

Klezmer: The Soundtrack of the Renewal of the Jewish World

Description

Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 (ironically, precisely fifty-six years after Kristallnacht, the beginning of the end for Jewish life in Central and Eastern Europe) the very countries that bore witness to the shrieks and cries of Jews being rounded up in the streets is now home to the vibrant sounds of klezmer music and Yiddish singing.

Klezmer music has become the soundtrack to the renewal of Jewish life in Central and Eastern Europe today. In such cities as Berlin, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw, one can find Jewish life manifesting itself in various ways: Jewish Day schools, synagogue services, film festivals and literary salons. And the engine that has driven this astonishing and ironic revival has been the advent of Jewish cultural festivals and these Jewish cultural festivals have been energized primarily through klezmer.



Jews looking for identity

Many Jews who lived in the former East Bloc and wanted to begin the search for their Jewish identity found going to a synagogue or any kind of religious event either completely foreign or against their agnostic or atheistic beliefs. However, the *pintele yid* (Yid, the quintessence of one's Jewish identity) still throbbed inside them. How could they seek and express their yearning to be Jewish but not to have to learn Hebrew or take «Judaism 101»? For these Jews, the answer lay in going to these Jewish culture festivals and listening to klezmer bands from Western Europe and America. Just by sitting and listening to the violin or clarinet play a *doyne*, they began to understand the beautiful and complex (and often sad) history of the Jews in Eastern Europe; With the strains of an upbeat *freylekhs* ringing in their ears, they could imagine what a Jewish wedding must have been like before the Holocaust. By learning how to dance a *sher*, they began to learn of the sheer excitement of klezmer music and how Jews in the towns and cities came together to celebrate as a community at a Jewish wedding. At a klezmer concert, these Jews were often hearing Yiddish for the first time, the language that was tinged with secretiveness and stained with the memories of entire families who perished in the Holocaust.

One could sit in the corner of a club nursing a beer, listen to the haunting sounds of klezmer and learn more about themselves and their culture and this transformative experience without exposing themselves to any kind of embarrassment because they knew nothing to very little about their own Jewish heritage.

The gentiles between curiosity and culpability

Meanwhile the gentiles who began attending klezmer concerts and/or began playing klezmer since the Berlin Wall came crashing down were driven by exoticism, guilt, capitalism, enjoyment or any combination of the four. When Jews in these countries began to rediscover, write about, and publicly

display their religion and culture, many non-Jews became fascinated by these local exotics. Forty-five years after the Holocaust, the grandchildren of those non-Jews who lived during the war were far enough removed by time to be able to understand the consequences of the large cultural hole that was created in their lands where most of the Jews were killed. They did not have to look across the ocean for some exotic group to admire and study -they just had to look in their backyards, and here were the Jews. The prevailing attitude was, "let's study these exotic people and help them be more Jewish since there are so few of them". (This paternalistic, ignorant point of view was no different from that of many Americans toward the native Americans as of the 1960s). Instead of studying and hanging with the "Last of the Mohicans", many, non-Jews decided to study klezmer, Hebrew, Yiddish, Jewish literature, customs, history, etc. ... and hang with the last of the Levines.

For some non-Jews, guilt was the driving force behind their enthusiastic support of klezmer and other things Jewish. This was their way of not only asking forgiveness, but bearing a collective responsibility for the sins committed, not by them, but by their parents and grandparents. Consequently, going to Jewish events -even participating and taking the time to learn some aspect of the culture- was the equivalent of saying: Jewish culture had been so intrinsically part of Central and Eastern Europe's development and history for nearly one thousand years that it was almost inevitable that, two generations after the Holocaust, non-Jews discovered the great loss they suffered when some ninety percent of Central and Eastern Europe's Jewry were murdered.

The market of Jewish culture

For Jews and non-Jews alike, rediscovering klezmer helps fill a void that was created by the Holocaust. And for many places throughout Central and Eastern Europe, the Jewish tourist trade today helps fill the void in the cash registers. Large numbers of tour groups from North America, Israel and Western Europe, driven by nostalgia and intellectual curiosity, have descended upon Russia and Central and Eastern Europe. Though the vast majority of the Jews are gone (although there are significant numbers in Hungary, Ukraine and Russia), synagogues, cemeteries, former Jewish schools and hospitals, homes, books, poetry, songs, music, paintings, photographs, ritual art, and more remain.

Ironically, some of the largest Jewish cultural festivals are in the cities where there are few indigenous Jews. One such festival is the Krakow Jewish festival (the largest in Europe drawing some 15,000 people at the finale concert) held for a week every summer since 1990. At such festivals, where the local Jewish artists and visitors are greatly outnumbered by non-Jewish and Jewish artists and tourists from abroad, klezmer fills the air and kitsch marks the business. This kitsch, sometimes bordering on the offensive, takes the place of reality, while fetishism of the victim (Jew and Rom) became a kind of secular religion, especially for the non-Jews. For example, one can take a tour of the former concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau during the day and relax in the evening at a Jewish café, eating Jewish-style cuisine while entertained by pseudo-klezmer musicians dressed in pseudo-Khasidic garb, stay at a hotel in Kazimierz that was a recreation of a nineteenth-century Jewish inn, and fall asleep looking at all the paintings and wooden figurines that depicted the itinerant klezmer musicians they have bought! and it is possible to not encounter a single Jew during this entire "Jewish experience".

From klezmer to Rom music

Today the revival of Jewish culture in Central and Eastern Europe is sustaining itself through other artistic and scholarly pursuits, and not just through klezmer. Since most of the former klezmer

musicians have died, and those that are still alive have been thoroughly interviewed and most of the archives thoroughly pored over, klezmer musicians and enthusiasts have had to find another angle to sustain the public's interest. In fact, the popularity of the klezmer reached its peak in Central and Eastern Europe in 2000. This other angle has been to research the symbiotic relationship between the Jews and the Roma (Gypsies). For many, the Roma are an exotic group of misunderstood people who are known for their musical heritage. There are klezmer musicians who have done some significant scholarly ethnographic field research among the Roma and have discovered some lost klezmer melodies and learned more about the special relationship Jewish and Rom musicians (specifically in Transylvania, Carpathian Mountains and Moldavia) had before the Holocaust. Unfortunately, for some klezmer musicians, this new found interest in Rom culture, specifically the music, is merely a way to give a new spin on their repertoire and to exploit the exoticism the Roma hold for the *gadje* (non-Rom). Most of the time, these bands do not even include one Rom musician, their knowledge of Rom history and culture is limited, and the music is anything but Rom. Many of these musicians (Jewish and non-Jewish) have succumbed to the same need to fetishize and romanticize the *«other pariah»* of Central and Eastern Europe. Consequently, you have these pseudo-Rom bands headlining many Jewish cultural festivals in Europe today. Often their main impetus for playing what they play is based upon how many gigs they can obtain and where. Because for some venues these days in Central and Eastern Europe, playing *«just»* klezmer is passé.

One might ask: *«So what's wrong with these bands playing this music? Whether it is or is not authentic Rom or klezmer or some kind of hybrid, as long as it is entertaining and being respectful of these two cultures that were nearly annihilated during the Holocaust, what's the harm?»* On the surface, one might say nothing is wrong. But if Jewish culture (and for that matter Rom culture) is going to continue to grow in its myriad ways and attract more adherents, a more critical, honest and profound understanding of the history of Rom and/or Jewish culture in Central and Eastern Europe from its beginnings to the eve of the Holocaust through today vis-à-vis the gentile population must be studied and honestly assessed. The rediscovery of klezmer among Jews and non-Jews certainly has been a vital component to the revitalization of Jewish life in all of the Ashkenazic communities in Europe and has been most essential to the growth of Jewish life in Central and Eastern Europe. There will always be those people who love to play and/or listen to klezmer because it connects them to a time and place before the Holocaust when Jewish culture was vibrant and part of the web of daily life for many Europeans. The questions are whether this affection for klezmer (fetishised or not) is enough to sustain the growth of Jewish life and culture in Central and Eastern Europe for the next fifty years? Will Jewish culture continue to grow without the Jewish population in Europe growing? And will the playing and listening to klezmer become one of the last cultural links for Jews and non-Jews to Ashkenazic culture? Time will eventually reveal all.

[Translation in French.](#)

* Yale STROM is ethnographer of klezmer culture, writer, composer, musician and filmmaker, Yale Strom is currently an artist-in-residence in the Jewish Studies Program at San Diego State University. He has written eleven books, among them *The Book of Klezmer: The History, the Music, the Folklore: From the 14th Century to the 21st*, A Cappella Books, 2002.

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