

Pictures from Jewish Life

Klezmorim

Translated by Wolf Krakowski (pp. 373-374)

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In our town, Shloyme Klezmer (Vilenberg) and his band were very famous. He was first violinist and the leader of the well-known Jewish klezmerim, among them, Shepsl Charne and his son Velvl (living in Israel today) and Peysekh Klezmer. Also, there was Shaye-Mendel Badkhn and later Yitzkhak Badkhn, the son of Shloyme Klezmer.



Photo of Shloyme Klezmer

Jewish klezmerim made merry at Jewish celebrations. They were very poor people and had to make a living through various sidelines.

A Jewish heart is stirred by a nign (melody). A Jewish soul is drawn to nignim as to a cleansing spring that elevates Jewish life from the mundane. Shabes (the Sabbath), holidays, prayers, celebrations and banquets were filled with zmiros (Sabbath songs) and nignim. Hasidim are spiritually transported [lit: "expire" (are knocked out)] by entrancing nignim that are sung to *Bnai-Heykhale*¹ in little houses of worship and study on shabes evening. For Hasidim, the nign is a part of life. If a Hasid should come from Rabin, he would make an effort to bring a new nign with him. One of the desirable attributes of a young man should be that he be a Master of Nignim and that he be able to daven (pray) at the pulpit. Among Hasidim, prayer is entwined with song. Misnagdim do not sing at prayer, but in every Misnagdish house, zmiros were sung on shabes and on holidays before eating.

On shabes eve before a wedding week, right after havdole (blessing at close of shabes), Shloyme Klezmer and his band appeared in the home of the in-laws to play "A Good Week."

¹ "Hasidim sing [traditional z'mirot texts like] *Bnai-Heykhale* ("guests of God's tabernacle") to attractive nignim."

This medieval z'mirah refers to the Hasidic belief that they were guests of the Holy One on Shabbat, and when it was over they lingered at table, still feasting, in order to prolong the Sabbath's departure far into the night. For a musical example see Journal of Synagogue Music 2009 article, "Hasidim in Jazz." (personal communication, Cantor Joseph Levine)

In town, an extra- bright lamp burned. The table was still covered with the white shabes tablecloth. In-laws and good friends sat comfortably in their silk hats, satin kipas/yarmulkes (skullcaps), satin and silk kapotes (robes), and even in red and blue housecoats decorated with various flowers. The women were decked out in gold, diamonds and silk. They drank tea; men chatted, smoked cigars or pipes.

All of a sudden, Shloyme Klezmer showed up. Familiar melodies from his violin tore at the heart. Shloyme played and Shepsl, Peysekh and Velvl accompanied him. There was also his son Berel on bass, Avraham on clarinet and Artche on flute. His son Yitzkhak Badkhn and everyone made an effort to make merry, to play a freylekhs (joyous tune) -- "Good Week" and "Mazl Tov." But things did not become any merrier. The longer they played, the more tears flowed. They played joyously but their playing sounded sad; like all Jewish celebrations in the shtetl, joy was mixed with sadness.

The householder (balebos) a Hasidic Jew was the first to wake up and became overjoyed hearing the spell-binding melodies. He stands up, thanks the klezmerim and they stop playing. Everyone wakes up and wishes one another "mazl tov." A healthy, full week; this is how a wedding week begins. The wedding day arrives. The bride and groom fast. In town there is a Khol Hamoed (intermediary week days of a holiday - Peysekh or Sukis/Sikis) silence. Sima the baker brings with her aromas of baking that fill the air. In-laws are arriving from out of town, some dressed festively, some in everyday clothes. On such a day, bright and early in the morning, Shloyme Klezmer and his band arrive to play a "Dzin Dobre" (Polish: "Good Morning") to the bride. By this time, everyone is crying, as they drew nearer to the khupe (wedding canopy). Everyone becomes ever more tearful, but most of all, the bride. She must fast, pray from the Yom Kipur prayer book and comport herself as if on Yom Kipur eve. The day of her celebration becomes a day of sadness, a day for the endless flowing of tears, a day to be reminded of death and of the destruction of the temple. . .

And even though we ate and drank and danced -- something was missing. Yitzhak Badkhn called forth his bounty of speeches, tricks and rhymes, but the atmosphere did not become festive.

A wedding such as this provided the klezmerim with an income that would last for several weeks; the in-laws, guests and those that made requests, all paid for the playing. When a dance was requested, the "Broyges Tants" ("Angry Dance"), "Besem Tants"² ("Broom Dance") and the essential "Mitzva Dance" brought in the most income.

In later times, klezmerim played in theatres for various performances and presentations. Pieces from "Shulamis," from "The Makhsheyfe" ("The Witch"), folksongs and unknown pieces fashioned in the Jewish style worked their way into Jewish celebrations and prayers. The Ostrover Kapelye (Band) also performed at weddings in the surrounding towns and they were even invited to play at Gentile weddings, at balls at the estates of the nobility. The Gentiles had always loved Jewish music and Jewish fish.

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² There are at least 3 possible meanings of Besem or Broom dance. It may refer to a dance where the broom was ridden as a horse, or where the broom was used as a weapon. In addition, it might also be a reference to the Shtokshpil, a game/dance similar to musical chairs. For further info see Traditional Dance by Zev Feldman in the [YIVO Encyclopedia online](http://www.yiddishdance.com/shtockshpil.html), and the Shtokshpil section at <http://www.yiddishdance.com/shtockshpil.html>. More recently, in North America, a broom has been employed in the Mezinke dance, but I have not encountered any proof regarding the existence of the Mezinke in Jewish communities in Europe during the time period referred to in this yizkor book article.