

by Hankus Netsky

RUTH *A Life in Song* RUBIN



She stood barely five feet tall, but Ruth Rubin was a giant who led the way for all of us committed to rescuing and understanding modern Jewish culture. A solitary figure, she worked alone, at her own pace, drawing unique conclusions from 2,000 Yiddish folksongs she collected over the course of her 40-year career. As she explained to Cindy Rivke Marshall, director of the documentary film *A Life in Song: A Portrait of Ruth Rubin*, “My focus from the beginning was examining the songs as they reflect the life of the people. I found that, in the Yiddish folksong, the people had poured out their feelings, which had no other place to go at that time. And this is what attracts me, what always amazes me the more I examine the material: the natural will to live, the natural wit, the wisdom...”

Ruth Rubin chronicled that wit and wisdom and her own response to it in four books, 70 articles, and nine extraordinary recordings. She was a pioneer, the organizer of countless collecting sessions that brought together people from all walks of life, from all social classes, religious and secular, with the common desire to share their Jewish folksongs. They knew that singing their songs for Ruth was the best way to ensure that these treasures would be transmitted to future generations. Rubin presented fascinating “lecture-recitals” through which she brought Yiddish folksong not just to academic institutions, but to everyday social gatherings. She was the first to issue an annotated set of Jewish ethnographic field recordings and, perhaps most important, the first to give Yiddish folksong its place at the table in the American folk music revival. In the words of ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin, “She was the bridge, she was the missing link. There was a long period, because of the Holocaust, because of assimilation, because of the rise of the state of Israel as a substitute [for American Jews’ Eastern European culture], when people really didn’t care if the Yiddish folksong survived. That was in the 1940s and 1950s, when Ruth was going around doing her work, recording and popularizing songs and putting out publications. We’re enormously grateful to her for what she did.”

Always ready to make herself and her knowledge available to admirers of my generation or, as she would say, “the young people” in the field of Yiddish music, she taught a simple lesson: Evolve, adapt, and, if no one listens, evolve and adapt again. Above all, if you know that what you have to say needs to be heard, get your message out, whatever it takes.

Born Rivke Roisenblatt in Khotin, Bessarabia, in 1906 to parents who moved to Montreal soon after, Ruth lived 93 years and saw almost the entire twentieth century. It’s remarkable to consider the sweep of history she experienced in her lifetime. As she described it, her father, who died when she was five, came from a traditional background while her mother was strictly secular. She attended Protestant school and, in the afternoons, the Jewish secular Peretz Shule, where she became immersed in Yiddish culture. At age seven she appeared on stage for the first time at the Monument National Theatre singing a Yiddish folksong as a soloist in her school’s annual concert.

“I remember seeing Sholem Aleichem in 1915,” she recalled in 1991. “He died in 1916 – he was a frail person. He suffered from pneumonia and I don’t know what else. He came to Montreal, and I was a little girl already going to the *shule* (Yiddish school)... He read a story to us and, when he was finished, there was a question-and-answer period... A woman raised her hand and said, ‘You write as if you’re speaking, just like that. *S’kumt aykh on zeyer gring, mistame* (It comes so easy to you).’ His answer was, ‘*Oy, mayn tayere, ven ir volt gevist vifil blut un trefn ikh fargis bay yedn kapitl, volt ir nisht gefregt di frage!* (Oh, my dear, if you only knew how much sweat and tears I pour out [to get this result], you wouldn’t ask this question).’ Then, two by two, we marched in rows with



him – he led us all. He wore a Panama hat and he wore spats... And we marched through the streets, and we were singing Yiddish songs.”

At 18, Rubin moved to New York City. “When I came to New York, I was already a poet... I knew many of the literati from my childhood in Montreal, so I went

Yiddish song she tapped extensively, as a major inspiration: “After I made my first recording, I played it for my mother and she said, ‘Oh, you learned them all from me, dear, you learned them all from me!’ Of course, that wasn’t really the case; it was just that she knew all of the songs I sang.”

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Hot Zikh Mir di Zip Tsezipt

My Sieve Was All Worn Out

Sung by Ruth Rubin, New York City, 1949. Sung in dialect, F.

Hot zikh mir di zip tse - zipt In hot zikh mir tse - bro - khn. Hot zikh mir di shikh tse - ri - sn.

Refrain

Tonts ikh in di hoy - le zo - kn! Tonts, tonts ant - key gn mir, In ikh ant - key - gn dir. Di vest ne-men dem ey - dem, In ikh vel ne-men di shnir!

1. Hot zikh mir di zip tsezipt
In hot zikh mir tsebrokhn.
Hot zikh mir di shikh tserisn,
Tonts ikh in di hoyle zokn!

Refrain

Tonts, tonts antkeygn mir,
In ikh antkeygn dir.
Di vest nemen dem eydem,
In ikh vel nemen di shnir!

1. My old sieve was worn out
And broke altogether.
My shoes were torn,
So I'm dancing in my stocking feet!

Refrain

Dance, dance, facing me,
And I'll dance facing you.
You will take the son-in-law,
The daughter-in-law for me!

to Dovid Pinski to ask his advice, should I continue or should I give it up?” Pinski gave her the right advice, and in 1927 she produced a book of “modern” Yiddish poetry called *Lider*.

Ruth married Sam Rubin in 1932 and had one son, Michael. His birth triggered in Rubin the desire to pass on to future generations the rich legacy of Yiddish song (Michael died tragically in his early twenties). In 1935, encouraged by preeminent Yiddishists Chaim Zhitlowsky and Max Weinreich, she began to seriously collect folk-songs using similar methods to early twentieth-century British collecting pioneer Cecil Sharp, who paid great attention to the sources and meanings of song lyrics. She also credited her mother, whose vast knowledge of



Music and lyrics from *Yiddish Folksongs from the Ruth Rubin Archive*. Edited by Chana Milete and Mark Slobin. Wayne State University Press, 2007.

While she was skeptical of the work of many Yiddish performers who she felt “hammed up the songs,” Rubin loved the recordings of Isa Kremer, whom she also met as a child. She was a close friend of Vilna partisan fighter, poet, and song collector Shmierke Kascerginski, who often stayed at her apartment on visits to New York: “He had an extraordinary memory... My childhood and adolescence were all tied up with an intimate relationship with this whole generation of young people who were helping to preserve the Yiddish language and Yiddish culture. They hardly got paid for anything they did.”

And neither did she. For all her eloquence and groundbreaking scholarship, Ruth was never fully welcomed into the Jewish academic world, earning the bulk of her living as a stenographer. She attributed the lukewarm reaction to her work to the ignorance of Jewish scholars, who, in her opinion, had no idea about how much the Yiddish folksong could teach them.

DR. RUTH ON JEWISH LOVE

A tough and feisty critic, Rubin would publicly berate the pedants during her lectures. She particularly enjoyed exposing how Yiddish literary scholars approached Jewish love songs. She would begin with an observation: “In a society of arranged marriages, the first contact between boys and girls occurred as they were working together as apprentices, in small clothing factories, for example.” She explained how the Yiddish love song was a product of social dance, when feelings of love and attraction would filter through the steps. Then she made her point: “Now, here’s a quote from M. Pinnis, who wrote ‘*Di geshikhte fun der yiddisher literatur*’ (*The History of Yiddish Literature*). He says ‘not until the middle of the nineteenth century, when early marriages were abandoned and secular literature began to penetrate even to the most backward sections of the people, acquainting them for the first time with such terms as “love” and “beloved,” the first Yiddish love songs were born.’ I don’t know where he gets his theory,” Rubin would remark. “Did you ever hear of anything so ridiculous? He wrote this in the 1920s, when he should have known better.”

She went on: “And now here’s a quote from Professor Leo Wiener, author of another such volume, from Harvard, no less, and he writes “The word “love” does not exist in the Judeo-German Yiddish dictionary. And, whenever that feeling, with which they have been acquainted only since the middle of the [nineteenth] century, is to be named, the Jews have to use the German word, “*liebe*.”” Her parting shot: “Did you ever hear any-

thing so klutzish?” But behind her blunt opinions lay indisputable insight: “Instead of seeking the facts among the lower strata of the people, [scholars] looked among the higher and middle groups, the economically secure religious patriarchal environment, which, up to the period mentioned, contributed very little to our secular folksong.”

Rubin could also be kind. She lavished praise on those who set the stage for her work, scholars such as Y. L. Cahan, who collected large numbers of songs in the first four decades of the twentieth century (even though, in contrast to Ruth, he lacked basic music notation skills). Cahan wrote, “Secular Yiddish love songs were current among the people in the Pale of Settlement during the first half of the nineteenth century, and the passion of true love was known to the Jewish community.” Ruth backed up this view by referring to Mendele, often called the “grandfather of Yiddish literature,” who was born in 1836 and grew up during the period Cahan described, and wrote about the love songs he heard as a child.

Meticulous scholarship and a no-nonsense approach was a way of life for Ruth, who not only knew virtually all of the literature on Jewish music, folklore, history, and sociology, but could reference vast quantities of cross-cultural material as well. One of her favorite pastimes was finding parallels between Yiddish cultural expression and the folklore and literature of other peoples. One bit of research she loved to quote was her discovery of the roots of the popular Yiddish workers’ anthem “*Un du akerst*” (“So you plow”) in a poem written by Percy Bysshe Shelley in England, in 1819.

SWANBOATS AND SONGS

I was in high school when I first became aware of Ruth’s work, having borrowed her *Treasury of Jewish Folksong* (1950) from the Free Library in Philadelphia. I remember looking at the photograph of the author on the cover and thinking how little she resembled the flamboyant older men and women whom I had come to associate with Yiddish music. In contrast to vaudeville-style Yiddish singers like Molly Picon, or Aaron Lebedoff, or Menashe Skulnick, whose faces I remembered from my grandfather’s sheet music, she looked far more sophisticated and intellectual. I finally met her in Boston in 1982, and shortly afterward I heard her speak at the National Yiddish Book Center. Her lecture, an extraordinary blend of scholarship and entertainment, was inspiring. Totally revved up to redouble my own efforts to rescue lost Jewish music, I jumped right in during the question-and-answer

period and asked her what I considered to be an innocent question: “Where can someone looking to do the kind of work you do find grants, stipends, and other financial support?” She stared right at me and said sternly, “Young man, don’t ever expect any support for work like this. No one in the Jewish community cares about it. Everything

I would stop in at Ruth’s apartment by Gramercy Park. We would often sit out in the elegant private park and talk, after she proudly opened the wrought-iron gate with her personal key. We collaborated on several concerts and taught together at Klezkamp. I invited her to Boston, where she offered weeklong seminars on Yiddish folk-

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Shoyn avek der Nekhtn

Yesterday Is Already Gone

Sung by Ruth Rubin, New York City, 1960. Variant: Idelsohn, *Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies*, vol. 9, Song #560. St.

Shoyn a - vek der nekh - tn, Nokh ni - to der mor - gn.

S'iz nor ge - bli - bn a bi - se - le haynt. Shtert im nit mit zor - gn.

Refrain
Day-day - day, day - day, day - day, day-day-dam. Day-day-day, day-day-day, day-day-day, dam.

Day - day, day - day, day - day, day-day-dam. Day-day-day, day-day-day, day-day-day, dam.

1. Shoyn avek der nekhtn,
Nokh nito der morgn.
S'iz nor geblibn a bisele haynt.
Shtert im nit mit zorgn.

Refrain

Day-day-day, day-day-day, day-day-day, dam.
Day-day, day-day, day-day, day-dam.

1. Yesterday is already gone,
Tomorrow has not yet come.
Only a bit of today remains.
Do not spoil it with worrying.

Refrain

Day-day day, day day day, day day day, dam.
Day-day, day-day, day-day, day-dam.

I have done, I have done while supporting myself with other work. You will do it because you believe in it.”

Later we were invited to the home of one of the Book Center’s supporters, and after lunch I volunteered to do the dishes. To my great surprise Ruth joined me, and within a few minutes we were singing Yiddish songs together as the suds flew. At that moment I realized there was, in fact, help and support on its way – from none other than Ruth Rubin.

Every time I visited New York in the years following,

song as part of the New England Conservatory Summer School, and during those visits she really became part of my family. I will always relish the memory of the summer afternoon when she took my then three-year-old daughter Leah for a ride on the swanboats in Boston’s Public Garden, and I was delighted to be the presenter when she received her honorary doctorate from the New England Conservatory in 1993. In 1997, while pursuing my own PhD at Wesleyan University, I organized a concert so that my students could meet her and, at the

same time, entertain the residents at the Mamaroneck Jewish Home, where she resided in her last years. Even then, after Alzheimer’s had robbed her of much of her memory, she waxed eloquent on Yiddish folksong and, at age 90, led the dancing.

A LASTING RECORD

The posthumously published *Yiddish Folksongs from the Ruth Rubin Archive* (Wayne State University Press, 2007) is a musical expansion of Ruth’s previous milestone volume, *Voices of a People: The Story of Yiddish Folksong* (1963). Ruth worked on the *Archive* manuscript for 20 years, until her mental acuity began to deteriorate. The pages lay dormant until scholars Mark Slobin of Wesleyan University and YIVO’s Chana Mlotek secured permission to complete it and bring it out. In the new book, Rubin traces the Jewish life-cycle structure she often used in her lectures, dividing songs into categories such as lullabies, children’s songs, courting songs, love songs, wedding songs, and work songs. She also includes chapters on Hasidic *nigunim*, anti-Hasidic satires, and drinking songs.

The new volume is the first to have a full chapter on songs about “Soldiers, Sweethearts, and Wars,” a subject Ruth took very seriously. “The *recruim* relates to a time in Russia in 1827, when the czarist government issued a decree of 25 years of mandatory service for all ethnic groups. Very few of these conscripts survived. If the community failed to produce grown men, it was permitted to send children; otherwise, the czarist government would destroy the communities. Going into the army was nothing that anybody wanted to do; they would do anything to avoid it. So this

decree was death. And some of these characters who survived the 25 years were called, ‘Nicolaevsky Soldatn’ [i.e., Russian soldiers, no longer Jews]. And when they came back they were thoroughly assimilated; they were like peasants, because they were taken as children, and they forgot their Yiddish and everything else. It was a tragedy among the people.”

The *Archive* also includes eloquent tributes from performers, scholars, and activists who continue her work, as well as a CD of “The Old Country,” the extraordinary collection of field recordings Ruth prepared for Folkways



Records in 1964 under the direction of Moe Asch, Sholem Asch’s son. The recording, featuring a mere fraction of the material she collected, provides a tantalizing glimpse into the priceless resources captured just in the nick of time by a scholar and troubadour who grasped her mission and true calling in life. ♦

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