

***Rumenye* (back) on the klezmer bandwagon?**

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Until quite recently, notably absent from the map of the institutions and events working to revive and commemorate Yiddish culture in central and eastern Europe has been Romania, that fabled land, beautiful, sweet, and fine, where, to quote Aaron Lebedeff, one can live a carefree life, drinking wine all the time, kissing girls, and eating the local gastronomical specialties – *carnați* (sausages, kosher naturally), *mamaliga* (corn porridge), *brânza*, and *cașcaval* (soft and hard cheese). As succinct an illustration as any of the existing gap in cultural memory were the pregnant silence and blank faces greeting New York-based klezmerim Deborah Strauss, Jeff Warschauer, and Benjy Fox-Rosen when in 2009 they opened a concert in Transylvania with the well-known (in American Jewish circles) strains of Lebedeff's 1920s vaudeville hit *Rumenye Rumenye*. Fox-Rosen, bassist and singer, recalls "There was absolutely no sign of recognition."

Granted, Lebedeff's *Rumenye* was, first and foremost, an American hit, and whether it was ever well known to those Jews (not to mention the non-Jewish population) who remained in Romania and did not emigrate is doubtful. Nevertheless, the silence encountered at that performance is indicative of a far-reaching general lack of knowledge regarding Romania's rich Yiddish cultural heritage and its global influence, as well as a pervasive reluctance to explore remnants within in the country. Romania as the cradle of klezmer music, the (sometimes disputed) birthplace of Yiddish theater, and stomping ground

of such significant Yiddish writers as Itzik Manger and Eliezer Shtaynberg, are characteristics little recognized in Romania today.

Romania's pre-war Jewish community numbered about 757,000, making it the second largest Jewish community in East Central Europe, after Poland. With Jews comprising just 4-5% of the population however, the overall proportion was lower than in Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, and Latvia.¹ With the exception of a few relatively assimilated urban communities in Transylvania and Bukovina (both Austro-Hungary until 1918) who spoke Hungarian or German and small numbers of wealthy assimilated Jews in Bucharest, the Jews spoke Yiddish. According to the census of 1930, about 70% of Jews listed Yiddish as their mother tongue; the real figure was probably higher as former and current rulers vied to swell or shrink minority population numbers.²

As throughout Europe, the war ravished the Romanian Jewish population: the northern Transylvanian communities were deported by the Hungarians in collaboration with the Nazis; the vast majority perished in Auschwitz in 1944. Antonescu's anti-Semitic policies expropriated the Jews across the country, depriving them of countless rights and forcing many into labor camps. The Romanian army deported the communities of the Bukovina and northeastern Moldova to Transnistria in 1941 where hundreds of thousands were killed or perished from exposure, starvation, and disease. Nevertheless about 400,000 Jews or half of the population survived the war, a staggering percentage as compared to the rest of Europe. The measures which resulted in a Romania whose Jewish population today numbers about 6,000 were undertaken by the

¹ Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 178.

² *Ibid.*, 182.

communist government, when in the 1950s and 1960s they began to sell their Jewish citizens to Israel for goods and hard cash.³

The disconnect between the multi-cultural history of pre-war Romania, whose borders contained, amongst others, substantial German, Hungarian, Jewish, Polish, Roma, and Ukrainian minority populations, and the largely monocultural country of today is reflected in the youth's understanding of local history. Jake Shulman-Ment is a klezmer violinist and 2010-2011 Fulbright scholar in the small Moldovan-region town of Botoșani, which once boasted more than 50 synagogues and prayer houses. Today one functioning synagogue remains, lavishly painted with bright folkloric images. The walls of another former shul, now a furniture workshop, still carry paintings of klezmer instruments. Shulman-Ment explains that “most high school students have no idea [that half of this city was Jewish]” and describes a presentation at a local high school “where no one knew what [Yiddish] was, even though it was one of the main languages, even when their parents were children.”

Of late, foreign and local NGOs have grown aware of the lacunae in educational material and cultural opportunities related to Romania's Jewish history. Instigated by a hodge-podge of inspired individuals, municipal administrations, and cultural institutes, and often backed by foreign funding, myriad initiatives focusing on local Jewish history have sprung up and been received with interest – the largest being the klezmer festival in Bucharest.

Karin Cervenka, an Austrian, has been in Bucharest as director of the Austrian Culture Forum since 2008. The aim of the Forum is to develop a cultural network between Austria and Romania, with a particular focus on contemporary art and promoting civil society dialogue. In

³ For details on this chapter of Romanian history see Radu Ionid's *The Ransom of the Jews: The Story of the Extraordinary Secret Bargain Between Romania and Israel*.

2009 the Forum organized the first klezmer festival in Romania "Jazz Meets Klezmer". The festival was an overwhelming success with all 6 concerts sold out. This summer the Forum held the 2nd annual klezmer festival, and the 4 concerts with bands from Poland, Russia, Austria, Moldova, and the USA, were again received enthusiastically. In explaining the motivation behind the festival, Cervenka referred to the so-called klezmer revival, asserting that the revival "had not yet reached Romania, a country with a large Jewish population before World War II" and that therefore the primary motivation was to return the music a country where it once thrived. She also adds that additional incentive was the fact that "Jewish heritage is no longer present in the mind of the Romanians."

Bob Cohen, musician, folklorist, and writer based in Budapest who first travelled to Romania in 1973 and has returned countless times since for field work and performances with his traditional klezmer ensemble "Di Naye Kapelye," performed at the 2009 festival and is frequently invited to concerts in Transylvania. Cohen reasons that the positive reception and burgeoning interest in Yiddish music and culture is due to "people getting to the middle class level [and] being able to afford to have interests that are not nationalist [...] They know that being interested in other ethnicities and nationalities of music from Romania is not threatening to them anymore."

Amongst many young Romanians there is a growing curiosity and desire to understand a complex history which more often than not is still conveyed bearing the marks of careful filtration through a communist lens. Boglárka Nagy, a young Romanian of Hungarian background who works as a cultural event organizer in Cluj, believes "there is interest in Yiddish culture anywhere" while admitting that among the younger generation there are some who "received their education from the generation that did not assume [responsibility for atrocities]"

In order for attitudes to change she insists that “people need contact with the object of their (possible) attention.”

In the eyes of the organizers, as well as the more-educated and open-minded Romanian youth, the primary role of events related to Yiddish-culture is, for now, one of education and reconciliation. Cervenka remarks that “Romania, in contrast to Germany, has not dealt with its past as it relates to the deportation and murdering of its Jewish citizens.” Accordingly, at the moment the events are of spectator character, with little audience contribution.

Events offered elsewhere in Europe have, over time, acquired more depth with participatory workshops for singers, dancers, and musicians as at the popular Krakow Jewish Festival or the 6-week Yiddish Summer Weimar workshops. Elsewhere universities offer academic options such as the Yiddish Institute in Vilnius, Lithuania, which celebrates its 13th anniversary this summer and similar programs exist throughout Europe including in Germany, Poland, France, and Ukraine. With an annual klezmer festival established, Jewish studies departments at three universities, and local actors becoming increasingly involved, the next step to be taken in Romania is for institutes to expand their programming, thus encouraging individuals in the audience to continue their involvement beyond the end of a concert or exhibition. Only in such a way will these initiatives create a sustainable interest amongst the population to explore and commemorate the cultural heritage of Jewish Romania.