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## Jewish Musical Ethnography in the Russian Empire: Ideology and Chronology

The formation of Jewish musical ethnography in the Russian Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century was determined by the trends of historical development, which brought assimilated Jewish intellectuals to the realization of the need to learn the traditions and culture of their people.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, many progressive Jewish intellectuals were influenced by the Haskalah movement and associated their future with Russian language and culture as the only tool to get equal rights in Russian society. Nevertheless, the economic and legal status of the main part of the Jewish population kept worsening and led to the inevitable crisis of the Haskalah concept. The pogroms of the 1870s–1880s had a crucial impact on the ideas of assimilation. Therefore, the Jewish national and cultural revival among Jewish intellectuals was a natural reaction to the general anti-Semitic climate of Russian society. Simon Dubnov, the famous Russian Jewish historian and the founder of Russian Jewish historiography, wrote in his work *Jews in Russia in the Period of Nicolas the II's Czardom*:

*“From the chaos of diverse public opinions the ways in different directions appeared to solve the crisis, but they always were associated with an aspiration to revive the Jewish people nationally and culturally.”*<sup>1</sup>

Dubnov was an adherent of the concept of building national autonomy in the Diaspora, and he saw

ethnography as a very important aid in the achievement of this goal. Dubnov's ideas found their continuation in Shlomo An-sky's works.

An-sky, the prominent ethnographer and writer, was a person who deeply inspired music researchers to collect religious and secular songs, Hassidic tunes and klezmer melodies, and popularize them through lecturing and publishing. His great impact on Jewish musical folklore studies in the Russian Empire is difficult to overestimate. He greatly influenced the development of the Jewish music ethnography through his theoretical legacy, although it was not that large in quantity. His activities were mainly of practical character and dedicated to collecting and analyzing enormous ethnographic materials from the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. But even the few articles which he managed to publish all had a programmatic character. An-sky's article “Evreiskoe narodnoe tvorcestvo”<sup>2</sup> [Jewish folk literature], which appeared in the Russian Jewish almanac “Perezhitoe” [Bygones] in 1908, is essential on that topic. The ethnographer tried to distinguish the main typical features of Jewish national psychology shown in traditional folklore, as well as the influence of Talmudic literature on the subjects and stylistics of ancient legends and songs. He also emphasized that the urgent complex research of the traditional Jewish way of life is a necessity, which might save real pearls of folklore poetry from disappearance. As an example, An-sky referred to Or-

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1 Simon Dubnov, *Evrei v tsarstvovanie Nikolaya II (1894–1914)* [Jews in Russia in the period of Nicolas the II's czardom (1894–1914)], Petrograd: Kadima, 1922, p. 20.

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2 Shlomo An-sky, *Evreiskoe narodnoe tvorcestvo* [Jewish folk literature], in: *Perezhitoe* [Bygones], Vol. I, St. Petersburg 1908, p. 276–314.



*Fig. 1: Shlomo An-sky (1920)*

shansky's article "The lower-class songs of Russian Jews," published in the supplement to the magazine "Ha-Karmel" in 1866. (Orshansky's article was probably the first work on that subject!). In his article, Orshansky quoted a few Yiddish songs, which were very popular in the middle of the century but later completely disappeared from the folk repertoire and were not mentioned in the comprehensive Ginzburg and Marek collection of 1901.

In An-sky's opinion, the lack of interest in Jewish folklore on the part of Jewish intellectuals can be explained by their undeveloped national self-knowledge. If only self-protection, i.e., a step of necessity, makes intellectuals turn to their national roots, in that case, it is very hard to expect productive work even from the most gifted people. There should be something more than just self-defense—an aspiration to the self-knowledge.

An-sky's ideas about the character and specifics of Jewish folk poetry are of conceptual value. He believes that the philosophy of Jewish folk poetry developed from Jewish monotheism, which by its origin is opposed to any war and puts spiritual per-

fection above material and physical perfection.

An-sky's approach to the classification of Jewish folklore, based on the penetration of religious elements into its forms, applies to the classification of Jewish folk music as well, since the influence of Jewish liturgy on folk music was dramatic. In his classification, the ethnographer distinguished three groups of works:

1. works created by religious intellectuals with a didactic concern; these works in the course of time became very assimilated by Jewish people (this category if applied to music might include liturgy and religious songs to be performed inside the synagogue);
2. works created by people under the influence or on the motives of religious literature (in music: paraliturgical songs and Hassidic tunes);
3. works created by people in the spirit of regular folklore (in music: secular folk songs and klezmer music).

After this historical and basic ethnographic background, which affected the development of systematic Jewish musical studies in the Russian Em-

pire, we now turn to their beginnings.

Chronologically, the development of Jewish musical ethnography in the Russian Empire can be classified in the following way:

**The Beginning 1898–1901:**

Starting of systematic recording of Jewish musical folklore;

**Popularization 1901–1911:**

Creating of Jewish cultural societies, development of Jewish music publishing and beginning of the methodical analysis of collected materials;

**Strengthening of the Research Base 1911–1914:**

Expeditions and planning of the museum collections.

Back at the end of the nineteenth–beginning of the twentieth century, even the very fact of the existence of Jewish folksongs was frequently brought into question. In 1891, Simon Dubnov, in his program work “About Historical Studies on Russian Jewry and the Founding of the Jewish Historical Society” wrote about Jewish folksongs (in context of the available research sources: *pinkasim*, registers of Jewish communities, Jewish chronicles, memoirs etc.):

*“I didn’t name Jewish folksongs among the sources simply because we hardly have any, at least any that would have any historical importance. Jews didn’t have any folk lyric in the ordinary sense as, for example, Ukrainian songs. A Jew never sang outside the synagogue; his songs, whether sorrowful or joyful, always were prayers.”*<sup>3</sup>

It wasn’t easy at all to change this stereotype, accepted even by the most advanced scholars. Therefore, the first attempts to comprehend and systematize Jewish musical folklore seem to us so challenging.

The first period of the development of Jewish music folklore studies was directly tied to

Joel Engel, a famous composer and musicologist, who was the leader of the Jewish musical revival in the Russian Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century. Engel first came to Jewish music while a student of the Moscow conservatory, in 1890s. In 1894 he participated in creating the Jewish opera *Esfir* [Esther] for Purim in Moscow. Engel’s interest in Jewish folklore is reflected in his music notebook, dated 1898. This notebook is now considered a very valuable documentary source, the earliest testimony of the beginning of systematic Jewish music folklore studies in the Russian Empire. Later Engel added there a few melodies from Ginzburg and Marek’s famous collection Yiddish folksongs in Russia, published in 1901 and consisted of 376 songs.

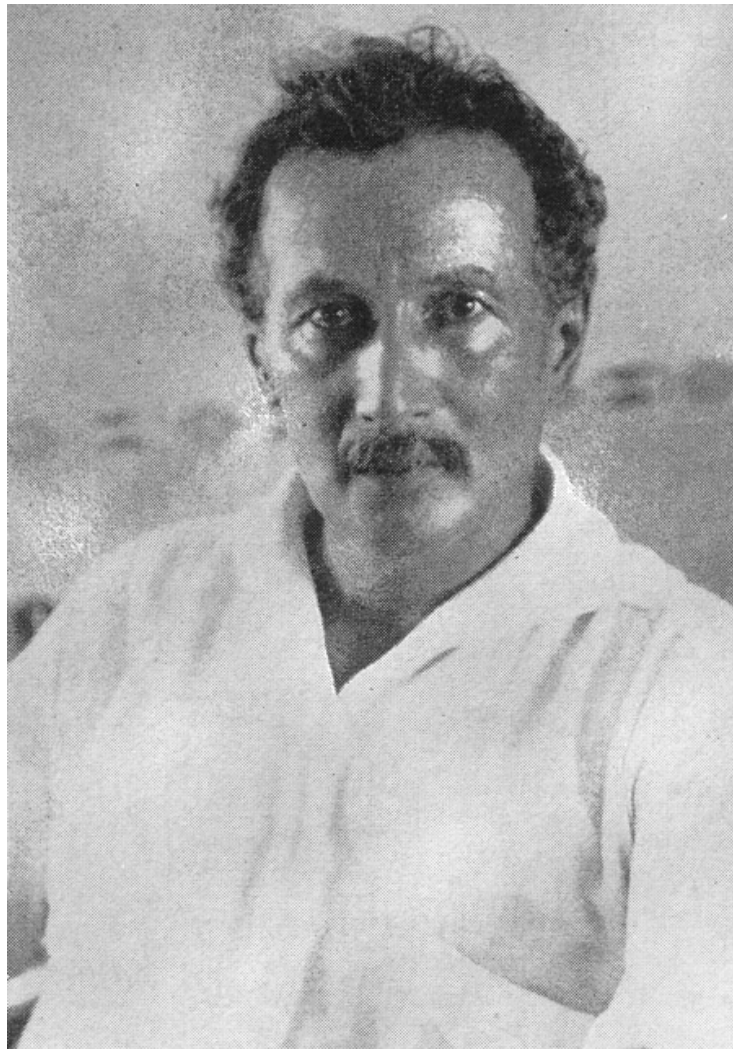


Fig. 2: Joel Engel (1868–1927)

<sup>3</sup> Simon Dubnov, *Ob izuchenii istorii russkikh evreev i ob uchrezhdenii rusko-evreiskogo istoricheskogo obshchestva* [About historical studies on Russian Jewry and the founding of the Jewish Historical Society], St. Petersburg 1891, p. 75

Marek and Engel appeared as lecturers at the first concert of Jewish music at the Imperial Society of Natural Sciences, Anthropology and Ethnography in Moscow, November 30, 1900. Engel delivered a lecture about the musical characteristics of Yiddish folksongs and provided comments to his arrangements of folksongs, which actually completed the body of the concert. The concert disproved the doubts of a certain part of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia in the very existence of Yiddish folksong and provoked further interest in its research, arrangement and concert performance.

From that time on a second period, a period of active popularization of Jewish music, started. In 1908 the Society for Jewish Folk Music was established in St. Petersburg. The Society involved in its activities a lot of young Jewish composers, such as Michail Gnesin, Alexander Zhitomirsky, Pavel Lvov, Moshe Milner, Lazare Saminsky, Solomon Rosowsky, Joseph Achron, Ephraim Shklyar, Joel Engel, folklorist Zinoviy Kiselgof and others. Many of them graduated from the St. Petersburg conservatory, where they received excellent education in Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's class. The Society organized lectures and concerts, encouraged young composers to create music, based on folk melodies and provid-

ed regular publications of their compositions. All these activities perfectly matched the atmosphere of Jewish musical revival of that period. The Society's achievements laid the foundations for the future development of Jewish music in the twentieth century.

Many of the composers, including Achron, took melodies for their compositions from the personal archive of the folklorist Zinoviy (Susman) Kiselgof, who was an active member of the Society and was considered the greatest expert in the area of Jewish musical tradition. The total number of items in his private collection that he gathered during several decades of his life was 2000! Kiselgof started to collect Jewish music systematically beginning in 1902. Winter 1907 he went to Lyubavichi, Mogilyov province, which was well known as the center of Habad Hassidism and the residence of Rabbi Sholom-Dov-Ber Shneyerson. In 1911, the materials of this first expedition he presented to the Society (along with the melodies from his mother's voice, and from other informants from the shtetls of Byelorussia), and this way they became available to young composers and a broader audience. Until his death in 1939, he continued to collect Jewish folklore either with the support of the Society of Jewish Folk Music,



*Fig. 3: Susman Kiselgof recording Jewish folk songs on a phonograph during An-sky's expedition (1913)*

the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society (in 1912–1914), and the Moscow Society for Jewish Music (in the 1920s) or later—in the 1930s—on his own. In 1940 his collection became a part of the Beregovsky collection in the Cabinet for Jewish Culture in Kiev.<sup>4</sup>

Let's now turn to the third period. Both Kiselgof and Engel participated in the An-sky ethnographic expeditions in 1912–1914. They used a phonograph to record Jewish melodies. Engel along with the photographer Solomon Yudovin participated in the first trial expedition, which took place in July–October, 1912 (although Engel left in August) on the territories of Kiev and Volyn provinces. Recordings of this expedition belonged to the Engel private collection, which was presented to the Kiev archive in 1930 by Engel's daughter. They include Hassidic tunes of the Ruzhin-Sadigora dynasty, as well as rare samples of klezmer music and folksongs from the shtetls Skvira, Ruzhin and Pavolotsh.

The next expedition was longer than previous: it started in June and lasted until November 1913 (Kiselgof left in August). Apart from An-sky and Kiselgof, three students of the Petersburg Oriental Courses (Rekhtman, Fikangur and Shrayer) took part in this expedition. The researchers visited Bogopol, Letichev, Medzhibozh, Proskurov towns of Podolya province; Tetiev and Berdichev of Kiev province; Oli-ka, Kovel, Turiysk, Zaslav, Kremenets, Dubno, Rovno, Korets, Slavuta and other towns of Volyn province. In total, the participants visited 25 localities, where they managed to record more than 1000 tunes and songs, apart from other materials.

In 1914, the expedition continued its work mainly in Kiev province, but soon had to stop, because Russia entered World War I on July 19th, 1914. Thus, An-sky didn't finish his project as he had planned it

(initially he also was supposed to do ethnographical study of Lithuania and Poland on the 4th and 5th expeditions, but faced difficulties in gathering financial means for this project even before the World War I started). Thus was completed the third period of Jewish musical ethnography in the Russian Empire. Nevertheless, the results of the expeditions had a tremendous impact on the development of Jewish ethnography in general. The materials laid the foundation of the Jewish Ethnographical Museum in St. Petersburg, which was organized in 1916. There were about 1000 items exhibited, including wax phonograph cylinders of folk songs; collections of folklore; manuscripts and old books; photographs of synagogues and scenes from daily life; ritual objects; clothing; wedding decorations; and tableware. The Museum was closed in 1930, its exhibits divided and transferred to other museums. The phonograph cylinders and separate manuscript collections went to Kiev, where they became a part of the Archives of the Institute for Jewish Proletarian Culture at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. Moshe Beregovsky, a prominent Ukrainian Jewish folklorist, took care of the musical collections, catalogued and transcribed and partly published them. His work actually symbolized the continuation of Engel and Kiselgof's work in the field of folklore. Then History did its part. After the Cabinet for Jewish Culture was closed in 1949, rare Jewish collections, including sound recordings, went to the storages of the Vernadsky library. This music only recently and very gradually, since 1990s, started returning to the researchers.

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4 Predvaritelnaia opis' materialov arkhiva Z.A. Kiselgofa, peredannogo Kabinetu evreiskoi kulturi AN USSR (Kiev) 29 maia 1940, [Preliminary inventory of the materials from the Z.A. Kiselgof Archive, donated to the Cabinet for Jewish Culture at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences on May 29th, 1940], Manuscript, Institute of Manuscripts of the Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine, Fund 190, no. 243, files 1–5

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