Anna Shternshis, “Machine Guns, Mothers’ Graves and Hitler the Haman: Soviet Yiddish Songs of World War II”


Shternshis spoke about her latest project, which she described as “something between history, literature, and art.” This project is based on a recently discovered archive of World War II-era Soviet Yiddish folk songs, collected by a team of Ukrainian (Soviet) scholars led by the Jewish ethnomusicologist Moisei Beregovsky (1892-1961). During the war, Beregovsky and his colleagues at the ethnomusicology department of the Kiev-based Institute for Jewish Proletarian Culture (including the famous linguist Elye Spivak) were evacuated to Central Asia, where they continued to collect songs, stories, and testimonies. In 1947, they recorded hundreds of songs in Yiddish from Soviet Jews who had served in the Red Army, returned from Central Asia, or survived the war in Europe. Beregovsky and his colleagues prepared this material for publication under the title Jewish Creativity in the Soviet Union during the Great Patriotic War, but the volume was never released, likely due to its aberrance from Soviet ideology: Shternshis remarked that most of the songs emphasize specifically Jewish (rather than Soviet) suffering and/or heroism.

According to Shternshis, songs about service in the Red Army tend to emphasize violence and revenge. In the songs about life in occupied territories, a common motif is that of losing one’s parents: unlike Jews who joined the Red Army (of whom roughly two-thirds survived the war), the survival rate of Jews in Nazi-occupied Soviet territories was about 1%. In many songs, Hitler is compared to Haman, the villain of the Book of Esther, over whom Jews celebrate victory during Purim. Shternshis mentioned that Hitler was cursed as a specifically Jewish enemy, in myriad ways: “there are not enough curse words in the Yiddish language to describe every way they cursed Hitler.”

In the context of Soviet culture during World War II, Shternshis said that music “played a role in ideology, entertainment, and social commentary.” Many songs were specifically commissioned to motivate people to build and fight for a communist state. Other songs functioned as an outlet for escape—humorous music was an important wartime genre. Finally, folk songs were a means of interpreting events, and served as a medium for the preservation of historical memory.

After the war, Stalin changed his policies toward Jews, and all institutions of Jewish culture were closed down. Beregovsky and his group were arrested and their work was seized by the authorities. Elye Spivak died during interrogation in 1950, and others were sent to gulag labor camps for years: Beregovsky was released after his “rehabilitation” in 1956. In the Soviet Union of the 1950s, it became dangerous to speak about Yiddish culture in public. The material collected by Beregovsky’s group was transferred to a “department of restricted access” at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, where it remained for decades.
When Shternshis discovered this material, which “changes our understanding of the history of the Holocaust and how Jews in the Soviet Union made sense of their wartime experiences,” she felt that it was important to share it with a broader audience. She wanted to tell “the story of the people who sang these songs, but also that of the scholars who risked their careers to collect this material.” As such, a central part of her project was recreating these songs, a process which Shternshis described as “a sort of archaeological dig”—while many of the texts did not come with music, “the majority of wartime Yiddish songs in the Soviet Union and elsewhere in Europe were sung to already-existing tunes.” Once the preliminary work was completed, Shternshis brought together an “eclectic” group of classically trained musicians, the “Yiddish Glory” band. Yiddish Glory recently finished recording an album, and a Toronto-area promoter is now “booking shows [for them] all over the country.”

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