

## Notes on the Emergence of Yiddish Dance Songs by Yehudeh-Leyb Cahan<sup>1</sup>

The roots of today's Yiddish folk songs are not to be found in neighboring cultures. The "love" motif had already appeared in the 16th century, bespeaking the existence of Yiddish love lyrics, at least in dance songs. While these old examples may have long since disappeared from everyday usage, those reclaimed in my published studies point to earlier prototypes that arose for the same reasons that later ones did.

Yiddish dance songs, like those of any people, are the product of a collective creativity that has been influenced by existing folk dance and folk song. "There is not a people that does not dance," wrote Otto Boeckel,<sup>2</sup> an authority on European folk poetry.

Yiddish folk dances may have appeared later than German folk dances (as did the Yiddish language from which they spring), yet our people have improvised and sung dances not only to Polkas, but also to Polonaises, Quadrilles, Waltzes, Rhinelanders, Mazurkas, Shers, Broyges dances, etc. The only new element may be the title I've given them: Dance Songs; previously, the genre might simply have gone under different names. Collectors have long recognized Children's songs, for example; even Nonsense songs have been grouped together. Yet songs that accompanied dancing have, for the most part, escaped classification.

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I first came across them by chance, thinking that they stemmed from a much earlier period. But then, a single strophe or a word would provide the impetus that led to further exploration. One such strophe turned out to be a Wedding song.

<i>Soreh di rebetsin di kalleh's a mumeh</i>	Auntie Soreh, from the bridal side
<i>Nit keyn gebeteneh, aleyh gekumen.</i>	Came uninvited and snuck inside.

The refrain—*orem iz nit gut* (poverty's not good)—appears with variations of the opening strophe in my 1912 collection and also in Guinsbourg and Marek's collection.<sup>3</sup> The last of their series of variations mentions the playing of a Semeneh (an old dance, according to the collectors) and also dancing a Kazatske (Yiddish adaptation of the Ukrainian Kozak).

I have found a Semeneh among "Children's songs" in Berman's collection (Vilna, 1913).

Dancin' the Semeneh's like swimmin' in water.  
If the fishes don't know it, they certainly oughta!

If children sing this song, it must be old—that is the ethnographical rule.

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<sup>1</sup> (Vilna: *YIVO Bleter*, Vol. I, 1931: 28-39), republished in *Studies on Jewish Folk Creativity*, Max Weinreich, ed. (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish research), 1952: 88-98.

<sup>2</sup> Otto Boeckel, *Deutsche Volkslieder aus Oberbessen*, 1885.

<sup>3</sup> S. M. Guinsbourg & P. S. Marek, *Yevreiska Narodnia Pesni* (St. Petersburg, 1901), containing 376 Yiddish poems with transliteration, but no music.

And why was the Kazatske brought in if the Semeneh has already been mentioned? My thought was that Klezmerim were not familiar with the first, and therefore suggested the second. It's also possible that the Semeneh (or "Semele") was once widely known, perhaps as a more complicated dance which would normally be not be played at a simple village wedding.

I also found the Semele hinted at in a collection of Children's Songs and Games from Switzerland. The dance was called Tschämelen, whereas the Semele stemmed from the Vilna/Kovno region of Russian Poland. The connection finally appeared in the "Childhood Memories" section of a book on *Jewish Folk Knowledge*, by Leopold Klein (pages 125-128).

Saturdays, the young folk would gather: summertime outdoors, wintertime in the home of a woman who lived alone. She subsisted on what the girls gave her, and their parents trusted her to look after them. Avrom would hold the corner of a handkerchief while Miryom held the opposite corner. For this scenario she was "Fraulein" and he was "Herr," and away they danced over the freshly-limed clay floor.

Klein supplied the German song to which they danced, which spells out the steps:

Lift the right foot and drag the left,  
Hop once, twice, thrice,  
Repeat, changing feet;  
Promenade a bit,  
Circle 'round—

and this he identified as the Tseperlants.

Our interest lies more in the song than in the dance itself, or whether it is related to "Semele-TsHEMELE-Shamper" or to "Semene-Semele." Were the lyrics "set"—or improvised? I believe they evolved organically under the influence of the dance-melody's rhythm, and probably emerged from the dance-leader's instructions, which were undoubtedly intoned to the melody and the rhythm. From scores of similarly-sung instructions there developed an entire repertoire of songs for each dance-type. Just how rich and varied this repertoire must have been we can estimate from the considerable number of songs that still survive.

Since supply generally follows demand, we may assume that every community—large or small—had places where young people, full of life, met to pass the time. In Warsaw they called such meeting places Knaypes, most often a young couple's apartment where their friends could come and dance freely on a Friday night or Saturday. The more religiously observant world, especially its habitual gossips, would look askance at such goings-on:

When dancing is done by a bachelor and maiden—  
There lurks a serpent, just like in Gan Eyden!

Klezmerim were not needed in these heymishe surroundings—there generally wasn't room for instruments. The young folk sang and danced spontaneously, effortlessly, in complete release from the pressure of daily work and troubles. The tunes

were plentiful, picked up from the dance accompaniments of traveling Klezmerim at wedding or circumcision celebrations. And just like the tunes, all sorts of dances were in the air—an international assortment to choose from.

The only thing lacking was a knowledge of the art of dancing, how to execute the actual steps. From the resulting chaos came an endless supply of satirical songs—as exemplified in my collections—next to which traditional folksongs seem pale indeed. But the young folk needed instruction, preferably from one of their own.

Who, then, were their instructors? Anyone who could sing and dance well, had the eye of a hawk and could improvise a running commentary—preferably in rhyme--while maintaining the rhythm! Assuming the honorific of *Tantsmayster*, this talented self-crowned expert had nothing to go on but his own quick wits in getting dance novices to shape up. Hence, such on-the-spot insults to grammar, rhyme and offending individuals as:

*Gey azoyset—drey zikh oyset!*  
Go to the outer—don't stand and pouter!

Hence, also, an inevitable disconnect between the “gallant” form of address used in pan-European ballroom dancing and the desperate attempts of *tantsmaysters* to maintain both their composure and the illusion of high society comportment:

*Damen un Herren—a klog tsu aykh!*  
Gentlemen and Ladies—damn your Zeydies!

Under surreal conditions like these, the Gentlemen and Ladies gave their tormentor tit for tat (but politely, of course):

Please don't be insulted, Señor—  
When our clodhoppers drag on the floor,  
If it seems like we're all shlepping rocks—  
That's because of the holes in our socks!

This was collective folk poetry, and both parties took a certain license.

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Every so often, when the group and their instructor got things right and a dance song clicked, it took on a life of its own. That is how some of the *tantslieder* came to be sung long after the sweat and tears had dried—in the street, at work, at home, until they were accepted as folksong—with multiple stanzas added as years went by. This is the understanding of Yiddish dance songs that I wished to convey through my research: these little songs are not to be viewed as an end in themselves. Rather do they represent the first seedlings of a collective Yiddish folk poetry, from which the art form of love-ballads would someday burst forth full-blown.

(Excerpted and translated by Joseph A. Levine—*mit grois koved*--for Helen Winkler's *Yiddish Dance Page* web site, February 20, 2008)