

Chana Mlotek Tribute, 12/8/13

I would like to thank the Mlotek family for this chance to praise Chana, who was my mentor, collaborator, and friend for some 40 years.

In 1979, I spent a sabbatical at YIVO, which kindly offered me an office of my own. By then, I had gotten to know Chana Mlotek, the doyenne of the Jewish song. She pointed to a set of black boxes circling the seminar room next door—"That's the Perlmutter Collection," she said. "We don't know what's in those boxes—why don't you start with that?" I couldn't believe that the manpower was not there, not only for the Perlmutter, but also for many other invaluable sources literally lying around the building.

Working on my own project, which became the book *Tenement Songs*, and informally doing an inventory of Perlmutter, when I needed to know the history of the song, Chana would simply open a file in her mental hard drive and come up with its entire history, both in performance and in print. As I went along, I could see the dim outlines of a continent of expressive culture, submerged under crashing waves of destruction and oblivion. Chana was the rescue ship, plowing ahead through the storms of history and the waves of neglect. To a considerable extent, she was able to right the vessel of memory and preservation and sail it a bit towards a safe harbor. Had YIVO supplied her with more provisions and a crew, she would have gotten closer. What will happen without someone at the helm remains unknown.

In the last period of our friendship, I was able to attract Chana into two projects: the music section of the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* and the book *Yiddish Folksongs from the Ruth Rubin Archive*. For the Encyclopedia, her overview of the music area helped me to map out the territory, and the entry she penned on Folk Songs is the single most useful short introduction to the Yiddish song to be found. For example, the paragraph on poetic devices takes the reader to the heart of music's cultural content and shows off not just Chana's academic training, but also the way that she fulfilled the mission that Max Weinreich empowered: to connect Yiddish words and melodies to structures of feeling as well as to historical unfolding.

The Rubin project was a sheer delight. Chana had reminded me that Ruth's manuscript lay unnoticed in the archives, and I somewhat innocently suggested we just put it out. It was a longer path from conception to execution than I had visualized. I realized we had to

contextualize Ruth herself and her projects, for which Chana contributed excellent insights, as well as carefully edit Rubin's writing, standardize some transliteration oddities, and so on. Literally sitting between Chana and Chava Lapin as we sorted out these issues was educational and even entertaining. The resulting book is a landmark in Yiddish folksong presentation. I have now used it twice with my Wesleyan undergraduates, making them buy this bulky volume and find a song they could perform themselves, in any format they liked. At first, I thought this might be a fiasco, but I was amazed at how they took to the material, not just for its suggestive texts, but for the sheer beauty of the melodies. The anthology has opened a window for today's students onto the treasurehouse of the *folkslid*, and Chana's expertise is very much a part of that impact.

I do hope a rising generation of researchers will pick up the torch and illuminate both the past and the future of the Yiddish song. It is the only proper tribute they can pay to the deep humanistic and technical knowledge that Chana brought to the heritage of a thousand years of expressive culture.