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Fiddler as a Fig Leaf

The Politicisation of Klezmer in Poland

Klezmer music has become very popular in Poland. The Festival of Jewish Culture in Cracow has gained national and international significance. Nonetheless, this is about more than music. The festival has become a litmus test, by which changes in the country's political mood and its attitude towards its Jewish heritage is measured.

*Jews in Poland are important. As a subject.
A subject significant to everyone, to some – obsessive.*

Stanisław Krajewski, *Żydzi, Judaizm, Polska*¹

*Even a Communist government wants to be popular.
Rock 'n' roll costs nothing, so we have rock festival at
the Palace of Culture.*

Jan in Tom Stoppard's *Rock 'n' Roll*

“There is no music without ideology”, said Dmitrii Shostakovich. In Poland, which constitutes a major East European market for commercialized *yidishkayt*, and which is still struggling to acknowledge the Jewish perspective in its collective remembrance of the past, the recent revival of Jewish folk music reverberates not only in concert halls. While klezmer music² accompanies anti-fascist demonstrations in Germany, and clarinetist Giora Feidman, “the king of klezmer”, is honoured with the Great Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, the political significance of the klezmer revival has not been lost on Germany's eastern neighbours either.

To be sure, the politicization of this Jewish musical heritage is not a new phenomenon. In the interwar years, it was not uncommon for klezmer *kapelyes* (bands) to accompany political rallies or marches in Eastern Europe.³ Even in the Weimar Republic, East European Jewish folk songs were frequently used by various Jewish

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¹ Stanisław Krajewski, *Żydzi Judaizm Polska* (Warsaw 1997), p. 153.

² The term “klezmer” originally denoted the traditional instrumental music of East European Jewry. However, with the revival of the genre in recent decades, the term has expanded to include new compositions and vocal pieces. In Poland, the label klezmer is often used to market a diverse mix of music ranging from Hebrew folk songs to Polish-language songs by Jewish composers and songwriters. I use the term “klezmer” here according to this contemporary usage.

³ Yale Strom, *The Book of Klezmer* (Chicago 2002), pp. 129–130.

organizations to generate Jewish group identities in the age of dissimilation.⁴ Jewish folk music is also a part of the founding myth of Birobidzhan, a district for the Jews that was established in eastern Siberia. New Yiddish songs celebrating the prosperity of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast within the Soviet Union entered the canon of Yiddish songs throughout the Communist bloc.⁵

By contrast, in the United States, where klezmer arrived along with East European Jewish refugees at the turn of the 20th century, the genre remained politically neutral for a long time. Klezmer then “faded from view”, because “[n]o movement, whether political or religious, had claimed this kind of music”.⁶ This situation changed with the klezmer revival of the 1970s and 1980s. The beginnings of the U.S. klezmer revival are to be found in the protests of the 1960s generation against the Israel policy of American-Jewish leaders.⁷ In fact, one of the features of the klezmer revival in the United States – a “counter-culture phenomenon” in the words of author and performer Yale Strom – was the search for a cultural reference point other than Israel.⁸

In today’s Poland, interest in the country’s Jewish heritage is booming. New festivals of Jewish culture are popping up across the country, former Jewish quarters are being renovated, and Jewish folk music has even made its way onto Saturday evening television. It therefore comes as no surprise that this revival had also attracted the attention of local authorities, politicians, and the media. Klezmer music, an accessible and media-effective form of Jewish heritage, has become the *pars pro toto* of Jewish culture in general. What is more, it corresponds to David Lowenthal’s definition of heritage as “a profession of faith in a past tailored to present-day purposes”.⁹

Klezmer: Political Correctness for All Occasions

Klezmer music embellishes all kinds of official events in Poland. Klezmer bands played, for example, at a celebration honouring Poland’s Righteous among the Nations, a meeting of Bishop Stanisław Gądecki with Rabbi Michael Schudrich, and at a commemoration ceremony of the anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. It seems that klezmer has become an all-purpose “politically correct” genre that can be successfully employed not only within the context of interreligious dialogue and Holocaust-related events, but as the soundtrack for occasions where there is no obvious reason for using Jewish music.

Klezmer has even become a part of the political discourse. Unsurprisingly, the revival of Jewish heritage music serves as a prime example of Polish-Jewish reconciliation and dialogue and comes in very handy as a counter-image when xenophobic and antisemitic acts of violence occur in Poland. Large-scale manifestations of Jewish heritage, such as the Jewish Culture Festival in Cracow are particularly powerful

⁴ Philip Bohlman, *Jüdische Volksmusik – eine mitteleuropäische Geistesgeschichte* (Vienna, Cologne and Weimar 2005), p. 27.

⁵ A collection of Yiddish songs from Birobidzhan were reprinted also in German Democratic Republic: Lin Jaldati, Eberhard Rebling, eds., *Es brennt, Brüder, es brennt. Jiddische Lieder* (Berlin 1985), p. 213.

⁶ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Sounds of Sensibility”, *Judaism* 47, 1 (1998), p. 57.

⁷ Rita Ottens, Joel Rubin, *Klezmer-Musik* (Munich 1999), p. 296.

⁸ Michael Alpert quoted in Strom, *The Book of Klezmer*, p. 224.

⁹ David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge 2005), p. x.

symbols. The final concert is broadcast on public television and watched by several hundred thousands of Poles. Consequently, these flagship cultural events of Jewish heritage are employed in public discourse to illustrate Polish society's positive attitude towards Jews.

Cracow's first Jewish Culture Festival in 1988 immediately caught the media's attention and was acclaimed as "a cultural event of great importance" and "unprecedented not only in Poland, but also in the socialist bloc [sic!]"¹⁰ Local commentators, who at that time were unaware of East Berlin's Days of Yiddish Culture (*Tage der Jiddischen Kultur*, 1987–1996), believed that the first festival marked the start of an ideological thaw in the Communist bloc, and that Jewish heritage could be more freely presented. One journalist described the festival as a groundbreaking event: It "blazed a new path and new course of action in a field that had been especially neglected and denied"¹¹.

This "new path" meant not only educating Poles about the Polish-Jewish past, but strengthening Polish-Israeli relations as well. At a time when Israel did not have an embassy in Warsaw, the presence of Israeli diplomats at the festival was a clear political statement that could be interpreted as a harbinger of change. The organizers of the second, this time international festival in 1990 visibly profited from the systemic change underway in Poland. The public display of Jewish heritage marked a symbolic end to the Communist state's monolithic model of culture.¹²

As the festival grew in size and importance, the political significance ascribed to it by the media increased accordingly. Reporting on the festival's final concert in 1995, the daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* wrote that the development of Polish-Jewish dialogue is easier to carry out by "means of culture" than by "listing the wrongs suffered".¹³ The official Web site that promotes Polish culture abroad wrote in 2002 that the festival was "the best way of bringing together these two nations – the Polish nation and the Jewish nation"; this was made possible "[m]ainly thanks to the music, which is a special form of cultural transmission and which is omnipresent at the festival".¹⁴ Similarly, the weekly *Polityka* interpreted the festival's final concert in 2004 as a "symbol of reconciliation, forgiveness, and victory of life over death, recognizable in Poland and in the world".¹⁵ Clearly, the impact ascribed to the revival of Jewish heritage in Poland, epitomized by Cracow's Jewish Culture Festival, has come to be measured in universal values. The festival, presented as both a symbol and means of reconciliation, is no longer anchored in its particular Polish, spatial, and temporal context, but has come to be identified with transcendent, long-term historical processes.

Polish politicians were likewise prompt to adopt the revival of Jewish musical heritage as a showcase of a successful multicultural policy. Former President Aleksander Kwaśniewski spoke of the Cracow festival as a platform for dialogue, a contribution

¹⁰ Oskar Sobański, "Więcej niż fascynacja", *Film*, 27, 3 July 1988, cited in *Powiększenie*, 1–4 (1990), p. 250, and Janusz Michalczak, "Swoi i obcy", *Dziennik Polski* (20 May 1988), cited in *ibid.*, p. 251.

¹¹ Sobański, "Więcej niż fascynacja" cited in *Powiększenie*, 1–4 (1990), p. 250.

¹² Krzysztof Gierat and Janusz Makuch, *II Festiwal Kultury Żydowskiej, Kraków 1990* (Cracow 1990), p. 11.

¹³ Grażyna Lubińska, "W blasku synagogi Tempel", *Gazeta Wyborcza Kraków* (19 June 1995).

¹⁴ Jean Kahn in <www.culture.pl/en/culture/artykuly/wy_fe_kultura_zydowska_2002>.

¹⁵ Katarzyna Janowska, "Festiwal Żydowski. Duch Kazimierza", *Polityka*, 28 (2460), (10 July 2004), p. 58.

to integration, and a part of “common heritage”.¹⁶ Similarly, Warsaw Mayor Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz expressed his belief that his city’s Festival of Jewish Culture “serves the present Polish-Jewish dialogue and ... spreads the idea of tolerance”.¹⁷ For Cracow Mayor Józef Lassota, the Jewish Culture Festival in his city was even the antithesis of Auschwitz. He opened the fourth festival with the words:

I hope that, just as Auschwitz became the symbol of extermination, Cracow will become the symbol of the preservation of what can be conserved – the memory of Polish Jews and their culture.¹⁸

Some have interpreted the successful revival of Jewish heritage in Poland as proof of Poland’s traditional openness and a rebuttal of claims that Poland is an antisemitic country. Mayor Marcinkiewicz spoke of the Jewish festival in Warsaw as an event that allows its visitors to “get to know and remember Warsaw as a city open to a variety of cultures and religions”.¹⁹ Addressing the participants of the Jewish Culture Festival in Cracow, then Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek wrote that the city had “always been open and hospitable”.²⁰ One reviewer wrote: “No-one who attended this great feast of Jewish music in Kazimierz is ever going to believe that Poland is an anti-Semitic country.”²¹

This public narrative of the festival as a success story of peace and reconciliation, not only for its organizers and participants but for the entire Polish nation, is occasionally forced to confront acts of antisemitism parallel to the “feasts of Jewish music”. *Gazeta Wyborcza* reported during the 1994 Cracow festival that a Jew had been beaten up by skinheads “in full view” of the festival audience, and that several grave-stones at the Jewish cemetery had been damaged.²² More recently, in 2007, on the day of the festival’s final concert in Cracow, neo-fascists marched in nearby Myślenice to celebrate the anniversary of anti-Jewish riots that took place before the Second World War.²³ While the story of the festival tends to be framed as if it were shared by the citizens of Cracow or the Polish nation as whole, the bitter counterpoints to this optimistic depiction are considered exceptions.

Battle for Primacy of Heritage

The revival of Poland’s Jewish heritage, however, is instrumentalised not only by those Poles who see in it a panacea for Poland’s antisemitism, but also by those who deny the very existence of the malady. Some political figures in Poland are particular-

¹⁶ Aleksander Kwaśniewski in *11. Festiwal Kultury Żydowskiej w Krakowie* (Cracow 2001), p. 3.

¹⁷ Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz in *Festiwal Kultury Żydowskiej Warszawa Singera* (Warsaw 2006), p. 5.

¹⁸ Józef Lassota in *4. Festiwal Kultury Żydowskiej w Krakowie. 19.–26. czerwca 1994* (Cracow 1994), p. 2.

¹⁹ Marcinkiewicz in *Festiwal Kultury Żydowskiej Warszawa Singera*, p. 5.

²⁰ Jerzy Buzek in *11. Festiwal Kultury Żydowskiej w Krakowie* (Cracow 2001), p. 4.

²¹ Elżbieta Morawiec, “Polska leży w Europie”, *Nowy Świat* (23 June 1992), printed in *4. Festiwal Kultury Żydowskiej w Krakowie. 19.–26. czerwca 1994* (Cracow 1994), p. 55.

²² Dorota Szwarzman, Grażyna Lubińska, “IV Festiwal Kultury Żydowskiej w Krakowie 19–26 czerwca. Klezmerzy nowocześni”, *Gazeta Wyborcza* (28 June 1994), p. 11.

²³ Bartłomiej Kuraś, “ONR z poparciem PIS?”, *Gazeta Wyborcza* (2 July 2007), p. 4.

ly sympathetic to certain concerns voiced by their voters and see the promotion of Jewish heritage as undesirable, even detrimental to advancing Polish values.

Shortly after being sworn in as Polish prime minister, Jarosław Kaczyński put this point of view into words on the Catholic TV channel *Telewizja Trwam* in July 2006. After a viewer called the studio to complain about the partiality of public television, which had broadcast “some klezmer band” during the final concert of the Jewish festival, but had made no reference to a pilgrimage of the country’s “best Poles, that is, Catholics and patriots” to the shrine of the Black Madonna in Częstochowa, Kaczyński responded:

Here, I fully agree with you, the example was terrific. Something important is taking place in Częstochowa, something that should be broadcast, and at length, and nothing is said about it. On the other hand, there is an event of, frankly speaking, city-, district-level, maybe municipal-level significance, and it is shown. I have nothing against it being shown, but there is a certain hierarchy. And it should be respected.²⁴

The hierarchy to respect is, in this case, Polish, i.e. Catholic, heritage first. The broadcast of the Jewish festival in this case is interpreted as a sign of the public media’s inadequate support for the Kaczyński government’s politics, and klezmer music as the antithesis of “true” Polish heritage.²⁵

Although nationalist-Catholic media – such as *Telewizja Trwam* and the daily *Nasz Dziennik* – use the symbolic force of initiatives such as the various festivals of Jewish culture to emphasise Polish benevolence to the Jews, they also resent the public visibility of such events.²⁶ As was illustrated by recent protests against the monument of David the Psalmist, which was erected in Zamość in 2007, the “defenders” of Polishness consider any representation of Jewish heritage “alien to [Polish] culture and national identity”.²⁷ In this battle for primacy of heritage, space dedicated to Jewish heritage is, from their perspective, lost space for Polish heritage. The same principle may be what motivates those who, with unwavering determination, year after year, paste large tags reading “called off” (*odwołane*) on the posters advertising the Jewish Culture Festival in Cracow. However, this symbolic act, which is marginal relative to the far-reaching publicity given the festival, exemplifies the persistent rejection of Jewish heritage among some Poles.

The organizers of the Cracow festival complain less about such individual acts of vandalism than they lament the general lack of interest on the part of authorities in promoting other less spectacular local initiatives aimed at preserving the city’s Jewish heritage. Cracow festival director Janusz Makuch says that Polish politicians are losing an opportunity to change Poland’s image abroad where Polish-Jewish relations are concerned.²⁸ Although Cracow’s Jewish Culture Festival is supported in part by the

²⁴ Jarosław Kaczyński cited in “Premier Kaczyński w Radiu Maryja, Rozmowy niedokończone, 23 lipca Radio Maryja i Telewizja Trwam”, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 29–30 July 2006, p. 16.

²⁵ On the world view of the Kaczyński government, see *Quo vadis, Polonia? Kritik der polnischen Vernunft* [= OSTEUROPA 11–12/2006] (Berlin 2006).

²⁶ See, for example, the letter of the Patriotic League of American Polonia (Patriotyczna Liga Polonii Amerykańskiej) published in “W obronie prawdy”, *Nasz Dziennik* (3 August 2007), available at <www.naszdziennik.pl/index.php?dat=20070803&typ=po&id=po51.txt>.

²⁷ Mariusz Kamieniecki, “Niechciany pomnik”, *Nasz Dziennik* (22 May 2007), available at <www.naszdziennik.pl/index.php?dat=20070522&typ=po&id=po33.txt>.

²⁸ On this, see the contribution by Katrin Steffen in this volume, pp. 195–217.

Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and takes place under the honorary patronage of the president of Poland, Makuch believes that Polish politicians still do not fathom the festival's true significance:

I never stop urging politicians to realize the festival's value. I believe that our politicians still treat this festival as just any other event, without understanding the fact that it is an expression of certain hopes, expectations, and wishes originating from the fact that 3.5 million Jews once lived here, and now there is a void.²⁹

Zev Feldman, one of the pioneers of the American klezmer revival, both a musicologist and a performer who is a regular guest at the Cracow festival, notes the discrepancy between the positive image generated by the festival and the real problems of Polish-Jewish relations, which remain unresolved. Feldman, observing the political situation in Poland in the summer of 2007, remarked:

I can see that in this situation anything that makes Poland seem like a fair, liberal, honest country would serve the interests of the people representing Poland to the world. And it's the kind of thing that would look positive, even if all the underlying issues were never resolved at all. It's possible for a country to have a festival like this and still have an antisemitic party in charge of education.³⁰

Makuch is also aware of the fact that the festival often serves as "a fig leaf to conceal the real problem". He resents the festival being used as a "rhetorical device" in politicians' speeches and dreams of Polish authorities recognizing the didactic importance of the event, around which one could build "a programme of mental changes" in Poland:

People have to realize the dimensions of the enormous evil that was done here and understand that it is important to cleanse themselves of it. The festival creates a confessional space that should help people realize what happened here and what we have lost. We have to ask ourselves the question why we lost it, what our guilt is, what our Polish complicity is in the fact that this Jewish world is not only gone, but will never return.³¹

Unfortunately, as part of the public discourse about the revival of Jewish heritage in Poland indicates, there is vehement opposition to a collective discussion on Polish complicity in the disappearance of the "Jewish world". The messianic tradition, by which Poland has endured repetitive historical wrongs as the "Christ of the Nations" in order to redeem Europe, encourages Poles to dwell on Polish losses, rather than to

²⁹ Interview with Janusz Makuch, 3 May 2007.

³⁰ The interview with Zev Feldman was carried out on 23 August 2007, when Roman Giertych, the leader of the extreme right-wing League of Polish Families (*Liga Polskich Rodzin*) was minister of education and deputy prime minister in the Kaczyński government.

³¹ Makuch, 3 May 2007.

sympathize with the Jewish suffering during the Holocaust.³² And the “obsession of innocence”³³ celebrated in public discourse impedes critical perspectives on anti-Jewish violence, the appropriation of Jewish property, and the widespread moral indifference towards the Holocaust. Rather than serving as a starting point of painful therapy, the Jewish heritage boom is flaunted as ultimate proof of perfect health.

Klezmer and World Politics

The revival of Jewish heritage in Poland is not only politicized in the public discourse at home, but is also affected by political events around the world. Like a seismograph, the Jewish Culture Festival in Cracow registers shock waves emanating from international political upheaval, particularly those originating in the Middle East.

In 2002, news of the stand off between Fatah militants and the Israeli Defence Forces at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem triggered an immediate response aimed at the Jewish festival. A group of Polish veterans, represented by their spokesman Jerzy Bukowski, composed an open letter to the Cracow municipal authorities and the organizers of the Jewish Culture Festival, urging them to cancel the event. The authors of the letter, who justified their appeal with “concern for the safety of the festival’s participants, particularly the guests of Jewish origin as well as Arab restaurant owners in Cracow”,³⁴ requested that the financial means devoted to organising the festival be redirected to rebuild the damaged fragments of the Bethlehem church. Shortly thereafter, the signatories, together with activists from the Polish-Arab Cultural Association, organized a demonstration against the Israeli occupation and again demanded that the Jewish Culture Festival be called off.³⁵

The line of argument connecting the festival with the conflict in the Middle East was striking in that it reflected domestic partisan considerations more than any true concern for the Israelis or Palestinians. Although protest organizers feared that the Cracow festival might become a scene of violence, they were particularly outraged by the “merciless attack of the Israeli army on one of the holiest sites of Christianity”.³⁶ The Jewish Culture Festival, as one of the most successful and far-reaching manifestations of Jewry in Poland, was thus turned into a screen onto which anti-Israeli sentiment and stereotypes of Jews as enemies of Christianity could be projected.

The Jewish Culture Festival in Cracow, which, like many other similar initiatives in Poland, concentrates primarily on the heritage of East European Jews, has also fostered good relations with Israel and Israeli culture. The Embassy of Israel in Warsaw is among the festival’s sponsors, Israeli artists are frequent guests, and the 2008 festival included many special events to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the State of Israel. In fact, festival director Makuch makes it clear that he has no intention of disowning the State of Israel, and in moments of military or political tension in the Middle East, he

³² The concept of national messianism was developed in Poland by primarily Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) in his drama *Dziady*, where he presents a vision of Poland as the crucified Christ among the nations of Europe. This messianic philosophy has since been used to frame Polish national suffering in the pattern of redemption.

³³ Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Rzeczy mgliste* (Sejny 2004), p. 13–15.

³⁴ “List otwarty do władz miasta Krakowa i organizatorów Festiwalu Kultury Żydowskiej”, *Gazeta Wyborcza Kraków* (10 April 2002), p. 2.

³⁵ “Przeciw okupacji i festiwalowi”, *Gazeta Wyborcza Kraków*, 13 April 2002, p. 4.

³⁶ “List otwarty”, p. 2.

does not hesitate to express his open support for Israel. At the 2006 festival, which coincided with the conflict in Lebanon, Makuch introduced the open-air concert of the Israeli drummer Shlomo Bar, saying: “Shlomo Bar is the voice of the desert, the voice of Israel, with which we all share in solidarity.”³⁷ Thus, the final concert of the festival was also presented as a gesture of solidarity with the Jewish state at war.

With the special focus on Israel, it was all but inevitable that the 2008 festival would also turn into a political event. Even though festival organizers distanced themselves from the political dimension of the 60th anniversary of Israel’s founding by declaring that the festival was not to “celebrate a political act”, but to “present the great melting pot of cultures in Israel”,³⁸ their statement did not prevent an extreme nationalist group from demonstrating against Israel in front of one of the synagogues during the address by the Israeli ambassador. The organisation behind the protest, the *Narodowe Odrodzenie Polski* (National Renaissance of Poland) – which is notorious for its antisemitic publications and fascist inclinations – framed its manifestation in terms of a human rights protest, accusing Israel of committing genocide against the Palestinians. The organizers of the festival reacted to the protestors by forming a human chain to hide the nationalist banners. Thus, by treating the festival as a symbolic extension of Israel, Polish nationalists appropriated the festival’s space and turned it into a political showdown.



Volunteers block a nationalist banner at the Cracow Festival in 2008.

³⁷ Interview with Janusz Makuch, 8 June 2006.

³⁸ Makuch quoted in Ryszard Kozik, “W izraelskim tyglu kultur”, *Gazeta Wyborcza* (27 June 2008), p. 18.

The festival also can also turn into an arena for spontaneous political statements not necessarily related to the State of Israel. Given that many of the artists performing at the festival come from the United States, commentaries on U.S. foreign policy have made their way into klezmer concerts. Lisa Mayer, a Jewish-American musician who gave a concert of Hassidic music at the 2003 festival, recalls an incident that took place one evening during a klezmer jam session:

Because it was July 4, I asked them if it was okay if I could just sing some American songs in honour of my country. And the first thing was someone screaming: “Get out of Iraq!” And I looked at them, and I said, “I didn’t vote for this president. I’m really sorry.”³⁹

The anti-American mood caused by the war in Iraq thus manifested itself in this quite unexpected context, making the Jewish festival again a forum for political comments. Developments in Polish domestic politics are likewise reflected at the festival. The traditional presidential letter to the participants of the festival has been missing since Lech Kaczyński of the party Law and Justice became president at the end of 2005. This absence has been particularly conspicuous in the festival’s official programme, where the president’s greeting used to appear on the first page. Current political events, whether in Poland or the Middle East, reverberate at the Jewish Culture Festival, even if it is not the organizers’ intent. The Cracow festival has become a litmus test by which Poland’s changing political mood and attitudes towards its Jewish heritage can be measured.

Musicians Without a Message?

Coming down from the highest echelons of power to the music itself, it is interesting to see to what extent musicians themselves use klezmer’s political potential. Messages of social or political critique are in fact not uncommon on the international klezmer scene. The celebrated American group the *Klezmatiks* not only advocate progressive gender politics in their songs, they also refer to 9/11 in their Yiddish version of Holly Near’s “I Ain’t Afraid”.⁴⁰ The American all-female klezmer band *Mikveh* emerged from a feminist campaign to stop violence against women.⁴¹ Other U.S. klezmer revivalists accept the Socialist content of songs of the anti-Zionist General Jewish Labour Union, the Bund, and have even recorded the Yiddish version of the “Internationale”.⁴²

Meanwhile, new, unorthodox klezmer songs are being made in Germany. The Jewish-American singer-songwriter Daniel Kahn, currently based in Berlin, made headlines

³⁹ Interview with Lisa Mayer, 23 August 2007.

⁴⁰ Abigail Wood, “The Multiple Voices of American Klezmer”, *Journal of the Society for American Music*, 1, 3 (2007), pp. 385–388.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 379.

⁴² “The Upward Flight. The Musical World of S. An-sky”, a CD accompanying, Gabriella Safran, Steven J. Zipperstein, *The Worlds of S. An-sky: A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century* (Stanford 2006).

with his song about the Vilnius-born Jewish partisan Abba Kovner (1918–1987).⁴³ His controversial song “Nakam (6000000 Germans)”, describes Kovner’s terrorist cell *Nakam* (Hebrew: vengeance), which sought to carry out spectacular acts of revenge for the Holocaust. Their goal: one German for every victim of the Shoah.

In this context, it is perhaps surprising to note that political and social dissent is actually avoided by Polish klezmer musicians. One searches in vain for Socialist or Communist songs in the repertoire of Polish artists. In fact, the entire revolutionary legacy of Yiddish songs remains taboo in Poland. What is more, even when Jan T. Gross’s book *Neighbours: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* was sending shock waves through Polish society in 2001 – as well as more recently when his latest work *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz* appeared in Polish translation in early 2008 – not a single song was dedicated to the Jedwabne pogrom, voiced empathy for the victims, or objected to the antisemitic sentiments unleashed by the debate. Although the Polish-Jewish past is a subject of deep political significance, the revivalists of Jewish heritage in Poland tend to divorce their work from politics.

Some Polish bands admit that they do not want their music to be “contaminated” by politics, or that they do not play klezmer music “for ideological reasons”.⁴⁴ Do Polish musicians avoid political overtones because the klezmer revival has been instrumentalised in public discourse? Or do they distrust the combination of “Jewish” and “political” as often employed in antisemitic propaganda in Poland?

Right-wing nationalist politicians and publicists began to link “Jewishness” with Communism back in the 1920s, when the term “Judeo-Communism” (*żydokomuna*) was coined. Inspired by the French for “Judeo-Masonry” (*judéo-maçonnerie*), the term was the Polish expression of the commonplace 19th-century European perception of Jews as conspiring to seize control of the world.⁴⁵ The myth of Judeo-Communism postulated that all Jews were Communists, and all Communists were Jews.

After 1945, the stereotype was based on two assumptions: that the Jews had supported Communism before the Second World War and had made up a majority within the Communist Party of Poland, and that they had imposed the Communist regime on the Poles after the war, enjoyed a privileged position within the regime, and benefited from it.⁴⁶ Historians have dismantled this stereotype, pointing out that Jews were no more supportive of Communism than Poles, even though the percentage of high-ranking party officials of Jewish descent was higher than the percentage of Jews in Polish society. This, however, was due to a higher literacy rate among Jews as well as the fact that many in Poland’s postwar Jewish community survived the Holocaust in the Soviet Union and saw in the Communists – first in the Polish Workers’ Party, then the Polish United Workers’ Party – the only force that could protect them after the war. Second, Jews did not necessarily profit from their leftist inclinations, given that

⁴³ Tom Segev describes the story of Abba Kovner in *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York 2000). The song *Nakam* is available at <<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=83093214>>.

⁴⁴ Interviews with Jarosław Bester, 17 April 2004, and Marcin Wiercioch, 30 June 2006, respectively.

⁴⁵ Aleksander Klugman, *Żyd – co to znaczy?* (Warsaw 2003), p. 171; Michael Steinlauf, *Pamięć nieprzyswojona: polska pamięć Zagłady* (Warsaw 2001), p. 64.

⁴⁶ Gross, *Fear*, p. 192.

the Polish United Workers' Party grew increasingly antisemitic over time and ultimately expelled the Jews from Poland in 1968.⁴⁷

At the peak of political hostility towards Jews in 1968, official antisemitic discourse also revolved around political issues. After the Six-Day War in 1967, when Poland's Communists sided with the Arabs, Polish Jews were depicted as a "fifth column", collaborating with "ex-Hitlerites", denigrating the Polish nation's martyrdom, and blaming Poles for the Holocaust.⁴⁸

The key features ascribed to the "anti-Polish Zionists" in 1968 were linked to their supposed political engagement (for the other side). Jews were depicted as members of some kind of "political, financial, or cultural establishment" and even assigned mutually exclusive identities, for example, that of both "Stalinists" and "agents of American imperialism". The Jew as the universal enemy provided the regime with a scapegoat for Stalinism's crimes.⁴⁹ As a result of this antisemitic campaign, around 20,000 Jews were forced to leave the country. With that, Poland lost almost all of its remaining Jews.

Are Polish musicians wary of the echoes of 1968 in their reluctance to make political statements in Jewish music? Would songs from the Bund on a Polish stage invoke the spectre of Judeo-Communism? Daniel Kahn and his band *Painted Bird*⁵⁰ – whose very name prompted a Polish journalist to remark: "They came to provoke" – explore complicated elements of Polish-Jewish history, but do so in Berlin.⁵¹

Polish klezmer musicians prefer to stay away from political connotations and controversy. But can Poles speak of an honest revival of Poland's Jewish heritage without addressing the Jewish revolutionary legacy and antisemitic depictions of Jews as Communists?

Conclusion

If music's relationship to politics is best expressed by the prepositions "for", "against", "despite", or "thanks to", the same is true for how politics positions itself vis-à-vis music.⁵² In Polish public discourse, it is clear that numerous prepositions are in circulation. Klezmer music functions in Poland as a metaphor for the popular interest in the country's Jewish heritage. The nature of this interest and its implications, however, are rarely probed. While some critics raise issues such as the commercialisation of Jewish heritage by mostly non-Jewish artists, the clichéd depictions of Jews within the klezmer scene, and the reduction of Jewish culture in public perception to folkloric images of shtetl life, these protestations rarely reverberate in official discourse.⁵³

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 199; Steinlauf, *Pamięć nieprzyswojona*, pp. 65–66.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 102.

⁴⁹ Dariusz Stola, "Fighting against the Shadows: The Anti-Zionist Campaign of 1968", in: R. Blobaum, ed., *Antisemitism and its Opponents in Modern Poland* (Ithaca and London 2005), pp. 284–300.

⁵⁰ *The Painted Bird* is the title of one of Jerzy Kosiński's novels, which was accused by some Polish critics as anti-Polish. *The Painted Bird* was banned in Poland until 1989.

⁵¹ Mariusz Wiatrak, "Kabaret makabryczny", *Gazeta Wyborcza Kraków* (29 June 2007), p. 7.

⁵² Stephan Eisel, *Politik und Musik. Musik zwischen Zensur und politischem Missbrauch* (Bonn 1990), p. 13.

⁵³ See *Midrasz*, 3, 107 (2006); Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Odrodzenie kultury żydowskiej w Europie* (Sejny 2005); Henryk Halkowski, *Żydowskie życie* (Cracow 2003); Bartosz Hlebowicz,

The revival of Jewish heritage, as embodied by klezmer, is presented as a symbol of and an actor in social processes. Klezmer stands in the public discourse for reconciliation between Poles and Jews and is at the same time believed to provide the social context for its achievement. The actual impact of the klezmer revival on its participants and the contribution of such events as Jewish festivals to the dialogue between Jews and non-Jews in Poland are not being called into question here. These issues have already been discussed elsewhere.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, the evidence presented in this article suggests that the klezmer revival has become a rhetorical device, a phenomenon that can also be invoked conveniently to deflect public attention from stubborn, latent antisemitic attitudes in Poland.

Poland's klezmer revival is instrumentalised in many contradictory ways. It is brought up as a counter-argument in debates on anti-Jewish prejudice, but it is also presented as antithetical and even threatening to Polish national heritage. Klezmer music in the Polish public discourse has clearly become a symbol that goes far beyond the actual musical phenomenon. The theatre director Michał Zadara confessed in a recent interview that he associated Poland with "the Shoah, klezmer music ... Communism, Wałęsa, and Chopin".⁵⁵ The reference to klezmer as a hallmark of Poland within such a list of symbols put forward by a prominent contemporary artist indicates that the term not only circulates widely in public discourse, but has become an indicator of contemporary social processes in Poland.

"Wierzchołek nieistniejącej góry", *Tygodnik Powszechny* (3 July 2005), available at <<http://tygodnik2003-2007.onet.pl/1548,1235372,0,dzial.html>>.

⁵⁴ See Ruth E. Gruber, "The Kraków Jewish Culture Festival" in Michael C. Steinlauf, Antony Polonsky, eds., *Polin. Focusing on Jewish Popular Culture and its Afterlife* (Oxford and Portland 2003), pp. 357–367; Erica Lehrer, "Bearing False Witness? Vicarious Jewish Identity and the Politics of Affinity", in Dorota Glowacka, Joanna Zylińska, eds., *Imaginary Neighbors* (Lincoln and London 2007), pp. 84–109; Magdalena Waligórska, "A Goy Fiddler on the Roof. How the Non-Jewish Participants of the Klezmer Revival in Kraków Negotiate Their Polish Identity in a Confrontation with Jewishness", *Polish Sociological Review*, 4, 152 (2005), pp. 367–382.

⁵⁵ Jacek Cieślak, "Kapitaliści nigdy nie mają pieniędzy", *Rzeczpospolita* (29 February 2008), available at <www.rp.pl/artykul/100027.html>.