I am a klezmer clarinetist, a teacher and scholar of klezmer music, as well as a collector of Yiddish and Hebrew 78 rpm recordings, and I am grateful for this opportunity to address why access to historical recordings is so crucial to the work that I do.

Yiddish culture, like most other folk traditions, was for much of its history primarily transmitted orally. Each generation would pass down to the next the important aspects of everything from prayer to foodways. Music was certainly taught in that way; would-be *cantors* apprenticed with eminent *khazonim* and in many families there were *klezmorim* who learned repertoire and the tricks of their trade from their grandfathers, fathers and uncles What distinguishes Yiddish culture from that of other national or ethnic groups, particularly in this country, is the extent to which the chain of cultural transmission was broken, nearly irrevocably.

Between 1880 and 1924, over 2 million[1] Yiddish speakers left Eastern Europe for the dream of a better life in America. In this they were no different from millions of other immigrants from all over the world. What was different, however, was the eagerness of the Jewish immigrants to embrace the language and cultural trappings of their new home. In her book *Yiddish: A Nation of Words*, Miriam Weinstein cites studies showing

> that Jews were among the fastest of all immigrant groups to drop their native tongues. The 1940 U.S. Census measured how much of the second and third generation still spoke the "Old World" language. Out of a field of 18 different immigrant groups, Yiddish, a culture with a great tradition, came in almost at the bottom, an amazing fifteenth.
>
> One explanation is that, by and large, Yiddish-speaking immigrants had a very different relationship with the countries they had left behind than did immigrants from, for example, Italy or Sweden. Yiddish speakers fled not only grinding poverty but governments that ranged from indifferent to hostile to, by the time of that study, genocidal.[2]

Another explanation, offered by historian Gerald Sorin, is that the Eastern European Jewish migration represented an unprecedented uprooting of an entire people.

> Greeks, Finns, non-Jewish Russians, and Italians were certainly in motion during these years, and significant numbers of them came to the United States. But none of these groups migrated as a people. Most came from independent nations and represented only a very small percentage of the societies they left behind. Moreover, large numbers of them (approximately 30 percent) returned

> to their homelands after a sojourn in the United States. Jews, on the other hand, left their old countries at a stunningly high rate: 33 percent of the Jewish population left Eastern Europe between 1880 and 1920, and after 1905 only 5 to 8 percent returned. This collective movement of a people was an extraordinary, if not wholly unprecedented, event.[3]

It may seem as though both freedom from the limitations and persecutions of antisemitism and the presence of huge numbers of fellow Jews would encourage the flourishing of Yiddish culture in its new setting, and indeed, the first three decades of the 20th century saw a flourishing of all forms of Yiddish expression in the United States. However, in a cruel twist of irony, the openness and acceptance of the new world ultimately destroyed that culture as thoroughly as the ravages of the Holocaust would soon destroy it in the old world, as the greenhorns eagerly sought to be become Americans. And nowhere was that desire so clear as among Jewish musicians. Ethnomusicologist Shulamis Dion has described first- or second-generation musicians in the United States as being successful only insofar as they were "able to achieve the bimusical fluency [their] generation of musicians and their audiences demanded."[4] This meant an ability to read and transpose charts, to play several instruments, and, most importantly, to play the "English" music, the American dance and theater music, that Jewish listeners requested.

Clarinetist Shloymke Beckerman, who was recorded on a number of sides in 1923-24, was one of the few first-generation Jewish musicians who not only understood the need to be "bimusical," but was able to become fluent in both idioms. As such, he was in a unique position to teach the second-generation how to be successful, and he taught both his son, Sid, and saxophonist Howie Leess. But he

> wasn't just passing on the tunes and the techniques of playing them. The younger generation was also learning the sophistication and the flexibility that would later enable them to diversify. The immigrants, and their musicians along with them, were beginning to lose their rough edges and to enjoy what the *goldene medine* had to offer them.[5]

Unfortunately, that flexibility and diversification meant that they soon came to devalue those "rough edges" – the Yiddish accent that might keep them from successfully making a living in the golden land.

The Holocaust is the second thing that separates the Yiddish experience from that of other immigrant cultures, as it destroyed what had remained of the Yiddish-speaking world in Europe and made it impossible for the immigrants to go home again. That devastation also led fairly directly to the final death blow to Yiddish culture, the formation of the state of Israel and "the increasing importance of Israeli culture in

shaping Jewish cultural identity worldwide."[6] American Jews deliberately turned their backs on both the language and the culture of *golus*, their long exile, as they looked to the new Jewish homeland to provide, finally, a safe haven, a land of their own.

By the middle of the 20th century, "both Zionists and assimilationists, those who wanted to assert a new Jewish identity and those who wanted to escape it entirely, would find the memory of Yiddish culture a source of embarrassment."[7] Thus, when ethnomusicologists and musicians inspired by the various "revivals" in other ethnic musics began to search for the Jewish equivalents of African-American or Appalachian old-timers, there were virtually none to be found. Henry Sapoznik, one of the first people to turn his attention to Yiddish music in that generation, describes this experience:

> ...the sort of face-to-face collecting and observation of continuity through which I'd researched old-time music in numerous field trips to North Carolina was not possible for the study of this music. There was no Old Country to go back to, no Poland, Ukraine, or Romania where I might find Jewish old-timers tenaciously holding onto their repertoire against all modern influences.[8]

Michael Alpert, another such researcher/performer, similarly describes the unique situation in which he and his colleagues found themselves:

> This dearth of opportunities for personal contact and study with master musicians performing a vital functional repertoire within a broad-based community context has widened the distance between the present musical generation and those who have preceded them, to an extent virtually unparalleled in other Euro-American musical traditions.

Fortunately, the wave of immigration that brought Yiddish-speakers to America coincided with the development of commercial recording as an industry, and through the benefits of that now outmoded format, we can gain access to generations who never had a chance to transmit their knowledge in person. Between 1898 and 1950, tens of thousands of 78rpm recordings were marketed to the various ethnic groups who had settled in the United States, primarily in the larger cities, and the Jews were no exception. Although record company files are far from complete, Spottswood[10] has reported approximately 6000 Yiddish/Hebrew recordings released between 1898 and 1942, and Aylward[11] estimated at least another 5000 recorded and manufactured in Europe during the same time. Of course, these commercial recordings in no way attempted to document anything the way a field recording might; they were simply aural snapshots of particular performances that some record producer or company executive thought would sell. But enough were made and enough have survived to give us a fairly comprehensive picture of Yiddish music in the early 20th century and

even before, as some of the recorded performers were already quite advanced in years when they were immortalized on shellac.

That was the good news. The bad news was that when what is now termed the klezmer revival began in the late 1970s, the availability of recordings to study was severely limited. While many institutional archives owned fairly sizable collections of Yiddish records, there was neither interest in nor money for cataloging them and transferring them to tape so that students of the culture could listen to them without causing further deterioration to the discs themselves. Other archives did have rudimentary catalogs, but restricted access to the recordings to individuals demonstrating some serious academic purpose and either did not permit copying the discs or charged extremely high per-side fees. As a result, interested students needed to find someone with a private collection of discs who was willing to share taped transfers or, more commonly, find someone who knew one of those lucky people with such tapes. If one could get hold of such a tape, the sonic quality was often atrocious because the transfers were often made on home audio equipment and copied over and over again, with each analog copy degenerating significantly from its parent.

Fortunately, the individuals who were most interested in what the recordings had to teach also understood how important they were. As Sapoznik puts it: "These delicate shellacs, these three-minute musical Rosetta Stones in effect were the Old Country, a ticket back to that time and place. Almost immediately I resolved to get these records into circulation."[12]

He was as good as his word; the first of his 10 reissues came out in 1980. It was followed in short order by a reissue compiled by collector Martin Schwartz, 9 reissues by Michael Schlesinger on his Global Village Music label, and three by klezmer clarinetist and scholar Joel Rubin. These reissues have been a vitally important resource for me and the other musicians who have come up through the ranks of the Yiddish cultural revival over the past 30 years.

And yet even the reissues have severe limitations for the serious student of Yiddish culture. For one thing, the selections on any individual reissue are subject to the specific interests and tastes of its compiler, and as I have mentioned, the entire reissued "oeuvre" reflects the interests and tastes of exactly 4 individuals. What we have readily available, even today, consists only of what those four compilers thought interesting or important. The seriousness of this limitation can best be understood by considering some numbers. Of the more than 10,000 individual performances that were presumably issued, the combined total of all tracks available on the 23 commercial reissue CDs that have been released to date is only 435, and approximately 80 of those are items which appear on more than one CD. This means that at best, only about 4% of the potentially available material has been made accessible to interested listeners. Moreover, although cantorial selections and

folk/theater songs vastly outnumber instrumental recordings, the latter have attracted the most attention over the past 30 years and accordingly comprise the vast majority of the reissued material. Of the 435 tracks on these CDs, 19 are cantorial, 1 is a comic monologue, 66 are folk or theater songs, and 349 are instrumental.

Even the 3-CD boxed set, "Cantors, Klezmorim and Crooners" (JSP Records, November 2009), of classic recordings from my collection was necessarily limited in number and involved making some difficult choices based on aesthetic considerations.

In a situation where the available information is already limited, in this instance by the fact that only a small percentage of the cantors, singers and instrumentalists who were actively performing were recorded in the first place, any additional restriction in effect becomes a kind of censorship. If we are allowed to hear only a certain kind of performance, we come to believe that that is the only kind of performance there was, and all other styles and repertoire become lost to us.

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