

LEIBU LEVIN (1914 – 1983)

Great troubadour of Yiddish poetry.



“On foreign paths strays my
wandering song,
Will it reach the place for which it
longs? “

Leibu Levin was born in the town of Kimpelung, Bukovina, in 1914. From 1919 he lived in Czernowitz. He studied Yiddish language and literature in the Seminar of the "Yiddisher Shul-Farayn" and at the same time started to appear with recitals of Yiddish prose and poetry, often singing his own melodies. A literary magazine in Bucharest wrote in 1935 *“Leibu Levin showed himself to be an excellent interpreter of Yiddish poetry... Levin is perhaps the first interpreter of Manger. Never before have we been so intoxicated by the specific Manger landscape and its fragrance as when Levin recited Mangers ballades...”*

Levin did not know the music notation, but being an artist of the highest level, an artistic reciter and singer and an expert in Yiddish literature, he succeeded in creating a wonderful combination of poetry and melody where the music is a full partner with the existing poetic text. The tune grows from the words, and to those who hear these songs it seems that it was born with them..." says Hanan Winternitz, who wrote wonderful the piano accompaniments.

"...Leibu Levin's songs merit inclusion among the cultural treasures of European Jewish music, which is an integral part of European musical culture as a whole. And I am convinced that all lovers of poetry and music will draw from them not only pleasure and satisfaction, but also the sense that in their preservation and in their being heard there is, in addition, something of historic justice."

Prof. Tzvi Avni, composer

Itzik Manger's poetry indeed holds a special place in the heart and in the creativity of Leibur Levin. "Sad Song" he once sang to Manger himself as they sat in one of the wine cellars in Czernowitz...

With the outbreak of war, there I just put a black mark on all the long maddening years. I only recall with pain your telegram, Hushke, my love, my dear, informing that my family is no more... And the card in which you part from me – both of them reached me in the concentration camp. So what? I became even more alone...”

In the year 1940 the territory of Bukovina was joined to the lands of the Soviet Union, and in 1941 it was overrun by Hitler’s armies. The war trapped Leibn Levin in Czernowitz. He was drafted to the Red army, and from there until 1942, over to the soviet gulags in Siberia, was only a narrow bridge...

During the second world war my brother, in the course of his wanderings, met Leibn Levin, sad and very embittered, in the Ural Mountains. In his poetic soul he felt he’d never get out of there. He gave my brother a poem as a gift, in which he gives vent to his longing and loneliness:

At present Leibn Levin is exiled in the far north guilty of “spying” For Hitlerian Romania. A preposterous accusation against a Jewish artist Whose soul aspires to the vision of beauty alone, and who lost in the camps Of the Nazis his parents and two sisters.

At the end of the war Leibn Levin used to still send letters from the camp including his very successful translations to Yiddish from the poetry of Pushkin and Tyutshev. But from after 1946 nothing further was heard of him. What happened to Leibn Levin? To whom does he sing his songs today? Who does he rejoice today with the poems of Leivick, Manger and Reisen? Is his voice silenced?

Reuven Katz

“Dos Yidishe Vort”, Chile, 17.6.’55

At 27 years of age he was imprisoned – and only in 1956 was he set free ... when 42 years old. In that same year he comes to Moscow in order to receive the certificate clearing his name. And there, in the home of Tshernya Entin-Guterman, the doctor who had saved his life in the camps, he meets her daughter Shura. After a month they marry. To Czernowitz he no longer cares to return; there no one and nothing remains for him...

And what is the first thing the freed prisoner does in his new home in Moscow? He buys two thick notebooks and notes down in them all the texts of the Yiddish writers and poets, and all the Yiddish folk songs he guarded in his memory during all the terrible years. “My sacred cameo” – so he calls it in his poem to the white kid from the Yiddish lullaby...

Only in 1962 does he arrive in Czernowitz, following an invitation to the 30th year observance of Eliezer Steinbarg’s death. When he ascends the stage, the crowd gets to its feet and

applauds for a good fifteen minutes...

“...In the home of the last of the giants, the last of the rich era of Yiddish in the Soviet Union, Shmuel Halkin, of blessed memory, I first met Leibu Levin. From that meeting I went out enriched with Yiddish songs I’d never heard until then. Also the soviet public of those days hadn’t heard the names of H. Leivick, Itzik Manger, of the folk singer Zelik Barditshever... It was Halkin himself, so very sick, who requested from him that he “say something”. Leibu “said” a tune, and another poem, and another tune... He was a Jew in every part of him. Fourteen years in exile and in camps hadn’t affected the young man with the noble appearance and a glance imbued with the high spirits of youth... Leibu’s approach to Yiddish and to the creative work in Yiddish is divine service. Every word and every letter was sacred for him.

He bore witness to the pain and wrath of the people. He sought in song salvation and mercy. From him I learned the songs of the Jewish troubadours – Broder Singers, Zelik Barditshever... Also “The Ballad to Antosha” of Moshe Kulbak in his version, “The Rebbe Elimelech”, “The World Asks An Old Riddle” – all in his special rendition.

He had a very beautiful warm voice, perfect pitch and an unusual natural musicality. His tunes, written to the texts of the best of our poets, excel in melodic liveliness, interesting musical expression and structure that adheres with each note to the text and thought of the poet. Many of his songs are played in the tradition of Austro-Hungarian classical romance, while preserving the Yiddish coloring.

The songs of Leibu await definitive professional evaluation. I want to pause here to reflect on H. Leivick’s cycle of Siberian poems...the sad and lyrical “Somewhere Afar”, the dramatic “Siberian Roads” and “Soldiers”, and the anguished “Dead Ways” that remains suspended, as it were, in the endless deadly cold of Siberia. The entire cycle is heard as an integral part of Leibu’s experience. Every note is organically bound with the word, every pause is full of content that conveys the feeling of the grey light-blue nuances of the landscape. All this together evolves to an unforgettable experience embracing all the senses... And at the same time – another Leibu in “Childhood Years” of Itzik Manger and in “The Green Tailors” of Shike Driz... full of lyric humor and playful...”

Nechama Lifshitz

“In Memory of Leibu”

Tel Aviv, Tashma”d – 1984

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those songs, M.-L. Halpern's "Az du vest batsoln, bruder..." crossed the ocean to become a folksong even during the composer's lifetime.

Leibu Levin gave innumerable recitals in Czernowitz, Bucharest and all the larger and smaller towns in Romania. In Beldz (Bessarabia) he met the folksinger Zelik Barditshever and was the first one to perform his songs on stage. The scores in the book "Zelik Barditshever. Lider Mit Nigunim", published by H. Segal in Czernowitz, 1939, were written down following Leibu Levin's interpretation.

When in 1941, the war started between Germany and USSR, Levin was called up and later sent to a labor camp in the Ural. In 1942 he was arrested and sentenced without trial to 15 years imprisonment. Not until 1956 was he discharged and "rehabilitated". He performed for six more years, but then had to leave the stage, for his health had been severely undermined in the prison camps. However, he continued to set Yiddish poetry to music. In 1972 he came to Israel. Here he set to music, among others, six poems in Hebrew. He also translated from German into Yiddish the poems of the Czernowitz poet Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger, who died in a Nazi-camp at the age of 18, and set six of her poems to music. A few recordings of him singing his songs have been made in the 70s by Kol Israel (No. 1,6,10,18,19,20), as well as of his last concert in 1982 (No. 2,3,4,5,11,14-17). This CD contains most of those recordings, and also a few made by the National Sound Archives in Jerusalem (No. 12,13), as well as home recordings (No. 7,8,9). Leibu Levin died in 1983, in Herzlia, Israel. He left about 80 melodies to the finest lyrics of Yiddish poetry. The songs to texts by Hebrew poets, with Hanan Winternitz's piano arrangements, were published in 1990 in the Nisimov Music Library in Tel Aviv. An anthology of 49 songs to Yiddish poetry, with piano arrangements by H. Winternitz, has been published in 2006 in "I. L. Peretz Publications", Tel-Aviv. It contains 49 songs, as well as photos and drawings. All the texts are in Yiddish, English and Hebrew.

Leibu Levin was much more than simply another composer, and this book comes to immortalize only a small part of the entire life's work of someone who in his time was the troubadour of Jewish literature and poetry, for whom Yiddish literature was his *raison d'être*, who devoted all his life to it, composing, reading and singing it on stages in three states: Romania, the Soviet Union, Israel.

After his death my mother published a booklet that included a few of the words ever written about the man: articles, letters, speeches ... eulogies. It is my wish to quote here from those words, since they are the words of people who saw and heard my father on various platforms when his star was on the rise; people who spoke his language, and therefore were in a better position to appreciate his art than I...

For he didn't speak Yiddish with me. The tragedy of our culture is that the parents didn't speak their mother tongue with their children...

My father was born in 1914 to a family of Boyan Hasidim in the town of Kimpulung in the south of Bukovina. In the year 1919 the family established its home in Czernowitz. That home was full of song...

You, grandpa Joseph, “the quiet hasid”, as depicted by my father, sang Hasidic melodies; you, grandma Feige of the house of Maiseles, were learned in literature and poetry and provided an unending source of Yiddish folk songs; and also you who were singing, Haike and Dora, the two pretty sisters... none of you did I get to meet. Together with most of the Jews of Czernowitz you were left beyond the Dniestr River and found your rest in a common grave in the town of Bershad, far from the birthplace. Let this book be your gravestone.

Leibu himself sang during his childhood in the choir of the Czernowitz Grand Synagogue, afterward in the Choral Synagogue beside the noted cantor, Pini Spector. It is told that once, when he sang solo during the High Holidays, he even received applause... He belonged to the Zionist youth movement, “Gordonia”, (in the Eagle” group, some of whose members eventually emigrated to Israel and founded the kibbutz “Masada” beside the Sea of Galilee). He learned Yiddish – language and literature – in the seminar “Yidisher Shul-Farayn” (Federation of Yiddish Schools), acted in the “Chameleon” Studio of Simha Schwartz and earned his living in a textile factory. In the second year of his studies he began to appear in evenings of reading and song.

“ ...Allow me, again, a little nostalgic prelude – regarding the theme and the atmosphere of a “soiree”, long ago and in a distant place. The time – the years of the thirties, the place – Bucharest, capital of Romania, from “beforehand”... And so, one evening in Bucharest, a meeting of friends in the new lodgings of a couple (also “new”), who both spoke the same language, Yiddish... And the friends – of all types, but with a “common ground” that was obligatory, and that was – that their mothers used to croon to them cradle songs with:

“Beneath the cradle of Yankele
a white kid stands
The kid went off to barter
almonds and raisins...”

That is to say, that they all spoke, and maybe even loved, the Yiddish language of their childhood.

For what did we gather? Not for idle gossip and not for a “round” of poker. The focus of the evening was a young man, a son of Czernowitz, a fellow whose reputation went before him throughout Bukovina and Moldova, places where he appeared for evenings of Yiddish reading and song and aroused storms of appreciation, – but in Bucharest he’d never been heard of. At

the appointed time he appeared in our doorway: young and lean, eyes like glowing coals, and with a shy smile flickering engagingly across his face. For two hours straight this man captivated us with his unique charm, – as from his mouth and throat were produced pearls of Eliezer Steinberg, Itzik Manger, Leivick, Halpern, Peretz – and afterwards, much to our amazement, also creations of words and melody of his own, miniatures of enchanting poetry, conquering, enthralling every receptive ear and feeling heart. He exuded an atmosphere of Yiddish folklore, both through the words themselves and the tunes with which he adorned the best of the generation's Yiddish poetic creation.

Swiftly, like a lightning attack or the revelation of the Roman epigraph “he came, he saw, he conquered”, he humbled us and joined us to the devoted legions of his listeners and admirers in all of Romania...”

Idov Cohen (Knesset Member)