

## Lunch and Game Day at Beth El Synagogue



Ruth Friss, Leona Kaiserman, and Ruth Seidman.

Photos by Joyce Bank



Vicki Plotka, Sylvia Guralnik, Anita Weiss, Florence Silverman, and Marcia Aiscowitz.



Betty Rimm, Hennie Berdinis, Nancy Freed, Roz Oberson, and Audrey Burg.



Elaine Small, Audrey Goldstein, Liz Modiano, and Ann Singer.



Lynn Appel, Renee Appel, Rose Weisbrod, Carol Myerowitz, Bernice Kish, and Evelyn Goldman.

### ARTS & CULTURE

## Yiddish Music, After hours

By Jonathan Mark

NEW YORK (THE NEW YORK JEWISH WEEK) — Sometimes the wall between this world and the Other World is as thin as the walls of an East Side tenement; one can hear the dead carrying on in Yiddish, playing accordions, cracking jokes. One can hear cantors davening, vaudevillians doing shtick as if in mountain casinos.

Listen – eavesdrop – through a 67-track, three-CD set, “Cantors, Klezmerim & Crooners 1905-1953,” a newly released anthology of a discarded world compiled from discarded 78s, from the collection of Sherry Mayrent, associate director of KlezKamp and Living Traditions, a Yiddish arts preservation group.

In her introduction to the collection, Mayrent explains that in 2004 she came across 100 cantorial records on eBay from the collection of a deceased cantor. Mayrent bought it for \$40. She bought another 200 records from another collector, mostly klezmer this time.

Within five years she had acquired Yiddish recordings not only of cantors and klezmer but crooners, comedians, novelty acts – 5,000 in all.

Keep in mind there were only 6,000 Yiddish recordings ever made in the United States, pre-1942; another 5,000 in pre-Holocaust Europe.

It is the nature of music that it lingers in the soul even as it vanishes in the moment. Even the musicians seem to vanish, except for those brief hours out of a lifetime that the musician is in a recording studio, a primitive place in the early 20th century.

Robert Johnson is one of the most revered names in American blues. Almost nothing in his life is documented other than the three days in 1936 he spent singing into a microphone while facing the wallpaper in a San Antonio hotel room playing the only 29 songs he ever recorded.

Nothing is known about Itzikel Kramtweiss other than what he did on Sept. 3, 1929, when he took his band, Broder Kappelle, into a studio. It was quite a day in Yiddish New York: 7,000 hemstitchers, pleaters and tuckers, many Jewish, had gone on strike, while Zionist leaders sent a telegram to President Hoover thanking him for his support following a massacre of Jews in Hebron. Old newspapers tell us that. But who can tell us, asks Henry Sapoznik, executive director of Living Traditions, about this “fiery and flamboyant director-clarinetist, Itzikel Kramtweiss?”

This one session, Sapoznik writes in the booklet accompanying the boxed set, “is key to understanding the ... stylistic diversity of klezmer music.”

Backed by drums and a tuba, the recording captured “the enigmatic playing of bandleader Kramtweiss,” with his “strident and edgy” clarinet. “Except for this one recording session,” Sapoznik writes, Kramtweiss’ “amazing contribution ... would have been lost forever.”

On a 1913 recording by the Yenkovitz and Goldberg band, Sapoznik writes, we hear “an older European sound of klezmer music, whose repertoire included religious melodies and local dance tunes ... the delicate pre-industrial sound of the accordion and tsimbl ... an insight into the persistence of musical traditions,” in a



Cover of the 3-CD set “Cantors, Klezmerim &amp; Crooners 1905-1953.”

changing soundscape.

Let’s spend Sept. 7, 1915 with Sholom Aleichem – a short day, Jews call it, as Rosh Hashanah is just a few hours away. He had less than a year to live. He was in poor health, close to broke, living in a Bronx apartment in the shadows of the elevated tracks. He likely waited at those tracks for a subway to the Victor Studios in Manhattan.

Sitting in front of a microphone, with hardly a dollar in his pocket, Sholom Aleichem starts to read: “If I were Rothschild ... I’d give my wife a three-ruble note so that when it comes time for Shabbos [she] won’t have to bother me ... I’d buy this house ... I’ll give her everything from the cellar to the attic.” He wasn’t well. He stops.

The sound engineer calls out, “Is that all you got?”

That was it. Sholom Aleichem had nothing left. Victor, at first, did nothing with the record, until the writer died, then they “rushed out the failed test record,” Sapoznik notes. It didn’t sell and was quickly dropped from the catalog.

Mayrent has it.

The release of “Cantors, Klezmerim and Crooners” (\$25), from JSP Records and Living Traditions, was timed to honor the 25th anniversary of KlezKamp, Living Tradition’s festival of Yiddish music and art (Dec. 23-29).

Speaking by telephone, Sapoznik, a five-time Grammy winner for his productions of early folk and country music, as well as a Peabody Award winner for his “Yiddish Radio Project,” says, “I’ve been listening to these types of recordings for the last 30 years, but even for me, to hear Sholom Aleichem reading from his own stories is thrilling. Or hearing the very first recording of Kol Nidre,” by a cantor in Warsaw in 1909, “puts you in a special place. You’re experiencing what Jews experienced in 1909.”

Sapoznik is intrigued by the cross-pollination of Yiddish-American culture. On one cut, Nellie Casman, of the Yiddish theater, was backed by Larry Shield, whose band played on hundreds of Yiddish and cantorial sessions. He also composed and conducted the movie scores for “Our Gang” and Laurel and Hardy.

“How many hundreds of thousands of people have heard those scores?” Sapoznik asked. And

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