

A CENTURY OF IDELSOHN

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(In commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Idelsohn's birth. He was born on July 1, 1882 and died on August 14, 1938.)

"A *munach*," said my teacher, "has no personality." And I, at age 5, understood perfectly. It was this man's pungent description of the lowly *munach*, adapting itself melodically to whatever cantillation followed it. Music was already a big part of my world, and how could it be otherwise, for my teacher of *Trop* — my first teacher of music of any kind — was Abraham Zevi Idelsohn. Looking back on my childhood now, he looms large. But then, in the early '30s, I took him for granted. He was my parents' friend, my father's colleague, a man who had tunes running around in his head and could sing them and play them and write them down and — best of all — teach me how to do the same.

As I learned a little more, he let me copy some of his music. I remember when he showed me that there really was a note below middle C. A *L'choh Dodi* of his started on B.

Idelsohn was no longer an active cantor when I knew him. He was Professor of Jewish Music and Liturgy. His most prolific publishing years were just behind him. His standard works were new then, and exciting the scholarly world. The last five volumes of his *Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies* appeared in 1932 — including the *Synagogue and Folk Song of the Jews of Germany and Eastern Europe*, plus the special volume of Hassidic song — to stand alongside the Sephardic and Oriental traditions he had collected in volumes 1-5. His *Jewish Music* was just three years off the press, and Schocken is still selling paperback reprints of it today. 1932 saw his second standard book, *Jewish Liturgy*, published. And a succession of articles and monographs in Hebrew, English, Yiddish, German, Dutch — on the *Kol Nidrey* and its origins, on the *Mogen Ovov* mode, on the life of the Vilna Bal-ha-besl, on the Cantor in Jewish life — and on and on his efforts went. Glance through any of the biographies written of him, during the '30s in the *Chazzonim Velt* and the *MacMillan Encyclopedia of Music* and a dozen other publications — or more recently in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* — and you get the feeling of a passionate, powerful, colorful, and determined man. A man who channeled his prodigious energy into pioneer achievements in his field, our field.

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I was hardly aware of most of that, however. As a young boy, I was aware of an imposing man — heavy head, black Vandyke beard, barrel chest, bearing himself with a kind of dignity that was of no specific country but specifically Idelsohn. He could be stormy and impulsive. He could abandon himself to the pleasure of a fine spring day, or could brood in volcanic rage. His offhand reaction to the American presidential campaign of 1932 was open disgust (“Roosevelt slings mud, and Hoover slings back the same mud”). He was impatient with his students at the Hebrew Union College (“A boy without a book is no boy”), furious with those who would challenge his professional authority while lacking even a fraction of his qualifications, tireless in working to finish a manuscript or a score, and yet he made time and found patience for a friend’s young son. His own children were grown-ups to me. His youngest daughter Yiska was in high school, as was Dena, while the older children were living far away in South Africa. His apartment on Maple Avenue in the old Avondale section of Cincinnati was a scholar’s workshop, and also a place where his wife Zilla could fashion gefilte fish for Shabos.

Ethnomusicology was a word I didn’t learn until nearly twenty years later, but of course that was Idelsohn’s greatness and his unique contribution to our art. Because of his combination of dream, drive, and insight, and because of the times and places in which he moved, he could singly bridge the gap between tradition and science in Jewish music, to an extent that nobody else approached before or since.

This coming year we will close a century since Abraham Zevi Idelsohn’s birth (July 1, 1882) in a section the Czar called Curland — now the Latvian S.S.R. A century of Idelsohn.

Early in that century, young Zevi stood in a market in Libau watching a man wrap a fish for a customer. The paper he was using for wrapping had strange marks on it — not letters in any alphabet Zevi had ever seen. He kept asking what those marks were until he found someone who recognized them. Music writing? A revelation! The yeshivah bochur had discovered a new world; music could be represented on paper. He didn’t rest after that until he had mastered music — first, in the customary way that he knew as the son of a shochet and baal t’fillah, by singing and studying with the local cantor, Mordecai Rabinovitz — later pursuing his studies with the great Boruch Schorr, and in conservatories in Germany. His restless nature, the migrations of his family, and his dream of musical research, took him first to Southern Germany, then to South Africa, and in 1905 to Jerusalem. There he found a polyglot steaming unsanitary and jittery population, ruled in archaic splendor

by the Turkish Sanjaq of Jerusalem, although the Ottoman Empire was slowly crumbling under its own rotten weight. Perhaps it would have disintegrated sooner, except that the subject population consisted of countless groups that were strangers to each other. Each group was isolated, culturally distinct, ignoring all the rest. And therein lay their supreme value to Idelsohn. A strongly-built young man with plenty of courage, he strapped an Edison cylinder-recording machine to his back, and went hunting for melodies. Every spare hour, and the few spare pennies not absolutely needed to feed his growing family, he spent prowling the city from Yemenite enclave to Hassidic shtiebl to Bukharan synagogue, collecting the sounds of Jewish life in all its varieties. If the Oriental Jews refused to sing into his strange horn-box, that didn't stop him. He relied on his memory, developed his own modified notation for the quarter-tones of the Middle East, built a file.

Idelsohn's century is in very reality the century of our musical Haskalah. All of us — cantors, researchers, musicologists, lecturers, composers, teachers — look to him for our foundations. He became all of those things, that boy with the well wrapped fish. And when he did his collecting — “field work,” we'd call it now — he had no Foundations to help him. No grants. No patrons. Only the dream and the drive, and the unique talent and insight to take musical charge of that moment in Jewish history.

The separate streams of our farflung tradition have begun to merge now. The technological heirs of Idelsohn's Edison recorder have wiped out all musical isolation. Cultural researchers in Israel today comb the ingathered exiles to find pure melodies that Idelsohn didn't already hear and collect. And what of us in the American cantorate? Where would our art and our knowledge be without his work? He contributed so much that we can hardly conceive of Jewish music without Idelsohn. Others have excelled in specialized areas. They, and we, stand on his shoulders.

By his own definition, Idelsohn was certainly no “*munach*.” A *pazer*, if anything. And he had a lesson for me which went even beyond music. Cut down by one stroke after another, crippled, muted, he still fought back. In 1933, he was to receive an honorary Doctorate. For the first time in months, he did the impossible. He stood on both feet, with only a cane for support, immaculately dressed and as dignified as ever, and mounted the steps to accept the degree. This courageous, sensitive man and total Jew taught all of us that day about self-respect.

The following year, paralysis struck again. Totally incapacitated, he died in South Africa in 1938. Thinking of his scant 56

years and of what they produced for us as bearers of the Jewish musical heritage, and for me personally, I feel fortunate to have been a *munach* to such a *pazer*.

Y'hi zichro baruch.

ABRAHAM Z. IDELSOHN — A Chronology

July 1, 1882 — Born in Pflsburg, Curland, Russia (now Latvian S.S.R.) to Azriel, a Shochet, and Baal Tefilah; and Deborah Idelsohn. One of 16 children; 7 survived.

1883-1901 — In Ijibau: attended heder and yeshivah to age 17; 17-18 sang in choir of Cantor Mordecai Rabinovitz. Studied hazzanut, harmony and Hebrew literature.

1901 — In Berlin: Sternsches Conservatorium, choir singer in Charlottenburg Synagogue with Boruch Schorr.

1902 — Hazzan in Leipzig. Studied at Royal Conservatory of Music, also with Cantor H. Schneider, whose daughter, Zilla, he married.

1903 — Hazzan/Shochet in Regensburg. Lost first-born.

1904 — Hazzan in Johannesburg, South Africa. Daughter born.

1905 — Went to Jerusalem with his family, following the twin passions for Eretz Yisrael and Shirat Yisrael.

1905-21 — In Jerusalem: Cantorial, teaching and research work. During World War I, led a Turkish army band — and sang Schubert lieder to entertain the officers!

Published works from this period include: "Shirey Tzion", "Toras HaN'ginah", "Shirey T'Fillah", and "Sefer Hashirim". The latter with all its music printed Hebrew-style, right to left. First volume of his Thesaurus "Songs of the Yeminite Jews" (Vienna, 1914) — result of his field research among the various Jewish groups in the Yishuv. Thesaurus was to cover 10 volumes and to take 20 years to complete.

Hebrew opera "Jepthah", performed in Jerusalem with an orchestra of Oriental instruments.

1921-23 — In Germany: Lecturing and writing. Began Hebrew-Language History of Jewish Music for Bialik's "Dvir" Press. Volumes 2 and 3 of Thesaurus (Babylonian, and Persian-Bokharan-Daghestani) published Berlin 1922.

1923-24 — In America: Lecturing and officiating. Cantor for several months at Society for the Advancement of Judaism, New York. Now, volumes of Thesaurus published with English and Hebrew introductions, as well as German. Vol. 4, (Oriental Sephardim) Berlin 1923.

1924 — Settled in Cincinnati, first to catalogue the Birnbaum Music Library, but soon thereafter as Professor of Jewish Music and lecturer in Jewish Liturgy at Hebrew Union College, a position he held until his death.

1925-28 — Began to write and compose for the U.S. Jewish community, while teaching and lecturing. Articles, synagogue music, and the first edition of his "Jewish Song Book" published. Also, in 1928 the 5th volume of the Thesaurus (Moroccan) published in Berlin.

- 1929 — Published "Jewish Music, in its Historical Development" (Holt & Co., 535 pages) which has remained the standard work on the subject, re-issued by Schocken for today's market.
- 1930-33 — Published monographs on "The Kol Nidre Tune", "The Diwan of Hebrew and Arabic Poetry of the Yemenite Jews", "Features of Jewish Sacred Folksong in Eastern Europe", and others. "Jewish Liturgy" (Holt & Co., 404 pages) appeared in 1932. The American Council of Learned Societies undertook to finance completion of the Thesaurus, and the last five volumes were published (in Leipzig, with English introductions): #6 (18th Century German Synagogue Song, from manuscripts), #8 (Eastern European Synagogue Song), #9 (Eastern European Folksong), #10 (Chassidic) and finally #7 (South German).
- 1933-38 — Despite a succession of strokes which cut his life short, he published a few more works, and received the H.U.C.'s Doctor of Divinity Degree. Taken back to Johannesburg in September 1937, to spend his last days with his family, he died a helpless invalid on August 14, 1938.