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Evaluation: Cantorial Senior Project Thesis **Spring 1995**

Student: Joel Colman **Advisor: Rabbi Carole B. Balin**

As his advisor, I can attest that Joel Colman has successfully completed his written work in partial fulfillment for the master's degree in the School of Sacred Music at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Joel initially conceived of studying the music and style of Sidor Belarsky, a performer of primarily Yiddish music, popular among a certain stratum of the American-Jewish population from the interwar period until his death in the 1970s. Had Joel continued in this vein, he would have produced and adequate, though pedestrian, study of Sidor Belarsky, which may have been titled "Sidor Belarsky -- The Man and His Music." While Joel did indeed piece together a thorough-going chronology of Belarsky's life (which appears in his paper as Appendix 1), in addition he endeavored to apply the tools of various disciplines (including chiefly ethnomusicology) to his study of Belarsky in order to determine the factors that accounted for the musician's great appeal. Joel's conclusions can be boiled down to a trio of factors: the evocative nature of the Yiddish language, Belarsky's choice of lyrics recalling hard times in the *alte heim* and other heart-tugging themes, and the relationship between the (immigrant or first/second-generation Jewish American) audience's yearning to maintain its ethnic identity and music that through it structure served to undergird that desire. Through oral interviews and secondary literature, Joel drew a portrait of Belarsky's life and musical contribution vis-a-vis the American Jewish community.

Joel is an earnest student, aware of his strengths as well as his weaknesses. I provided guidance in two primary areas: (1) assistance in conceptualizing the project as a whole and (2) help in writing style and syntax. My hope is that this project provided Joel with the satisfaction of delving deeply into an area of interest to him and with enhanced writing skills that will serve him in the future. Joel's conclusion includes a heartfelt statement about the place of vernacular music in the cantorate today.

WHY SIDOR BELARSKY WAS POPULAR AMONG AMERICAN JEWRY 1930-1975

JOEL COLMAN

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

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion
School of Sacred Music
New York, New York

March 27, 1995
Advisor: Rabbi Carole Balin

Introduction

I can easily recall when I first heard the name Sidor Belarsky. It was my voice teacher who initially suggested that I purchase Belarsky's recordings for two reasons: first, because of his high degree of musicality, and secondly because he was a bass-baritone as I am. Given the fact that I had studied very little Yiddish music up to that point, coupled with the fact that Belarsky had died in 1975, I was unfamiliar with him and his music.

Purchasing tapes of Belarsky was not difficult, if one knew where to look. I was directed to the Workman's Circle, which is an organization that promotes the use of the Yiddish language through classes, programs, and its bookstore. I was able to purchase recordings of Belarsky at the Workman's Circle. I listened to the tapes and was impressed by his singing, as well as his interpretation of the music and words. I began to wonder who was this man, and what was the trajectory of his career. When I approached several faculty members of the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, suggesting to them that perhaps a study of Sidor Belarsky would be an appropriate subject for my master's project, they agreed. Months later, the faculty accepted my proposal, entitled: Sidor Belarsky and his Contribution to Jewish and Secular Music.

The introduction to this paper is necessary because I want to explain how my initial approach to the study of Sidor Belarsky became altered. I was disappointed to find that recent publications listing famous Jews in music did

not include Belarsky. However, I was relieved and delighted to find a lengthy notation and accompanying photograph of Sidor Belarsky in a publication nearly fifty years old.[1] Nevertheless, I was concerned of the possibility that Belarsky was not as significant performer as I had been led to believe. Therefore, I began to concentrate on Sidor Belarsky on a much broader scale. Namely, I wanted to determine how Belarsky fit into the overall picture of Jewish life from 1930 until his death in 1975. Rather than depending on what had been written about Belarsky, which unfortunately is very meager, I would have to depend on research materials devoted to Yiddish culture in America and on interviews of people who knew Belarsky.

This study explores how Belarsky fit into Jewish America from the time of his arrival to the United States in 1930 until his death in 1975. Since Belarsky had a performance career that spans over four decades, his presence was felt by different generations, including first, second, and for a short time, third generation Jews in America. The purpose of this paper is to determine why Belarsky appealed to Jewish audiences. After providing an overview of Belarsky's life, with particular attention devoted to his movement from the world of secular music to that of Jewish music, I will describe three chief causes that led to Belarsky's popularity: his use of the Yiddish language, the texts that he sang, and the form of music that he sang. In conclusion, I will explore these

[1] American Jews, Their Lives and Achievements (New York: Golden Book Foundation of American, Inc.), 10.

three factors, discuss why Belarsky appealed to Jewish Americans, how Belarsky's's interpretations of the Yiddish folk song apply to the American Reform cantorate today, and how Belarsky (if he were still alive) would relate to third generation Jewish Americans.

Sidor Belarsky in Retrospect: A Biography

Sidor Belarsky (1898-1975) emigrated from Russia in the year 1930. He, therefore, belonged to the wave of Jewish immigration that has since been labeled the "Russian or East European" immigration of Jews to America.[2] Although there were Jews who arrived in America from various parts of the world, the overwhelming number of Jews who arrived to America at the turn of the century hailed specifically from Eastern Europe.[3] It is important to note that Belarsky's life in Europe was far different from the average East European's. Most Russian-Polish Jews had been:

> employed in trade, tavern keeping, brokerage, makeshift occupations, as rabbis and other religious functionaries, about twenty-five percent artisans, and the rest were servants and persons, beggars, and paupers.[4]

In contrast, Belarsky devoted himself to studying music and singing. His experience differed from those of most East European Jews, especially those who lived in the small towns of the Pale of Settlement, because Belarsky gravitated to the cities which offered gifted Jews like Belarsky opportunities for musical training. Belarsky, whose hometown of Kreshopel was not far from the Black Sea, found ample training ground for his talents in Odessa. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Odessa had a population of approximately

[2]Milton Doroshkin, Yiddish in America (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1969), 63.

[3]Jack Kugelmass, Between Two Worlds (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), 3.

[4]Doroshkin, 64.

two hundred thousand, and was considered a center of intellectual and cultural life.[5] It was this city with its rich cultural life that enabled Belarsky to learn how to sing with such skillful musicality.[6]

Belarsky's entrance into the world of Yiddish music was probably not his preference, for we know that the early years of his life in America were consumed by teaching and singing in operas. After his unusual arrival to the United States in January of 1930 -- sponsored as he was by Dr. Franklin Harris, president of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah -- Belarsky taught voice for three years at the University and then moved to Los Angeles. Once on the West Coast, he attempted to establish an opera company, which sang opera classics in English. In a letter to the President of Brigham Young University in 1934, Belarsky writes not a word about singing Jewish music but rather goes on at length about his opera company:

> The name of our company is the American Opera Company. We are going to give opera with American singers and for American audiences; and it is quite understood that all our presentations are going to be done in the English language. In our first performance, we had on the stage one-hundred-and-twenty people, a large symphony orchestra, special printed scenery, and most beautiful costumes. Now we are rehearsing and preparing for the coming season three more operas. Boris Goudonof will of course be repeated.[7]

[5]Arthur Hertzberg, The Jews in America (New York: Touchstone, 1989), 165.

[6] Mrs. Isabel Belarsky, interview by author, Tape recording, New York, New York, 17 November 1994.

[7]Sidor Belarsky, Letter to Dr. F.S. Harris, 23 June 1934, Collection of Isabel

It seems Belarsky was hoping to make opera his full-time career. And in fact, throughout his lifetime, he managed to sing operatic roles.

Belarsky's feelings toward opera are evident in both the contents and biographical statement published in his songbook. Though the songbook contains 202 Yiddish and Hebrew melodies, there is not a single reference to his many concerts performed in Israel, Palestine, and for Zionist organizations. Neither is mention made of the many Yiddish concerts he performed in New York and elsewhere. Rather the biographical section emphasizes his role in the world of non-Jewish music. It reads:

> Sidor Belarsky a graduate of the State Conservatory at Leningrad was formerly a leading basso of the Leningrad State Opera Company. Within an astonishingly short time he was hailed as one the leading artists of the day. In his song recitals from coast to coast and as soloist with such eminent conductors as Arturo Toscanini, Fritz Busch, Artur Rodzinski and others, his success has been overwhelming. Likewise in opera, Sidor Belarsky has been triumphantly received as leading basso of the Chicago Civic Opera Company, the San Francisco Opera Company, the American Opera Company of Los Angeles, the New York City Center Company, Teatro Municipal in Rio de Janeiro and the Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires ....[5]

Moreover, when Isabel Belarsky was given a reception at Brigham Young University in 1980, an article in the local newspaper was titled

Belarsky, New York.

[5]Sidor Belarsky Songbook (New York: Yiddish Books, 1988).

"Daughter of Opera Star To be Welcomed at 'Y'."[9] Despite the headline, however, the journalist reported that, "Belarsky was particularly well-known for his interpretation of Hebrew and Jewish songs, as well as Russian folk music. He died in 1975."[10] At the reception, there were two recordings played of Belarsky singing - - a Russian song and an operatic piece, not a word of Yiddish was heard.

Belarsky's turned toward singing Yiddish music sometime in 1934. In an interview with Isabel Belarsky,[11] she described how Belarsky came to this decision. In 1934, her father sang at a Jewish function with the noted Zionist leader, essayist, and editor[12] Hayim Greenberg in the audience. Taking notice of Belarsky's apparent skill in singing in Yiddish, Greenberg connected Belarsky with several Zionist organizations, which would appreciate having Yiddish music sung. This became a turning point in Belarsky's career. His connection to Labor Zionist organizations was, in fact, a primary reason for Belarsky moving to New York in 1936. In order to support his family, Belarsky sang in concerts in New York and performed as well as a cantor in Philadelphia,

[9]"Daugher of Opera Star To be Welcomed at Y", Provo Daily Herald, 2 September 1980.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Isabel Belarsky, interview by author, Tape recording, New York, New York, 17 November 1994.

[12]Encyclopedia Judaica, (1971), s.v. "Greenberg, Hayim."

Atlantic City, and New York during the High Holidays. Eventually Belarsky's High Holiday singing would even take him overseas to South America and South Africa.

One can only speculate why Greenberg was so enraptured with Belarsky, and why they became such good friends.[13] Although Greenberg was ten years Belarsky's senior, the two had much in common. Both had lived in Odessa and were university trained. The two had even lived in Berlin in the same year of 1921. More importantly, each had a love for the Yiddish language. The Jewish music world owes a debt to Greenberg for initiating Belarsky's long association with Jewish organizations.

The Jewish music world is, of course, fortunate that Belarsky's operatic aspirations did not come to fruition. With his entry into the world of Jewish labor organizations, Belarsky embarked on a long career, establishing himself as one of the foremost interpreters of Yiddish folk music. The question emerges how did Belarsky manage to achieve this, and what was his appeal to Jewish American audiences?

I submit that three elements account for Belarsky's popularity: his ability to sing Yiddish, his selection of texts, and the music that he sang. Therefore, this paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, I

[13]Mrs. Isabel Belarsky, interview by author, Tape recording, New York, New York, 17 November 1994.

will discuss the importance of Yiddish to Jewish Americans. The second section is devoted to the texts of the songs that Belarsky sang. And the third section is a study of the music that Belarsky sang, and how Jewish American audiences related to those melodies.

Belarsky's Contribution I:
The Significance of the Yiddish Language
to American-Jewish Audiences

Although Belarsky performed in many concerts and operas throughout his career to the American public in general, it was his connection to American Jewry in particular that was central to his career. The majority of his records are of a Jewish nature[14], that is either Yiddish or Hebrew music, and his popularity was rooted in singing such music to Jewish audiences throughout the United States and abroad. It is important then to ask: what kind of Yiddish music did Belarsky sing? Belarsky did not sing the Yiddish theater music that was so popular with Jewish audiences in New York. For one thing, Belarsky's daughter claims that her father was not comfortable singing this genre of Jewish music, though he was no doubt capable of singing the music written for the Yiddish theater.[15] Moreover, by the time Belarsky was establishing himself as a performer in America, from the mid-1930's, the heyday of Yiddish theaters had passed. Theaters on Second Avenue in New York shrunk from approximately twenty (at its height) to no more than four or

[14] Jeffrey M. Cohen, Bibliography & Discography of Music by Sidor Belarsky, unpublished course paper, 1988, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York.

[15] Mrs. Isabel Belarsky, interview by author, Tape recording, New York, New York, 17 November 1994.

five in 1940.[16] Rather, Belarsky was best known for singing Yiddish folk songs with simplicity and pathos. His former students such as Loretta Di Franco and Kenny Karen remember this facet of Belarsky's performances, and continue to draw on coaching tips taught over thirty years ago when performing the very songs their teacher used to sing.[17]

Every artist needs an audience, and in Belarsky's case, he needed an audience that could understand what he was singing. Belarsky found such an audience in America. By the time Belarsky arrived to the United States in January, 1930, Jewish immigrants had in fact swelled the overall Jewish population in America to three and a half million.[18] The enormous influx of Jews to America became the basis for Belarsky's audiences. While many of these Jews had brought with them to America only the possessions that could be carried on their backs, they did have their culture, including their expressive language. Despite its different dialects and regional differences, the Yiddish language bonded these immigrants together. And eventually the different dialects would be blended together, and a new Yiddish dialect would be formed,

[16]Hertzberg, 280.

[17]Kenny Karen, interview by author, Tape recording, New York, New York, 24 October 1994.
Loretta Di Franco, interview by author, Tape recording, New York, New York, 3 November 1994.

[18]There were nearly seven million Yiddish speakers worldwide, which was forty percent of all Jews. Doroshkin, 67.

known as "American" Yiddish.[19]

The Yiddish language served many different purposes. On the simplest level, it was used by Jews as a means of communication, whether to speak to each other or for "just getting around" heavily Jewishly-populated areas. Yiddish also was a way for Jews to identify as Jews, both personally and intellectually - almost like a language badge of honor.[20] For new immigrants with few material possessions, but a strong sense of ethnicity, speaking Yiddish reinforced that identity and even, for some their self-esteem. Once established in America, continuing to speak Yiddish was a sign of taking pride in one's ancestry and in the Jewish community, both past and present. Additionally, the Yiddish language was a tool of unity for those American Jews who shared similar social problems.[21]

Since Belarsky sang songs in Yiddish, Jewish audiences could easily identify with the music and words, (see pages 19 - 28 for a discussion of the lyrics). Moreover, because Belarsky was a highly skilled musician and knew Yiddish (Russian was his mother tongue), he was able to interpret these songs with artistry that touched Jewish

[19] Ibid., 75.

[20] Joshua A. Fishman, Yiddish in America: Socio-Linguistic Description and Analysis (Indiana: Indian University, 1965), 49.

[21] Doroshkin, 173.

audiences. To take but one example, Cantor Samuel Rosenbaum states:

> More than any other, Sidor Belarsky was the singer who taught American Jews to understand and to treasure the unique *Yiddishkeit* of the songs of the Jews of Eastern Europe. But he was more than a singer, more than a consummate musician, and even more than an inspired poet of song. He was a pathfinder and teacher who exposed to the deepest sinews of the Jewish experience in Europe and later in Israel.[22]

Molly Freedman, whose husband has amassed a collection of over 1,500 Yiddish recordings, including those of Sidor Belarsky, recalls, "He was the singer of the period--my father used to play his stuff every Sunday. In the Italian houses they played Caruso, in my house they played Sidor Belarsky."[23] In Molly's childhood home, Belarsky was seen as the musical representative of the Jews. Joseph Mlotek, a representative of the Workman's Circle, adds his voice to those who praise Belarsky: "Belarsky was the beloved voice of our people, whose song will live on in our memory."[24] Chana Mlotek, the music archivist for YIVO, the premier institute for Yiddish research in the United States, agrees: "Sidor Belarsky was a musical phenomenon unto himself: the foremost artist in the presentation of Yiddish folk and art songs on the concert stage and on disc."[24] These quotes are especially significant, since both Chana and Joseph

[22] Jeffrey M. Cohen, Bibliography & Discography of Music by Sidor Belarsky, 1988, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York.

[23] Andrew Cassell, "When Bob Freedman Began Collecting Ancient Yiddish songs, He Accomplished More Than He Bargained For," Philadelphia Inquirer, 20 December 1992, p.11

[24] Jeffrey M. Cohen, Bibliography & Discography of Music by Sidor Belarsky, 1988, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York.

Mlotek are considered experts in the field of Yiddish studies.

Yiddish was also used by immigrants who formed organizations to help acculturate themselves to American society. The organizations not only supported these new immigrants as they made their way in America, but they also allowed them to maintain their strong association with Jewish culture. As the historian Milton Doroshkin claims:

> Sociologically, there was a developed, organized community of Jews in the United States during the period of East European immigration (1880-1924), represented by cultural institutions that reflected the needs of the people, and with which the individual Jew identified and affiliated. ...Thus we see the national fraternal orders, the labor orders, and the various *landmanshaften* (religious, mutual aid, social, familial, ladies, etc.), tied together broadly as a social category by virtue of the fact that in one form or another they developed on the American scene as a response to the need of the Jewish immigrants for a bridge from the old world to the new.[25]

As well, the historians Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz explain, "The East European immigrants also brought with them socialism, and various secular Jewish ideologies, for example, Zionism and Yiddishism, which they sought to implant in America."[26] Thus we see that the very organizations, that attempted to help their members move into American society, sought simultaneously to retain their members' Jewish identity. One of these ways was through Yiddish.

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[25]Doroshkin, 23 and 169.

[26]Paul R. Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds. The Jew in the Modern World (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 355.

On account of Belarsky's skill in singing in Yiddish, a mutually-satisfying relationship soon developed between Belarsky and these organizations. When Belarsky arrived to America, these organizations were functioning at a high level. And they quickly became the staple for Belarsky's career as a Yiddish performer. In fact, members of the Histadrut (an agency that fostered relationships with the labor movement in Israel) expected Belarsky to perform at their annual conferences. According to the past president of the Histadrut Foundation, Sol Stein, one could not even consider holding a musical event without the singing of Belarsky.[27]

Belarsky's popularity among Yiddish-speaking Jews did not wane over time. In fact, as the Yiddish language (during the second half of the twentieth century) diminished in importance, those Jews who had been raised on the "mother tongue" clung more tenaciously to it. They wanted to be recognized as a group that continued to retain its roots. And that was done through the Yiddish language. Belarsky's presence was thus an effective means of maintaining their heritage, for he sang Yiddish songs that reminded them of the "Old Country." As the historian Irving Howe so eloquently put it: "Yiddish had served as a kind of secret sign, a gleeful or desperate wave to the folks back home by a performer who liked it to be known that he was still a Jewish boy."[28]

[27]Dr. Sol Stein, interview by author, Tape recording, New York, New York, 24 October 1994.

[28]Irving Howe, World Of Our Fathers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 569.

Howe goes on to explain how local politicians of the time deliberately peppered their speeches with Yiddish to win over Jews. Belarsky, however, did not need to do the same. Being secure in his knowledge of music and the Yiddish language, he naturally brought Jews toward him. He sang to a fluent audience, who understood every nuance of the language as it was articulated through the music.

Despite his connection to the "Old World," Belarsky was not one to remain solely in the past. He was constantly studying music.[29] In the early 1950's, for instance, he recorded Songs of the Holocaust, for he wanted to represent musically the grief of that horrific event. So when Belarsky sang, he could evoke both sadness and joy from an audience by singing Yiddish folk songs, Hasidic songs, or Holocaust songs. As Chana Mlotek suggests, "Much scholarship and aesthetic taste were contained in his compilations of songs devoted to specific themes, notably the songs of the Holocaust, songs of Soviet-Jewish poets, the immigrant experience, Hasidim, holidays ...."[30] Cantor Samuel Rosenbaum echoes:

> The songs of Israel, and the songs of the Jews of the Soviet Union (who can forget his early recordings of "*Veulai*" and "*Kakha*," or his album of songs of the Jewish Russian underground?), all of these responded to his special genius. But to me he will always

[29]Mrs. Isabel Belarsky, interview by author, Tape recording, New York, New York, 17 November 1994.

[30]Jeffrey M. Cohen, Bibliography & Discography of Music by Sidor Belarsky, 1988, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York.

> remain the spirit and the substance of those little towns who were caught in the web of love and artistry of Sholom Aleichem and Peretz and Gebirtig and Manger.[31]

I contend that Belarsky's popularity with the people stemmed not only from his knowledge of the Yiddish song, but also from the fact that he succeeded as a musician in the non-Jewish world. Jews in America, I believe, took delight in a fellow Jew fitting into the secular world, as well as the Jewish one. It was a source of pride to his fans to hear Belarsky sing opera at the New York City Opera and on the radio.[32]

It is important to add that many who remember hearing Sidor Belarsky sing, did not belong to the first waves of immigrants from Russia at the beginning of century.[33] Indeed, numbers of Belarsky's fans belong to the second and third generation of American Jews, who grew up hearing Yiddish being spoken by parents and grandparents. They, too, have an emotional bond with Yiddish, but do not identify with the Yiddish folk song in quite the same way as their parents or grandparents. For some of these people, Yiddish is not their mother tongue. Yet as the linguist Joshua Fishman explains, although their "...Yiddish is quite limited their comprehension level is still substantial."[34]

[31] Ibid.

[32] Mrs. Isabel Belarsky, interview by author, Tape recording, New York, New York, 17 November 1994.

[33] Doroshkin, 174.

[34] Fishman, 49.

Moreover, many wished to sustain their East European heritage through song and language. The historian Jack Kugelmass, describing the current upsurge of interest in Yiddish language and culture claims: "For others, the East European Jewish past has reemerged as the bulwark against assimilation as evidenced by the recent revival of klezmer music and current attitudes towards Yiddish."[35]

Belarsky's language skill certainly helped him when he sang to Jewish American audiences. His Yiddish skills enabled him to engage the audience, not only through song, but when he would speak to the audience.[36] However, there are many types of songs that can be sung in Yiddish. Belarsky carefully chose the songs he sang to Jewish Americans. He knew what they wanted to hear. In the next section, I will present the lyrics of eight of Belarsky's songs in an attempt to understand the connection between the words and Belarsky's audience.

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[35]Kugelmass, 11.

[36]Edward R. Fogel, interview by author, Tape recording, New York, New York, 7 November 1994.

Belarsky's Contribution II:
What the Songs Actually Said to
American - Jewish Audiences

Although Belarsky was capable of singing more sophisticated music, as both his musical training in Russia and his ability to sing challenging operatic roles prove, he was popular among Jewish audiences primarily as a result of his eloquent presentation of the Yiddish folk song. During a career that spanned over forty-five years, Belarsky compiled over three hundred fifty recordings, the majority of which is in Yiddish.[37] Belarsky's daughter Isabel has been actively preserving many of Belarsky's Yiddish, Hebrew and Hasidic recordings, and has had these recordings transferred to cassette and CD formats. Additionally, two songbooks are available even today in bookstores: Sidor Belarsky Songbook (published by Yiddish Books of Queens College, Flushing, NY) and My Favorite Songs (arranged by Sidor Belarsky, published by Tara Publications, Cedarhurst, NY). I drew the bulk of the materials for my recital from these two songbooks. Thus my recital is entitled, The Music Sidor Belarsky Loved To Sing. This section of my paper is devoted to a study of Belarsky's musical selections. I intend to explore and explain why the lyrics of his most popular songs captured the hearts of generations of American Jews. After presenting some background on Yiddish folk song, I will interpret the lyrics

[37] Jeffrey M. Cohen, Bibliography & Discography of Music by Sidor Belarsky, 1988, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York.

of eight Belarsky songs.

According to the Yiddishist Eleanor Gordon Mlotek, Yiddish folks songs have a history tracing back three centuries:

> It is to be remembered that some Yiddish folks songs which folklorists have traced to the sixtieth century in Germany were collected on Slavic territory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; before that they were never set down in writing, except for single, rare instances.[38]

As she suggests, Yiddish folk songs, like most folk songs, have a primarily oral history.

What are the lyrics of the songs Belarsky sang? By analyzing eight of these songs, I tried to look for common themes, such as relationships with people, parents, locations, and countries. The themes that I will highlight are the East European experience prior to 1940, Israel, Russia, and the Holocaust. The eight songs are *"Der Kremer"* (The Grocer), *"Dem Milner's Trern"* (The Miller's Tears), *"Dem Zeidn's Broche"* (Grandfather's Blessing), *"Yerushalayim," "Olim"* (book translation - Song of the Advancing Brave) *"Reizele,"* and *"Moyshelech, Sholoimelech,"* and *"Ergetz Vait."* (In the Distant Land). These songs are excerpted from My Favorite Songs, with the exception of ***"Moyshelach Shloimelach"*** (Sidor Belarsky's Songbook), and *"Ergetz Vait"*

[38]Eleanor Gordon Mlotek, Traces of Ballad Motifs in Yiddish Folk Song, The Field of Yiddish, Studies in Language, Folklore and Literature, Second Collection (The Hague: Mouton & CO., 1965), 232.

(Transcontinental Music Corporation).

One theme prevalent throughout many of these Yiddish folk songs is the living conditions in Eastern Europe during the late 1800's. Though it is easy and simplistic to sum up the Jewish experience in Eastern European by conjuring up the famous musical Fiddler on the Roof, one cannot help but do just that when reading the lyrics to these songs. The general motif found in these folk songs is that of the Jew living in poor economic conditions in a *shetl*.

Although the terrible pogroms of 1881-1882 were a significant factor in the emigration of 2,750,000 Jews from Eastern Europe,[39] severe economic conditions had a major influence on the Jewish exodus from Eastern Europe as well.[40] As the historian Robert Seltzer indicates, "After 1880 a new Jewish leadership emerged to deal with the special problems of the Jewish people, including the poverty of most East European Jews ...."[41]

The first song to be analyzed is *"Der Kremer"* (The Grocer), written by A. Liesin. It is about a poor grocer, who is waiting for customers on a rainy day. It begins: "There is a poor modest grocer, among hundred more on the street, he sits and he waits for a customer, it is dark and the rain is like sleet." As he sits, he thinks about how much better things would be if there was Jewish State: "...

[39]Robert M. Seltzer, Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Expereince in History (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1980), 643.

[40]Ibid.

[41]Ibid, 634.

while his fantasy is wondrous and sweet, a government run by our people, a Jewish one, you understand ...." While he dreams about a Jewish state, a short man comes in and asks to purchase a very tiny portion of fish, which immediately ends the grocer's dream and brings him back to reality. The lyrics continue: "All of a sudden a customer, as big as a peanut comes in, he asks for a cent's worth of herring, and knocks every dream out of him." Typical of many of these songs are the visual pictures one can derive from the words. The words paint a vivid picture of the poor merchant on the streets of *shetl*. His imagination provides the listener with a sense of the onerous burden carried by the Jewish people living under Tsarist rule.

The second song is *"Dem Milner's Trern"* (The Miller's Tears), with words and melody by Warshavsky. As in *"Der Kremer,"* this song describes a working Jew -- an old man thinking about a bygone time when he was a miller, wondering if he had any joy in his life: "While passing by me, the years did try me, I was a miller long ago." He also remembers those who wanted to drive him away from his town and work, and laments how the years pass "without an end and without a goal." This song depicts not only the pogroms that occurred ("The rumors try me, they want to drive me from out the village and the mill ..."), but, like the previous song, indicates the poor financial conditions of Russian Jews: "The days, he sings will never come back as ever, when I could claim a little luck."

The third song, *"Dem Zeidn's Broche's"* (Grandfather's Blessing), written by Warshavsky, also dwells on the theme of poverty. It tells of a man recalling the night before Kol Nidre when, before the last meal was eaten, his grandfather would bless him and ask him to go to shul with him. He pleaded with him, saying: "When the feast before Kol Nidre came to end, my grandfather blessed me ... "Come, my child, to shul with me, God will be most merciful toward you ...." Now, however, the grandson bemoans the fact that he ever joined his grandfather for prayers, for his deed was not rewarded. His years have been filled with suffering and misfortunes, "You meant well, Grandfather dearest, but your prayers for me were no blessing ... but those years were filled with sorrows, everyday brings new misfortunes, but I don't know why or wherefore." We hear that even a young man with initial hopes for meeting with financial success in Eastern Europe, even with the blessings of his grandfather, still grows up with difficulty and sadness. The songs explain why so many young men would venture from their homeland alone to American, bringing the rest of the family only once some money had been earned. There was little hope for a future of financial stability in Eastern Europe.

The fourth song in addition to portraying life in the *shetl*, discusses relationships. ***"Reizele"*** is one of Belarsky's signature songs, with words by M. Gebirtig. Though this song does not speak directly of the poverty in the *shetl*, the listener can imagine that love appears to overwhelm any concern for

poverty. This song speaks of a young man who is thinking about his love, *Reizele*: " ...I love you so much *Reizele*, I love your mama, I love the streets, I love the old house, I love the old house, I love the stones next to the house, because you walk on them ..." This song differs from the previous two songs in that instead of singing about poor old men, we now hear about the overwhelming feeling of love that this young man has for his *Reizele*.

These four songs describe a time when Jews lived in *shetls* and for the most part in poverty. And for many first generation American Jews, these scenes would not have been difficult to conjure up. For second generation Jews in America, these songs might have been attractive because they can imagine immediate relatives living in such circumstances (such as a parent or grandparent). The songs Belarsky sang touched the hearts of many people.

All these songs speak of harsh times in Eastern Europe. But many of the Jews once in America continued to have financial difficulties:

> Almost two thirds of the new immigrants settled down in the big cities of the Northeast, especially in crowded downtown neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side of New York City. There they found employment in manual labor of various kinds. Over half entered the ready-made clothing industry in which entrepreneurs, contractors, tailors, and seamstresses were mainly Jews. Wages were low, hours long, and working conditions poor in the small, unventilated, and dirty sweatshops.[42]

It would seem that, to some degree, Belarsky was consoling his listeners by reminding them of a time when life was even more difficult. And as arduous as

[42]Seltzer, 644.

life was in America, there was hope that eventually the quality of life would improve (and, in fact, for most, it did). It is important to add that Belarsky did not sing to the Jewish Americans when they were new to the country. Belarsky generally sang to Jewish Americans who had already established themselves in the United States, as we know Belarsky himself did not sing to Jewish American audiences until the 1930's. Also given the year in which Belarsky's book of Favorite Songs was published (1951), singing about toilsome times in mother Russia may have been easier considering the mood of Jewish Americans in the early 1950's. As the sociologist Marshall Sklare observes:

> Until very recently it seemed that American Jewry was optimistic about its future. Older Jews recall the celebration of the American-Jewish Tercentenary in 1954, honoring the 300th anniversary of the arrival in New Amsterdam of a small band of Jewish refugees from Brazil, as a bright and joyous occasion. The reason for the festivities are easy to locate: Nazism had been destroyed, the State of Israel had been established, and the enemies of Israel did not seem to pose any immediate threat to its survival. And while the main outlines of the tragedy of the Holocaust were known, American Jewry's illusions had not yet been shattered by the revelations about the Roosevelt Administration's lack of resolve to rescue Jews (first from persecution and later from annihilation).[45]

Another common theme in these songs is the desire to go to Palestine. This was a popular topic in the East European Jewish press in the 1880's. As one historian puts it:

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[45]Marshall Sklare, Observing America's Jews (New England: University Press of New England, 1993), 262-263.

> When East European Jewish emigration increased many fold, the Jewish press debated whether it should be directed to America or to Palestine. Most of the emigrants opted for the United States, but the idea of re-establishing the land of Israel as the center of Jewish life took hold among many *maskilim* and Russified Jews.[44]

Zionist ideology played a central role in Belarsky's life. He visited Israel eight times, including a concert the very evening Israel was declared a State,[45] and he himself was an important part of the Histadrut Israel Foundation for many years.

In the song *"Yerushalayim,"* with words by A. Hameiri, the Zionist theme is unmistakable: "From generation to generation we dreamed and hoped to be a nation." As well, the theme of the importance of Jerusalem to the Jewish people is cited many times, " ... Jerusalem, Jerusalem, rebuilt by our strength and our joy, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Oh city that none can destroy ...Oh holy city great is your praise! Jerusalem, Jerusalem, I never shall wander from here, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, The Messiah will surely appear."

In "Olim" (as translated in the songbook: Song of the Advancing Brave), with words by I.Shenberg, the theme of going to Israel has even a stronger Zionist message then *"Yerushalayim:"* "To the land my fathers knew, my brother are all coming, and they hear a secret humming: Only this land will do." Though Belarsky did not make *aliyah* to Israel, he still sings about the importance of

[44]Seltzer, 635-636.

[45]Mrs. Isabel Belarsky, interview by author, Tape recording, New York, New York. 17 November 1994.

going to Israel. But given his strong relationships with labor Zionist organizations, it is no wonder that his repertoire included a number of songs with a powerful Zionist theme.

Belarsky's musical selections even take us to the barren and cold land of Siberia, about which he sings in *"Ergetz Vait"* (In the Distant Land), with words by H. Leivik, and music by Lazar Weiner. The story is about a man, a prisoner by himself: "Somewhere far away, lies the land forbidden ... somewhere lies alone a prisoner ... one can't find any way to this forbidden land." It is important to mention that this song is not a simple folk song, for Weiner's music plays on the lyrics with dissonance created by the music, giving the listener a sense of emptiness. It is songs like these, that give Belarsky an opportunity to paint vivid pictures for his audience.

The last song to be analyzed, *"Moyshelach, Shloimelach,"* words by J. Papernikoff and music by Israel Alter, tells of the affect that the Holocaust had on a town in Poland. Belarsky sang about how "under the Polish green trees, little Moses and little Solomon do not play anymore, no little Sarahs and little Leahs, not on the grass and not on the snow." And now this Polish town has no Jewish homes or streets, "Dead are the Jewish homes, dead are the streets, and destroyed are the homes," where children, "sticking out like little mice with their big dark eyes" used to play. Isabel Belarsky mentioned on several occasions how people would react when Belarsky would sing this song. She

told me of people sobbing, and even of someone fainting (in fact, my recital coach became very emotional just translating the text into English).

Belarsky knew that these songs would be meaningful for his audience. Singing in Yiddish was not just a symbolic gesture for Belarsky, for he knew that his audiences could understand the stories he was telling. Belarsky's songs were significant not only to first generation Jewish Americans, but also to those who had been born and raised in this country during the first half of the twentieth century. Many were raised in an area which was primarily Jewish, and where Yiddish was spoken in the home. So for many second generation Jews, there was a strong emotional attachment to the songs that Belarsky sang.

Sidor Belarsky sang many types of songs, including Yiddish folk songs, Hasidic melodies, and art songs. He was ever careful to sing these songs which meant something special to Jewish Americans. Whether to conjure up images of the "Old Country" or to evoke the desire for a return to Zion, Belarsky was aware of the texts that he sang and how they affected his audiences. We know this because Yiddish songs were included in Belarsky's programs year after year. Belarsky's use of Yiddish and the texts of the song made for a powerful combination that usually evoked a strong emotional reaction from the audience. However, there is still another element of Belarsky's popularity among American Jews, and that is the melody itself, which signaled to the audience that this is **Jewish** music.

Belarsky's Contribution III:

The Significance of Folk Music to American-Jewish Audiences

In this section, I will first analyze how folk music in general offers ethnic groups a rallying point for their ethnicity. I will present two unusual examples of the importance of music and its relationship to ethnic identity. I will also discuss how music can be one specific avenue through which ethnic groups maintain a part of their heritage, especially when that ethnic group is no longer in the country of its origin. I will then examine how East European Jews in particular identified through Belarsky's music with their Jewish ethnicity.

Music is defined as "The art of organizing sound so as to elicit an aesthetic response in a listener."[46] This aesthetic response obviously changes according to the kind of audience listening. According to the folklorist Ruth Rubin, music is one facet of any ethnic group, as she explains, "along with ethnic food, clothing, and folkways, song are some of the great unifiers of an ethnic group."[47] She summarizes this point in her prologue:

> Contrary to the type of Yiddish songs of the earlier archaic epoch, these folk songs were almost completely anonymous. They reflected the light and shadow of many generations of Jewish life in the European communities, a life which included both the old and the new - the old patterns to which the people had clung for

[46] The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, ed. Peter Davies (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1973).

[47] Ruth Rubin, Voices of a People (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), 30

> generations and even centuries and the new forms emerging under the influences and pressures of the surrounding Slavic culture and history.[48]

Folk songs also augmented the addition of telling stories of what was happening in a society at that time. As the musicologist A.Z. Idelsohn explains:

> In this song we again find the spirit of the Jewish people, of the masses, expressing itself. In the Eastern folk-song the life of the PEOPLE as a whole is reflected, but nonetheless are the sentiments of the individual voiced. Moreover, the Jewish woman, as a living girl, as a married woman, and as a mother, found in it a channel for the outpouring of her heart.[49]

Folk songs thus provide us with the historical background of an ethnic group along with words and language. Yet the melody itself is equally important for building ethnic identity.

The first example of the relationship between ethnic identity and music is drawn from television. On a recent episode of the popular science fiction television program, Star Trek The Next Generation, there was a two-part episode entitled, Birthright Parts 1 and 2. The story centered around an alien race (called Klingons) who were being held captive for over a generation. When the Klingons were discovered by another Klingon (called Worf who appears regularly on the program), a

[48]Ibid.

[49]A.Z. Idelsohn, Jewish Music in its Historical Development (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 391.

central scene took place where Worf began to sing a Klingon song to his long lost people, this stirred the memories of the elderly and inspired the young. The writers of the program had chosen music as a means for recalling ethniticity.

An additional way in which modern day ethnic groups are tuning into their heritage is through an older medium of communication, namely, the radio. In the same way Jews (and everyone else) listened to the radio during the 1930's and 1940's, today there are radio stations that cater to the different ethnic groups of people living in New York. One such radio station is WRTN (93.5), a station located in metro-New York. It broadcasts music of India, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Ukraine, Mexico, and China. The station recently changed its format to accommodate the different groups of people that live in the area. The comments from two DJ's, as quoted in a local newspaper, explain why they feel it is important to play ethnic music, exemplifying the importance of song for an ethnic group:

> "The show's very important, part of their heritage ...ethnic music shows are increasingly important as more immigrants settle in New York... a great many immigrants just want to keep in touch with home."[50]

The title of the article alone, indicates what music from a different part of the

[50]Ray Weiss, "Ethnic Harmony," Gannett Suburban Newspapers, 10 February 1995, sec C, p. 1.

world can mean to a group of people who are no longer in the land of their origin: "Ethnic Harmony - On alternative radio stations, it's not the same old song."

Ethnic groups, such as transported East European Jews in America, are also affected by the need to hear music that they can identify as there own. Whereas it is one thing for an ethnic group to express itself in its own environment, ethnic expressions takes on a different dimension when transported somewhere else. For the East European Jews recently arrived to America, "Music was a cultural adhesive, covering over the cracks in an immigrant society and hardening its edges. Above all, it helped frame a space that was purely for the in-group, and hence comfortable, in an alien world."[51] New immigrants heard Jewish music with new ears, because they were now exposed to a new language (English), new stories (life in America), and very different types of music (Broadway music, jazz, etc.).

Sociologists tell us that music was an important part of East European life as well. One must remember that life in the *shetl* did not have modern day distractions such as television and video. In the *shetl*, people visiting would bring songs to share at the dinner table.[52] Life was simpler, and therefore singing with friends and family at home not an unusual event. The sociologist Mark Slobin claims, "Song was an important part of East European Jewish folk

[51]Slobin 6.

[52]Mark Slobin, Tenement Songs (Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 2.

culture, even in the small communities we call the *shetl*."[53]

There can be no doubt of the importance of music as a way an ethnic group defines itself, either in a society where the ethnic group originated; (such as the folk music in Eastern Europe) or in a transplanted locale (such as America). Ethnic expression grows in importance once a group leaves its original habitat.

Jewish Americans who desired to hear music identified as their own could listen to Belarsky's recordings or concerts. Certainly Belarsky's music was something that the East European Jew could understand. When Belarsky performed before a Jewish audience, he did so with an expectation that he would evoke a particular response when singing about trying times in the *shetl*. Whether he was singing in Hebrew or Yiddish, Belarsky typically sang music that represented what people recognized as Jewish music:

> The bibliography section lists the keys in addition to the titles, authors, composers an arrangers. Several are followed by, "(AR)." This is a designation for a Jewish musical mode known as "Ahava Rabba," which has a strong flavor of Eastern Europe, characteristically utilizing lowered 2nd and 7th, and raised 3rd scale degree...[54]

Many songs in the Ahava Rabba mode are evident not only in Yiddish music but also in cantorial music, both of which Belarsky ably sang with knowledge

[53]Slobin, 2.

[54]Jeffrey M. Cohen Bibliography & Discography of Music by Sidor Bealrsky, 1988, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York.

and authority.

The musical strengths that Belarsky demonstrated for many years as a performer all combined to enhance his reputation as an artist. In addition to this was Belarsky's skill as a charismatic performer. It was his presence alone that would attract nearly a thousand people to a Saturday-night concert at a Histadrut Foundation event in Miami, Florida.[55] Interestingly, at these meetings which would attract hundreds of delegates from around the world, a musical event was considered a natural part of the activities being offered. That is, while the central reason for this meeting was not musical, but political, the members of Histradrut used music as a means for representing themselves as an ethnic group. In the 1960's and till his death, Belarsky was the featured performer at the functions of the Histadrut Foundation.[56] Thus we might ask: what is it about the nature of music that motivated a Jewish labor organization, a politically-oriented group, to maintain Yiddish folk music as a central feature of its annual meeting year after year? To answer this question, it is essential to understand the importance of song for building ethnic group identity, particularly in the case of Jews of East European descent.

Belarsky's musical artistry displayed and related many Jewish stories (through the Yiddish folk song) from Eastern Europe. In addition, the lyrics of

[55]Dr. Sol Stein, interview by author, Tape Recording, New York, New York, 24 October 1994.

[56]Ibid.

Belarsky's Yiddish folk songs related much about life there. American Jews wanted to assimilate into the American landscape, but they did not wholly reject certain ethnic expressions, such as music. Yiddish folk song gave Belarsky the opportunity to transport musically people back to a time that reflected many different events, including sad and happy ones. At those concerts in which Belarsky sang Jewish music, the audience made up of first and second generation American Jews, recognized the music being sung as Jewish.

Therefore, we can attribute Belarsky's popularity to Jewish Americans from the 1930's to 1975, not only to his skill in Yiddish language and to the musical lyrics of the music, but also to the musical melody as well.

Conclusion:

Belarsky's Contributions,

Past, Present and Future

In conclusion, I will speculate on a few questions, after summarizing the major points presented in this paper.

What did Belarsky have to offer to Jewish Americans from the time he started performing Jewish music in the early 1930's until his death in 1975? Belarsky not only had a rich musical background, but he had three things that made him successful as a performer among American Jewish audiences.

First, Belarsky was known for his ability to sing in Yiddish. Chana Mlotek, referring to Belarsky's skill in Yiddish folk and art songs notes, "He endowed these songs with the same understanding, careful diction and artistic interpretation as the classical repertoire."[57] Not only did Belarsky know and understand the Yiddish language but he had an audience that understood the lyrics, especially the nuances that he would give to the Yiddish as he would sing.[58] Like all languages, each has its own idioms and inflections. The Yiddish language is no different. My recital coach, Cantor Robert Abelson, spent many hours correcting

[57]Jeffrey M. Cohen Bibliography & Discography of Music by Sidor Bealrsky, 1988, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York.

[58]Dr. Sol Stein, interview by author, Tape recording, New York, New York, 24 October 1994.

my Yiddish because pronouncing a word slightly incorrect can change the meaning or disturb the knowing (Yiddish-speaking) listener upon hearing the Yiddish mispronounced. Belarsky's strength lay in his understanding of Yiddish and his ability to sing Yiddish so well. This brought joy to his audiences who loved to hear their language being pronounced accurately. For those Jews in America, simply having someone singing in their language was a way of connecting with their heritage.

Secondly, Belarsky's strength lay in the songs that he sang. Belarsky usually sang to people who had a strong empathy with the stories that the Yiddish folk songs told, which were usually about the East European experience. Belarsky's audiences grew to expect certain types of Jewish music. Many of the programs that I reviewed had songs that were sung year after year. Jewish audiences hoped to hear songs like *"Veulai"* and *"Reizele"* time and time again. Belarsky was very effective in touching his audiences who were of the generation that had experienced life in Eastern Europe, or who had parents originating from that area.

Thirdly, Belarsky offered musical melodies that were familiar to his audiences. These musical melodies offered comfort to his audience because they had a familiar ring to Jewish Americans. Although

Belarsky occasionally sang art songs and opera, he nevertheless always returned to those melodies that audiences recognized as being inherently Jewish.

Therefore, Belarsky was able to give his audiences throughout his career a formidable presentation of language, lyrics, and song - all of which had a strong emotional effect on the people he sang to for over forty years.

Having stated the chief reason for Belarsky's appeal, I must raise the question of how Belarsky would be received if he sang to a group of Jewish Americans, like myself, who do not know the Yiddish language and who grew up in the 1960's. The audience that heard Belarsky sing certainly had a better understanding of the Yiddish music he sang than the generation of Jews who were born after World War II. The earlier audience grew up hearing Yiddish in the home and in the streets, or in the *shetl*. It was not necessary for them to obtain a formal Yiddish education. Yiddish was a part of them; English was the language they had to learn and master. For American Jews born later, the opposite was true.

My experience growing up in metro-Detroit is representative of many others of my generation (children born after 1955). My *bubbi*, (who was born in the mid 1880's in Russia) spoke Yiddish, and my father, (who

was born in 1926) would respond in Yiddish. I was never spoken to in Yiddish, and therefore I grew up understanding very little of the language. Thus, if Belarsky were to sing to an audience of my generation, though there may be an aesthetic appreciation for singing in Yiddish, and most likely not a word would be understood. A translation of the text would be needed, which would diminish the quality of the performance for the listener because of the constant need to refer to those notes. As for the lyrics, Belarsky's singing of the experience of Eastern Europe would not be totally lost on my generation (with the use of program notes), especially for those who know their Jewish history. Nevertheless, being another generation removed from that experience, does of course dilute the emotional attachment to the memory of that era. Belarsky's audience had had that experience, or at least had immediate family members who had recently come from that "Old World." I myself can appreciate the history of what is being sung, but I certainly cannot relate to it like those people who were immigrants in America.

For the most part, Belarsky would only be connecting with an audience today through one facet: the music. The lyrics and language would take on a diminished role. Two years ago, I attended a Purim dinner at a Reform temple in Yonkers, New York. The people responsible for the dinner hired a cantor who entertained audiences

singing Jewish music, including Yiddish. The people at the dinner were for the most part over thirty years old. When the cantor sang in Yiddish, he was given only a tepid response. The audience did not understand what he was singing, and there was not a program with the translations in English. When he sang something funny in Yiddish, he would have to translate into English, and the humor usually was lost in the translation. The music, however, still transcended the lyrics. Music has a language that needs no translation, and therefore Belarsky's fine musical ability to sing Yiddish folk songs and Hasidic music could continue to have a strong effect on today's Jewish Americans.

Belarsky's role in Jewish America from 1930 to 1975 is one that will remain enduring so long as each generation of Jews takes on the responsibility of singing the Yiddish folk song. As a cantorial student at the College-Institute, I have been taught traditional forms of liturgical music, classical styles of Reform music, as well as Yiddish music. The message implied at HUC-JIR is to maintain the tradition of singing music that has been sung for centuries.

We are indeed fortunate to have people alive who are determined to keep parts of the Jewish heritage alive. Belarsky's daughter Isabel is one such person. Through her efforts, one can either mail order or purchase at music stores recordings by her father. Isabel Belarsky has

taken a few select albums and has had them transferred to the more accessible listening devices of cassettes and cd's. Isabel has been instrumental in arranging concerts in her father's memory to ensure that his music lives on for future generations.

There is an additional point raised by this study of Belarsky's popularity related to the music being sung in the synagogue today. At the College-Institute, cantorial students are exposed to traditional Jewish music, including cantors such as A. Katchko and I. Alter, who were considered giants in the field of hazzanut. As well, we study the finest in classical Reform music, such as L. Lewandowski, S. Sulzer, A. W. Binder, etc. The College-Institute assumes their music to be of the highest quality. We also learn about contemporary Jewish composers who write cantorial music based on traditional musical modes, including S. Richard, B. Steinberg, and S. Adler. Students are given a subtle message that contemporary American Jewish folk music being written is somewhat beneath the quality of the music that we are learning at the College-Institute. American Jewish folk music usually does not have the same high musical quality because the music tends to be written more simply, and the music itself usually does not have a relationship to the traditional music forms that other composers would apply in their compositions. Nevertheless, this music, which some people tend to call

"camp music," has become popular in Reform temples around the country, usually because the congregation can sing along with the cantor. Cantors are struggling with trying to sing this folk-style music and balancing it with the traditional modes of music. The composer and teacher, Samuel Adler, states his position on this phenomenon quite clearly:

> The problem today, however, is that rather than meeting the challenge by enlisting our very finest talents in the creation of new religious sounds and then educating the sensibilities of our congregants, we have succumbed to the voice of ease and surrendered to the spirit of populism. Thus our time does indeed differ from similar periods of the past, precisely in the fact that sacred sound has buckled under the stress of the secular challenge, producing the melting down or congealing of two sounds into one single musical entity that we might affectionately call *spiritual entertainment*, and that sounds suspiciously like a Broadway musical, or television sound tracks.[59]

I believe Adler is somewhat harsh in his analysis of this music and that there is room for a more positive outlook. My study of Sidor Belarsky has shown that the singing of simple Yiddish folk songs to Jewish audiences could be a highly moving experience. Belarsky was able to touch the audience because they understood the language, the music, and related to the meaning of the text being sung. Though cantors today

[59]Samuel Adler, Sacred Sound and Social Change: Liturgical Music in Jewish and Christian Experience, Lawrence A. Hoffman and Janet R. Walton, eds, (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 290.

must keep the musical traditions of the past alive, why shouldn't American audiences have the opportunity to have Jewish music sung that connects with them on all three levels: namely, English, the text, and the music. Although some of the American Jewish folk music being written today is not as sophisticated as Lewandowski's or Adler's, it nevertheless has a right to be sung with pride, elegance and musical quality, just as Belarsky would sing the Yiddish folk song. It must be remembered, too, that Belarsky did not only sing the simple Yiddish folk song. Belarsky sang difficult music, such as Lazar Weiner's compositions, as well as art music and opera.

Belarsky as a teacher, taught his students how to interpret the songs of Yiddish music. Besides his important legacy in the musical life of Jewish America during his career, he also leaves an important message: that singing Jewish music, whether simple or complex can be meaningful for the listening audience. But to be effective, and to touch the audiences fully, one must be able to understand the subtle nuances given by the performer. Just having an appreciation of the music alone is not enough; audiences needs to hear the music, as well as to understand the language in order to connect with the text. Jewish Americans who move farther and farther from the experience of Eastern Europe and the language of Yiddish, deserve to have music sung that

will also connect to them, just like the Yiddish folk song and lyrics did for Belarsky's audiences. That is why the music of folk music composers of Cantor Jeff Klepper and Debbie Friedman are being sung today. Not only do they write musical melodies that audiences recognize as more modern, but they will sometimes combine Hebrew and English texts of the liturgy into one song. This insures that the audience will be able to relate to the music on three levels: the language (English), the text, and the melody.

It becomes the responsibility of each generation to try and learn about the Jewish traditions of preceding generations. Today's and tomorrow's generation must be able to make an attempt to learn what moved previous Jewish generations. Though these songs may never touch audiences the way they did twenty or thirty years ago, we still may have an emotional attachment to those songs, and they will still be meaningful to us, though in a different way. I believe this coincides with Belarsky's wishes. As Belarsky so eloquently puts it in his introduction to his songbook, "My life has been and continues to be devoted to discovering, reviving and presenting our exciting heritage of songs, bringing them to the attention of those of us who wish to pass them on to succeeding generations.[60]

[60]Sidor Belarsky Songbook (New York: Yiddish Books, 1988).

The rich musical heritage of Yiddish folk music should not be forgotten. It should be sung to audiences both young and old. If ever a performer or listener needs to be reminded how to sing these songs, and how the Yiddish is being pronounced, interpreted, and sung, all a person would need to do is to listen to the one of finest examples of the Yiddish folk song performer, and that is, of course Sidor Belarsky.

APPENDIX I
Sidor Belarsky: A Biographical Chronology

1898

February 22: Sidor Belarsky born Kreshopel, near Odessa.
Moshe Lifshitz, Belarsky's father, worked as an egg merchant.
Esther Lifshitz, Belarsky's mother.
Six sisters, all younger then Belarsky: Lisa, Freida, Fania, Eva, Yulia, Riva.

1910

Acts as a (boy) cantor near Kreshopel.

1913

Accepted to the Odessa Conservatory.

1919

Marries Clarunya Soichet, who lived in the nearby *shetl* of Moskivka.
Moves to Berlin for two years.

1920

Daughter, Isabel born.

1925 - 1929

Attends State Conservatory in Leningrad.
Belarsky family visits Kreshopel during the summers.
Son born, died shortly after birth, Kreshopel, Russia.
Graduates from the Conservatory.

1926-1929

Joins Leningrad State Opera Company.

1929

Dr. Franklin Harris, President of Brigham Young University hears Belarsky sing at the Leningrad State Opera, and offers him a position to teach voice at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
Belarsky's family leaves Russia, traveling to France.
Lives in Paris for three weeks.
Sails to New York on the Auitania.

1930

February 8: Arrives to the United States.
Travels to Provo, Utah to arrange for housing, while family remained in New York, on Broadway and 145th street.
Teaches at Brigham Young University and University of Utah.
Presents concert at College Hall, Brigham Young University.
Sings in Russian, English, Italian and German.
June: Granted a six month visa extension.
Travels to Canada, to receive documents in order for family to remain in the USA under the Canadian immigration quota.

1931

July 13: His students, give an operatic concert at College Hall, Brigham Young University.
November 14: Recital at Town Hall, and sings Afro-American Spirituals.
Adversely reviewed by the New York Evening Post.
April 15: Sings in recital at Carnegie Hall, operatic music.

1932

Moves to Los Angeles for more professional opportunities, including singing with Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra.
Director Artur Rodzinski responsible for Sidor removing the "I" formerly in his name "ISIDOR."
Sings with the Los Angeles Opera, San Francisco Opera, Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires, Chicago Civic Opera.
Founds the American Opera Company of Los Angeles.
Teaches voice in Los Angeles, and spends summer in Utah teaching voice.

1934

July 21: The American Opera Company of Los Angeles is granted a corporate charter by the State of California, Belarsky named Director General; operas are in English.

1934

Hayim Greenberg hears Belarsky sing at a banquet and introduces Belarsky to the Jewish National Alliance and the International Ladies Jewish Workers.

1936

Belarsky moves to New York to be closer to the Jewish labor organizations; lives in Washington Heights.
Gives Jewish concerts under the name of Lifshitz or Brown; uses the Belarsky name for secular concerts.
Sings as the cantor for synagogues in South America and South Africa.
Performs for Jewish organizations, on local stages.
Appears at a banquet with Albert Einstein.
Einstein and Belarsky agree that Einstein would only accept speaking engagements where Belarsky was invited to perform.

1937

Performs at Town Hall, New York, NY.

1939

Performs at a secular concert at Town Hall, New York, NY.

1940

April 21: Performs in the title role at Mecca Auditorium in the production of the Ukrainian opera "Taras Bulba."

1942

April - December: Performs at an all-Russian concert at Town Hall, New York, NY.
Performs at the International House, singing Russian music, sponsored by the Slavonic Student Committee, New York, NY.
Performs a secular concert at Town Hall, New York, NY.

1943

Performs a concert of Folk Lore and Contemporary Songs of the U.S.S.R. at Town Hall, New York, NY.

1944

Joins the New York City Opera company.
Sings as Angelotti, in Puccini's "Tosca," and soloist for Arturo Toscanini in two broadcasts of "Fidelio."
January 8: Performs in a concert at the Carnegie Chamber Music Hall, sponsored by the Union of Russian Jews, NY.
Other artists that appear are Marie Maximovitch, Arthur Balsam, and Mischa Mischakoff.
June 11: Performs at Town Hall, New York, NY, singing secular, operatic, Hebrew, and Yiddish music, with pianist, Lazar Weiner.

November 29: Performs at a Hanukah Concert at the Academy of Music, NY. Molly Picon, Shulamit Silber of Palestine, Maurice Ganchoff, and Benjamin Zemach of the Habima sing in concert as well.

1945

January 29: Performs an all-Russian program at Carnegie Hall, NY. Performs in a concert for the Labor Zionist Organization and Histradrut, Chancellors Hall, NY.

1946

Performs the concert version of the opera "Hechalutz" by Jacob Weinberg in the 6th Festival of Jewish Arts for the Hechalutz at Carnegie Hall, NY.

1947

Performs in a concert of secular music, Town Hall, NY.
Performs at Ohel Shem Hall, Tel Aviv, Israel.

1948

Performs a concert in Israel.
Performs in a concert of "Songs of Israel," at Carnegie Hall, NY, pianist, Lazar Weiner.
Additional locales of concerts:
Kimball Hall, Chicago, IL
Academy of Music, Philadelphia, PA.
Biltmore, Los Angeles, CA.
Philharmonic Auditorium, Los Angeles, CA.
San Francisco, CA.
Detroit, MI.
St. Cecilia Club, Grand Rapids, MI
Saturday Morning Music Club, Tucson, AR.
Agricultural College, Logan, UT.

1951

Travels to Israel in a tour sponsored by the Histadrut.
June 11: Performs in a recital at Town Hall, New York, NY, pianist, Lazar Weiner.

1952

January 4: Performs secular and Yiddish music, Town Hall, NY.
February 24: performs at the Twelfth Festival of Jewish Arts, Carnegie Hall, NY; concert is presented by Jacob Weinberg and Sidor Belarsky.

September 10: Receives a letter from the South African Jewish Orphanage, thanking him for his performance.
April 6, 1952: Performs at Town Hall, NY, sponsored by the Association To Perpetuate The Memory of Ukrainian Jews, pianist, Lazar Weiner.

1953

January 4: Performs a concert of opera and secular music, Town Hall, NY.

1957

April 2: Performs a concert of secular and Hebrew music, Town Hall, NY.
February 21: Performs at a Yiddish concert at Town Hall, NY, in a concert sponsored by the Young Men's & Young Women's Hebrew Association, pianist, Lazar Weiner.

1959

March 21: Performs a concert of secular, Hebrew, and Yiddish Music at Town Hall, New York, New York, pianist, Ivan Basilevsky.
May 17: Performs a concert at Town Hall, New York, NY, sponsored by The Women's League of the National Council of Young Israel.
December 27: Performs at a Hanukkah concert at Carnegie Hall, singing Hebrew and Yiddish. Also appearing were Maurice Ganchoff, Abraham Ellstein (pianist), Lazar Weiner (pianist), Masha Benya.

1959-1960, World Tour

June 7: Performs at a concert in Melbourne, Australia, sponsored by the Jewish National Library. Concerts consist of secular, Yiddish and Hebrew music.
Receives an invitation from the President of Israel (Zalman Shazar) to sing in Israel.

1960 - 1969

Joins the faculty of the Jewish Teachers Seminary, NY, coaches students in the art of singing Yiddish music.
Sings as a cantor in Sao Paulo, Brazil for the High Holidays.
January 9, 1960: Performs a concert at Town Hall, New York New York, sings Russian, Hebrew, Yiddish; pianist, Ivan Basilevsky.
Dec. 17/18, 1960: Performs at Town Hall, NY. Appearing also was Moshe Ganchoff, Vladimir Heifetz, Lazar Weiner.
March 17, 1963: Performs at a Purim Festival at Town Hall, New York, NY.

December 15, 1966: Performs at a Hanukkah concert at Carnegie Hall, NY.
March 31, 1968: Performs in a concert of Yiddish Songs by Soviet Jewish Composers & Poets, at Town Hall, NY, sponsored by the Congress for Jewish Culture; pianist, Lazar Weiner.
June 26, 1968: Performs at a cantorial concert at Congregation Shaar Hashomayim, Montreal, Canada.

1970 - 1975

September 6, 1974: Gives a concert in Sao Paulo, Brazil.
March 24, 1974: Performs at a concert commemorating the 30th Celebration of Jewish Music Month, sponsored by the Congress for Jewish Culture, in cooperation with the "Friends of the Yiddish Song," Town Hall, NY.
February, 1975: Sings at the Israel Histadrut Foundation Conference in Miami, FL.
June 7, 1975: Dies of a heart condition, NY.

This chronology was compiled from the following sources:

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APPENDIX II
Songs that were analyzed

Moyshelech, Schloimelech
Under the Polish green trees
they do not play anymore, little Moses and little Solomon
they don't play anymore, any little Sarahs and little Leahs
and not on the grass and not on the snow
You don't hear anymore,
the Jewish voices from the little children
With their little troubles coming in their little world
from their wonders and worlds

There is still sadness in these Polish trees
Dead are the Jewish homes, dead are the streets,
and destroyed are the houses, where the children used to
play, sticking out like little mice.
Jewish children with large big dark eyes.

Full with this tragedy and this disaster, under the Polish green trees ...

Der Kremer
There is a poor, modest grocer. Among hundred more on the street, he sits and he waits for a customer, it is dark and the rain is like sleet. He sits and he waits for a customer, while his fantasy is wondrous and sweet.

A government run by our people, A Jewish one, you understand, everyone there must need to be a genius, only kings may help govern the land.

And all of the other poor grocers, are watching the deal from the street, with their eyes they would gladly devour him, full of envy that's hardly discreet.

All of a sudden a customer, as big as a peanut comes in. He asks for a cent's worth of herring, and knocks every dream out of him.

Dem Milner's Trern
While passing by me, the years did try me, I was a miller long ago. The wheels must always turn, for years we always yearn, I'm old and gray, that's all I know.

The days will never come back as ever, when I would claim a little luck. The wheels must always turn, for years we always yearn, no answer have I ever struck.

The rumors try me, they want to try me, from out the village and the mill. The wheels must always turn, for years we always yearn, though endless and without a will.

Where shall I live now, and who will give now a thought to me so old and dear. The wheels must always turn, for years we always yearn, and with them till I'll disappear.

Reizele

Standing there in the street,
Quietly absorbed in thought, is a little house.
There in the attic room
Lives my dear Reizele.
Every evening in front of her little house
I hang around, walk to and fro,
Whistle, and call out: "Reizele,
Come, come, come."

A little window opens,
The old house wakes up,
And soon in the quiet street there rings a sweet voice.
Reizele speaks:
Just wait a little while, my love
Soon I'll be free.
Walk around a few times more,
one, two, three.

I step along happily
Singing and cracking nuts.
I hear her little feet
Tripping down the stairs.
Now she's off the last step,
I embrace her lovingly
I softly kiss her cheek
Come, come, come

I must beg you, Dovidl,
Not to whistle for me again.
"Hear that, he's whistling," cries my mother,
She is pious and it pains her so,
Whistling, she says, is not Jewish,

It only fits for "them."
Just give a sign in Yiddish:
Eyns, tsvey, dray (one, two, three).

From this day on I'll whistle no more,
that I swear to you.
For you I would even become religious, my little pious one.
Pious, like your mother.
Every Shabes, attend the little synagogue
Come, come, come.

I believe you, my Dovidl,
I'll knit you a beautiful *tephillin*-sack
With a Star-of-David on it.
When it's admired in the synagogue,
You must tell them:
"It was knitted by my beloved Reizele."
Come, come, come.

I thank you for your little gift,
I love you so much, Reizele,
I love your mother, I love the little street,
I love your little old house,
I love the cobble-stones near the house
Because you tread on them.
Hear, your mother's already calling, "Reizele,"
Come, come, come.

I step along happily,
singing and cracking nuts.
I hear, running on the stairs,
her little feet.
Again the house is absorbed in thought,
Again the street is mute.
Come to me in my dreams, Reizele,
Come, come, come.

***Ergetz Vait* (In the Distant Land)**
Somewhere far away, lies the land, the forbidden.
Silvery is the hill that has not yet had anyone walk on it.
Somewhere deep in the earth, kneaded, waits treasures for us.
Somewhere far lies alone a prisoner, and his head dies the shine from the setting sun.
Somewhere there moves deep in the snow, which has been spread. One cannot find, anyway to this forbidden land.

***Dem Zeidn's Broche* (Grandfather's Blessing)**
When the feast before Kol Nidre came to end, my grandfather blessed me, laid his hardened hands upon me, drew me close and so caressed me. Feeling his white robe so near to me, I would tremble and would listen. And would see how he was weeping, teardrops on his cheeks would glisten.

Come, my child, to shul with me, God will be most merciful toward you, be devout, be good and surely with long life God will reward you. One part of grandfather's blessing was fulfilled, I say, and therefore, I have lived in endless suffering, but I don't know why or wherefore.

You meant well, grandfather dearest, but your prayer for me was no blessing, for your prayer was surely answered, but it proved to be distressing. Many year, ah yes, I have had them, but those years were filled with sorrows, everyday brings new misfortunes, In my heart no bright tomorrows.

Yerushalayim
Mount Scopus is here I shall stand, to worship God on high, Jerusalem, may peace be with you, will be our prayer and our sigh. From generation to generation we dreamed and hoped to be a nation. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, rebuilt by our strength and our joy, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, oh city that none can destroy.

Mount Scopus is where I shall stand, while peace is our prayer anew. A thousand exiles from everywhere are turning eyes to you. May endless blessings brighten your days, oh holy city great is your praise! Jerusalem, Jerusalem, I never shall wander from here, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the Messiah will surely appear.

Olim

Through the night the ship is plowing, silently to reach the shore, listen, land of all my fathers, I return forever more.

Through the night the ship is plowing, hopes to find an open door, listen, land of all my fathers, I return forever more.

To the land my fathers knew, my brothers all are coming, and they hear a secret humming: Only this land will do!

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