

AN OFFPRINT FROM

POLIN

STUDIES IN POLISH JEWRY

VOLUME SIXTEEN

*Focusing on Jewish Popular Culture in Poland
and its Afterlife*

Edited by

MICHAEL C. STEINLAUF

and

ANTONY POLONSKY

Published for

The Institute for Polish–Jewish Studies

and

The American Association for Polish–Jewish Studies

Oxford · Portland, Oregon

The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization

2003

Early Recordings of Jewish Music in Poland

MICHAEL AYLWARD

FOR seven years I have been working on a discography of commercial recordings of Jewish music made in Europe on cylinders and shellac records. This project has now progressed sufficiently for a work-in-progress report to be issued. I will initially give a general account of the discography as it stands at present and then concentrate on those aspects that apply especially to Poland.

OVERVIEW OF THE DISCOGRAPHY

The aim of the project is to document as far as possible all commercial recordings of Jewish music made in Europe on cylinders or shellac records (broadly speaking, 78 rpm records). When complete, this discography will list them all, together with all standard discographical details such as record label, catalogue number, matrix number, disc size, artist name and title of recording (together with details of

I would like to thank the following: Janet Topp-Fargion and Jane Harvell, National Sound Archive, London; Ruth Edge and her staff, EMI Sound Archive, London; Ewa Krysiak and Pani Wróblewska, Biblioteka Narodowa, Warsaw; Alan Kelly (Sheffield), Arthur Badrock (Norwich), Bill Dean-Myatt (Sutton Coldfield), Paul Vernon (London), George Woolford (Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk), Joel Bresler (Lexington, Massachusetts), Helen Winkler (Calgary), Michael Gunrem (La Ferté-Milon), Dina Levias (Geneva), Valeria Ieseanu, Chişinău (Kishinev), Pekka Gronow (Helsinki), Dr Risto Pekka Pennanen (Göttingen), and John DeMetrick (Budapest) for much discographical information and advice; Joel Rubin and Rita Ottens (Berlin) for their generous support and advice and invaluable technical information on Jewish music and recordings.

The following are important sources for the work I have been doing: R. Gelatt, *The Fabulous Phonograph 1877-1977* (London, 1977); M. Kominek, *Zaczęło się od fonografu* (Kraków, 1986); J. Łętowski, *Magia czarnego krążka: ABC kolekcjonera płyt* (n.p., 1981); J. Wollock, 'European Recordings of Jewish Instrumental Folk Music, 1911-1914,' *Association for Recorded Sound Collections Journal*, 28 (1997), 36-55; S. Prizament, 'Yidish teater in Lemberg', in I. Manger, Y. Turkov, and M. Perenson (eds.), *Yidisher teater in eyrope tsvishn beyde velt-milkhomes: poyln* (New York, 1968); J. Gelston, 'Lwów i śpiewacy brodczy', in A. Kuligowska-Korzeniewska and M. Leyko (eds.), *Teatr żydowski w Polsce* (Łódź, 1998); N. Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (New York, 1986); I. Fater, *Yidische muzik in poyln tsvishn beyde velt-milkhomes* (Tel Aviv, 1970); M. Fuks, *Muzyka ocalona* (Warsaw, 1989); J. Rubin and R. Ottens, *Klezmer-Musik* (Kassel, 1999); Z. Zilbertsvayg (Zylbercweig), *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, 6 vols. (New York, 1931-69); H. Veigl, *Lachen im Keller: Von den Budapestern zum Wiener Werkel. Kabarett und Kleinkunst in Wien* (Vienna, 1986).

composers and arrangers where these are given), precise recording date and recording location, name of recording engineer, and details of any records on which the original recording was later reissued. Every effort will also be made to provide artist biographies and additional information of interest.

The range of musical genres covered by the discography is wide, but may be broadly defined as applying to traditional Jewish music. For example, it excludes works by Jewish composers working in the European classical tradition; art music, even if specifically Jewish in tone and content; and non-Jewish music performed by Jewish artists. It does, however, extend to non-musical recordings such as comic monologues and dramatic recitals. In addition, there are separate appendices dealing with categories such as 'Jewish' music performed by non-Jewish artists¹ and Jewish parodies performed by non-Jewish artists, the latter a fairly common genre among pre-revolutionary Russian recordings, but rare in Polish ones of the same era.

Tables 1 and 2 give a snapshot of the discography as it currently stands. Although enlightening, they by no means give a representative picture. This is merely a view taken at a particular point in time of a project that is constantly evolving and will, by the time this chapter is published, be hopelessly out of date. The data recorded in these tables is based only on those recordings that have so far been entered onto the database. In addition to the 1,753 recordings noted here, there remain a further 2,000 or so recordings from the Gramophone and Zonophone companies that need to be entered, and an additional 1,500 or so recordings from a range of other companies. Most of the additional 2,000 Gramophone and Zonophone recordings were made in Poland and Russia, but that number also includes about 500 titles, mostly comic routines, made by Jewish artists from the polyglot theatres of Budapest such as the Fővárosi Orfeum, where performances appear to have been conducted in a mixture of Yiddish, Hungarian, and German. Many of the 1,500 or so recordings on other labels derive from Vienna, particularly from the Yiddish theatre and Jewish music hall (notably by artists from the Budapester Orpheum-Gesellschaft, whose entertainers were mostly Jewish and where routines were performed in German but with a very heavy admixture of Yiddish).

It is important to stress that of the 1,753 records noted in these tables only 150-odd were recorded after 1914 and that on closer examination some of these may ultimately prove to be reissues of pre-First World War recordings. Furthermore, all the 3,500 recordings still to be added to the database derive from the period 1899 to 1914.

Bald statistics such as these are usually misleading and the data set out in these tables are no exception. For example, the thirty-six Budapest recordings of Yiddish theatre songs were recorded in 1909 and 1911 and were all made by the ubiquitous

¹ As, for example, a title such as 'Żydowski krakowiak z wystawy', recorded by the Polish folk group Orkiestra Wicjska for the Gramophone Company sometime before 1925.

Table 1. Breakdown of recordings by record company and musical type

Record company	Cantorial	Synagogue choir	Yiddish theatre song	Yiddish song	Yiddish theatre orchestra	<i>Klezmer</i>	Instrumental	Spoken word	Miscellaneous	Total
Anker	2	5	12	2						21
Beka	68		20	4						92
Cristal Electro	4			10					12	26
Edison	3			1			5			9
Favorite	48	5	141	3						197
Gramophone	339	18	173	171	15	48	12	23		799
Homocord	13			14						27
Imperial	24		14	22		4				64
Jumbo			34	3						37
Odeon			8							8
Olimpia				6						6
Parlophone	52		12	2						66
Polska Płyta				22					3	25
Scala	24		92	5	4					125
Syrena	10		2	14					14	40
USIBA									1	1
Zonophone	34		52	95	15		6	1	7	210
TOTAL	621	28	560	374	34	52	23	24	37	1,753

Table 2. Breakdown of recordings by location and musical type

Location	Cantorial	Synagogue choir	Yiddish theatre song	Yiddish song	Yiddish theatre orchestra	<i>Klezmer</i>	Instrumental	Spoken word	Miscellaneous	Total
Bucharest	4	3	18							25
Budapest	56		36	5						97
Czernowitz	26			23		8				57
Lemberg	5		354	1			4		1	365
London	82		13	84		4	2			185
Moscow				20			2	6	1	29
Nizhny Novgorod				4						4
Odessa						6		4		10
Paris				14						14
Poltava							2			2
St Petersburg	25	9		82			4	14	4	138
Tarnów	11			14						25
Vienna	196	2	25	6						229
Vilna	43	4	11	34	30	15	3			140
Warsaw	121	5	82	79	4	19	1		31	342
Unknown	52	5	21	8			5			91
TOTAL	621	28	560	374	34	52	23	24	37	1,753

Pepi Litmann, who was born in eastern Galicia and seems to have been constantly on the move throughout her career. Presumably these recordings were made while she was on tour in Hungary. The staggering lack of recordings made in Romania (with the exception of those made in Czernowitz, which was located in Austria-Hungary during the period in which most of these recordings were made) may perhaps be explained by the fact that so far I have had little luck in tracking down information on the Odeon recording company, which was very active in this area and whose catalogues, when finally located in sufficient quantity, may well completely change the picture. The complete lack of recordings from western Europe (apart from Great Britain) is explained simply by the fact that I have not yet investigated this area. In view of this, I will, therefore, refrain from drawing any but the broadest conclusions from this set of figures and even these should be regarded as tentative.

On the basis of present findings, however, we can say that prior to the First World War there was in Europe, and specifically in eastern Europe, a vigorous Jewish music recording industry. This was centred predominantly in Poland, but was also fairly active in Russia, mainly in St Petersburg (very few recordings seem to have been made in Moscow), as well as in Vienna. The main type of music recorded was Yiddish songs from either the Yiddish theatre or other sources. The second largest category was cantorial music, and bringing up the rear was a small number of instrumental recordings, not much more than 6 per cent of the whole, even if we combine the figures for Yiddish theatre orchestras, *klezmer*, and other instrumental recordings. Moreover, this percentage figure will reduce drastically once the 3,500 other recordings are added in, as these are overwhelmingly non-instrumental.

THE FIRST JEWISH RECORDINGS IN POLAND

On the 22 July 1902 the Russian branch of the British-controlled Gramophone Company, which for two years had already been recording in Poland, opened a shop at 30 Nowy Świat. This was initially under the management of Franciszek(?) Rafalski and subsequently under that of Konwitz (the shop moved premises on 26 February 1903 to 116 Marszałkowska). The very same year that the Warsaw branch of the Gramophone Company opened its doors, recordings of Jewish music began to be made by the company. These were the first of what proved to be a steady stream of recordings until 1915, when the German occupation of Warsaw resulted in the closure of the British company. The very first Jewish recordings made by this company in Poland appear to have been a set of ten cantorial pieces sung by the cantor Gershon Sirota and recorded in Warsaw in 1902.

In 1903 the Gramophone Company took over its American arch-rival, the International Zonophone Company, and from 1904 Zonophone became the Gramo-

phone Company's budget label. To describe it in this way, and this is the usual way Zonophone is thought of, is to do it a major disservice. It may have been a budget label, but in the field of recordings of 'ethnic' music it made a substantial contribution. Between them the Gramophone Company and Zonophone issued from 1902 until 1915 about 3,000 Jewish recordings, about 90 per cent of which were recorded in eastern Europe, with Poland being the major recording centre.

They were, however, by no means the only companies active in this field. In December 1907 the German company Favorite-Record opened a branch in Warsaw at 2 Nalewki, moving in 1908 to 13 Graniczna. Even before setting up in Warsaw, the company had been actively recording artists from the Yiddish theatre in Lemberg (Lwów), and by December 1907 had already recorded at least eighty-nine titles by artists from this theatre. In subsequent years the company extended its Jewish recordings to Warsaw, where it recorded both cantorial and Yiddish theatre items.

By 1914 dozens of record companies were operating in Warsaw; many were branches of foreign-owned companies, but Polish companies were also making their mark. At this stage it is impossible to give a definitive accounting of which of these companies were issuing Jewish recordings. All that can be said is that the German-owned companies Beka, Jumbo, Odeon, and Scala were all active in this field to a greater or lesser extent. As regards Polish companies, the most significant was Syrena. Founded by Julius Feigenbaum, most probably in 1904, its shop at 153 Marszałkowska distributed a wide range of recordings of all types of music. Syrena has always had the reputation of having been a major source of Jewish music recordings, and it is believed that a substantial number were made. But documentary evidence concerning this company is notoriously difficult to come by and two weeks that I spent at the Biblioteka Narodowa in Warsaw in 1998 yielded information on only a handful of Jewish recordings. This lack of information has so far represented a major gap in our overall picture of recordings of Jewish music in Poland.

Miraculously, this gap is about to be filled. While the final draft of this chapter was being written, news arrived of the forthcoming publication of a complete Syrena discography written by the Polish discographer Tomasz Lerski. This three-part, 1,100-page magnum opus will appear under the title *Syrena Record: Pierwsza polska wytwórnia fonograficzna, 1904–1939* ('Syrena Record: The First Polish Phonograph Company, 1904–1939'). I am told by the author that it contains a very large number of Jewish recordings spanning the whole period. If so, then this work will contain detailed information (including artist biographies) on what was probably the only major source of Jewish recordings in Europe during the inter-war period.

THE RECORDED REPERTOIRE

As can be seen from the tables, the repertoire fell into two basic categories, cantorial and Yiddish theatre, plus a scattering of Yiddish songs and instrumental pieces.²

Cantorial

Recordings of cantorial music in Europe are dominated by two immensely prolific artists, Sawel Kwartin, based in Vienna, and Gershon Sirota, based in Warsaw and Vilna. Only twenty-nine of the 180 Polish cantorial items so far documented were not recorded by Sirota. These include recordings by the cantor Kipnis, who recorded six sides for the Gramophone Company in Warsaw 1902; Butzarski and Blacher, soloists of the Great Synagogue of Vilna, who recorded two sides for the Gramophone Company in Vilna in 1903, probably at the same session; the cantor Alter Melitzer,³ who recorded eleven sides for the German Homocord company in Tarnów in 1908 and also several Yiddish songs both as soloist and in duet with his son Israel Melitzer; the cantor I. Icht, who recorded eight sides for Syrena Record before 1924, probably not in Poland; and the cantor Fainer, who recorded a series of non-cantorial items for the Gramophone Company in Vilna in 1903.

Yiddish Theatre and Other Songs

Under the heading 'Yiddish Theatre Songs' I include recordings by Broder singers. These were itinerant actors and singers who toured throughout Galicia and Romania and often much farther afield, performing in taverns and cafés. There is no firm dividing line between Broder singers and theatre artists. Broder singers often moved into the theatre for a while, only to revert later on to their former profession. Likewise, theatre artists would also spend periods as Broder singers.⁴

This needs to be borne in mind when we consider the overwhelming significance of Lemberg as a recording centre for Yiddish theatre songs. Of the 560 Yiddish theatre recordings so far identified, 354 were recorded in Lemberg and of these about 100 are by Broder singers such as J. Reissmann, S. Podzamcze, and especially the hugely prolific Pepi Litmann, who was, according to Zalmen Zilbertsvayg (Zilbercweig) a personal favourite of Mendele Moykher Sforim, at whose home in Odessa she was a frequent guest during the First World War.

The remaining theatre songs recorded in Lemberg are by artists which the record catalogues invariably, but rather vaguely, refer to as belonging to the Jüdisches Theater Lemberg. However, a glance at the roster of artists immediately reveals that this theatre, as one would expect, is Yankev-Ber Gimpl's company. This was the main Yiddish theatre in Lemberg, which was founded by Gimpl in 1889 and remained in the family's hands until 1939. All the most well-known and popular

² Names of performers and their works will follow the spelling in contemporary catalogues and record labels.

³ Zilbertsvayg's theatre lexicon refers to him as a *badkhn*.

⁴ On the Broder singers, see M. Steinlauf, 'Jewish Theatre in Poland', in this volume.

artists are represented on these records, including Julius Guttmann (for many years the theatre's artistic director), his wife, Salcia, J. Deutsch, Leon Kalisch, Helene Gespass, J. M. Thur, Jakob Fuchs, S. Schilling, Norbert Glimmer, Adolf Melzer, Lina Karlik, and many others.

Even on the basis of these figures, these 250-odd recordings made during the period 1906 to 1909 must be regarded as a remarkable achievement, but the true situation is even more extraordinary. The 3,500 or so recordings that have not yet been put on the database and are available only in the form of catalogue pages contain an estimated additional 250 recordings by the artists of Gimpl's theatre, making a grand total of 500 recordings. Assuming an average playing time of 2½ minutes per recording, this would yield a total of almost twenty-one hours of continuous recorded music, an amazing prospect for students of the popular Yiddish theatre, assuming these records are ever unearthed in meaningful quantities. I can think of no parallel in the history of the early record industry where any artist or group of artists was the subject of such intense activity. The pioneering recording engineers of this era documented a complete sound panorama of one of the most important Yiddish theatres ever to operate in Europe and, what is more, captured it on disc during the period when it was at the very peak of its powers.

As regards the repertoire, scenes from the Yiddish operettas of Goldfadn and others predominate, but there is also a substantial number of comic songs and couplets. The instrumental accompaniment is usually piano, or piano and violin, but there are also a large number of recordings with full orchestral and choral accompaniment.

Most of the Yiddish theatre recordings from Warsaw simply note the artist as being from the Jüdisches Theater Warschau and so it is only by knowing the background of the individual artist concerned that we can identify which theatre this may have been. The main artists represented are S. Landau, Herrmann Weissmann, G. Feinstein, Lina Goldstein, P. Breitmann, S. Rotschein, J. Fiszlewicz, L. Braun, and Nadia (Ester) Nerosławska, the last four all from the Elizeum Theatre. As with Lemberg, the emphasis is on the Yiddish operetta, but with Goldfadn not nearly as apparent and far more recordings of works by composers from the American Yiddish stage, such as Yosef Rumshinsky ('Die Amerikanerin') and Boris Thomashefsky ('Die Neshume von main Volk').

There are a few Yiddish theatre recordings made in Vilna prior to the First World War, but there is no sign of any recordings made by Yiddish theatres in Kraków or Łódź.

Yiddish song is far more difficult to discuss, since it is represented by a large number of singers who recorded only a few titles that are difficult to analyse. Significantly, however, the standard repertoire of what nowadays is presented as Yiddish 'folk song' is completely absent. One will search in vain for a recording of 'Di mizinke oysgegeb'n', 'Di mame iz gegangen', or 'Der rebbe elimeylekh'. Even 'Rozhinkes mit mandlen' appears to have been recorded only once (by Leon

Abramovitch, London, 1904), which is surprising given the numerous recordings of Goldfadn's other songs. Finally, mention should be made of the mysterious group which recorded in Poland under the name Żydowski Kwartet, and in Russia as the Evreiskii Kvartet N. Pundika (N. Pundik's Jewish Quartet). Between 1902 and 1909 in St Petersburg, Moscow, and Warsaw this group made forty or more recordings of what seem to be mainly comic Yiddish songs. I have been unable to find any information whatsoever about them.

Yiddish Theatre Orchestra, Klezmer, and Other Instrumental

As mentioned previously, the most striking thing about this category is how little of it was recorded. Two possible explanations immediately spring to mind, only to be just as immediately countered by two forceful objections. The first explanation is that for technical reasons it was far more difficult to record groups of musicians than, say, a solo singer with just piano accompaniment. This is true, but it did not prevent record companies before the First World War from producing vast quantities of recordings of military bands, dance orchestras, salon ensembles, and every other combination of musical instruments—the Russian catalogues overflow with countless hundreds of such recordings. Besides, this technical problem did not prevent record companies from providing an orchestral accompaniment for many of their Yiddish theatre recordings. The second explanation is that there was no great market for purely instrumental recordings of Jewish music. This supposition, however, is soundly confuted if we take at face value a statement made in a Russian publication about the Syrena company's sales of recordings by Belf's Romanian Orchestra (Rumynskii orkestr Bel'fa), which performed a *klezmer* repertoire: 'And do you know how many of Belf's records the factory sells? Every day not less than two to three thousand items are shipped south, yet new orders pour in endlessly.'⁵ Something is not right here. Either these figures are grossly exaggerated or there was some factor other than lack of demand which deterred companies from recording Jewish instrumental music to any significant degree.⁶

The earliest purely instrumental recordings that I have been able to identify is a series of four sides made in 1903 for the Gramophone Company by the Orkestr Vilenskago Bol'shogo Teatra (Orchestra of the Vilna Grand Theatre) conducted by Stupel. The first side is entitled 'Tsyganskaya serenada' ('Gypsy Serenade'), but the other three are entirely Jewish, being pot-pourris of themes from two Goldfadn operettas: *Shulamis* and *Di koldunye*. Stupel followed this set in March 1910 with a set of fifteen sides on the Gramophone label with the Dukhovoi Orkestr Vilenskago Gorodskogo Teatra (Brass Band of the Vilna Municipal Theatre). Again, with a

⁵ *Grammofonnyi Mir*, no. 11, 25 June 1912; as cited in Wollock, 'European Recordings of Jewish Instrumental Folk Music'.

⁶ I should point out that, apart from the Belf recordings, I have not incorporated any of the 193 recordings listed in Jeffrey Wollock's article noted above, so that what follows is entirely additional information on the subject of instrumental recordings.

few exceptions all the titles are Jewish, e.g. ‘Der rebi hot geheissen lustig sein’, ‘A frehlichs “Sore schejndel”’, a six-sided pot-pourri of Yiddish operettas, and so on. Yet more Stupel recordings were made in July 1913 in Vilna.

Who was Stupel and what was the status of the Bolshoi Teatr and the Vilenskii Gorodskoi Teatr as regards the Yiddish theatre? Documentation of the Yiddish theatre in Vilna prior to the advent of the Vilna Troupe is scant, but it seems that these theatres were shared by both Russian and Jewish companies. Perhaps in the course of time more light will be shed on this and many other matters concerning the less ‘artistic’ side of the Yiddish theatre in Poland.

The bulk of the Polish items that I have provisionally classified as *klezmer* is provided by two main groups, the first based in Vilna and headed by D. Olevsky. Three recording sessions have been identified so far: a single side in September 1910 for the Gramophone Company (actually under the name of A. S. Olevsky—perhaps a misprint, perhaps a completely different artist); a four-side set recorded on 8 and 9 July 1912 for the Zonophone Company; and a ten-side set recorded in July 1913 for the Gramophone Company. Roughly half the titles are Jewish, the others having an ‘oriental’ flavour or Polish motifs.

The other group, which recorded nineteen titles for the Gramophone Company in Warsaw on 5 and 7 March 1914, was Belf’s Romanian Orchestra. This orchestra, almost certainly Romanian in name only, was in fact a Jewish ensemble, although its origins have long been the subject of speculation. Current opinion is that the group probably came from Podolia. Knowing that these recordings were made in Warsaw may cast some doubt on this theory, although recording location is a rough guide at best to the provenance of the recording artist.⁷

THE INTER-WAR YEARS

The period 1918 to 1939 saw a steep decline, we may even say collapse, of the recording of Jewish music in Europe. Although the catalogues of this era carry many Jewish lists, almost all on closer inspection turn out to be reissues of pre-war recordings.

In Poland the situation was no different. I have been able to find information on no more than 100 recordings made in Poland during this time, most on the Syrena, Homocord, and Polska Płyta labels, but these need to be treated with caution. For example, all the twenty-two Polska Płyta recordings are of Yiddish songs by anonymous artists, usually a sign that these are either reissues of extremely early recordings or are recordings pirated from other companies, in which case they may even be American in origin.

As regards Poland this picture will change greatly with the publication of Tomasz Lerski’s Syrena discography, but it seems unlikely that even with the

⁷ On the Belf orchestra, see also W. Feldman, ‘Remembrance of Things Past’, in this volume.

discovery of further sources the general European picture will change substantially. Why this collapse? We can speculate about a number of intersecting causes. First of all, loss of the Russian market after the revolution made the recording of Jewish music by big international firms such as the Gramophone Company a less attractive financial proposition. Meanwhile, domestic recording companies in the new, fervently nationalistic successor states of eastern Europe doubtless had little inclination to cater to the tastes of their national minorities. Moreover, from the mid-1920s onwards, Anglo-American music, in the form of either direct imports or recordings by local artists imitating the general style, began to shoulder aside all forms of indigenous music. An additional factor may have been that after the war the American Victor and Columbia companies vigorously began to market their American-recorded Jewish repertoire in eastern Europe. Such competition may well have discouraged local companies from making their own recordings for this specialized market.

CONCLUSION

Recordings of Jewish music were made on a massive scale in eastern Europe and especially in Poland prior to the First World War. So far, more than 3,000 such recordings have been identified, with the prospect of many more thousands being added in coming years as other major labels such as Odeon and Syrena are investigated.⁸

⁸ By mid-2003 the number of items on the database had increased to approximately 5,500, but the additional material has done little to alter the overall picture presented in this chapter. Anyone who has any information whatsoever that may be relevant to this project is invited to contact the author of this chapter at 164 Loose Road, Maidstone, Kent ME15 7UD, England; fax +44 (0)870 0528675; email: <mikeaylward@last.demon.co.uk>.