and solidarity. Organized labor owes a great debt to the Jewish immigrant women whose social consciousness was raised with concern for the plight of the working class and whose sharp political skills rallied hundreds of thousands of women and men into unions in their fight for bread and freedom.

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