

## Noise, Music, and Klezmer

Screeches, thumps, bangs... We are so inundated with an endless variety of sounds, noises, and music that we have become immune; we don't even notice them any more.

Ambulance and fire truck sirens wail, car brakes squeal, horns honk, buses rumble, voices talk and yell, music plays... Oozing through all openings—doorways, elevators, even bathrooms; sounds, sounds, everywhere. We can't escape them. Even if we wanted to, where would we escape to? Parks and beaches are filled with boomboxes carried on shoulders; these, too, jar our senses.

This is the sound of life here in America, but it wasn't so in the shtetl. A horse-drawn wagon on unpaved ground doesn't make much noise. There were no ambulances or fire trucks, no television, not even radio, when I grew up in Shebreshin.

There was hardly any music, either. Some religious choral sounds emerged from the Catholic Church every Sunday, but the Jewish people forbade themselves even to listen. We had to cover our ears and run away.

Life was very hard for us, and there were few reasons for songs—even lullabies. There were only two ancient, hand-cranked, steel-neededled phonographs in the entire village. They

played old, worn-out, sometimes cracked records, often near open windows. People would stand around listening to the strange sounds, which occasionally included opera singers.

A little later, Dr. Talanda acquired a piano, and for the first time we heard the sounds of Chopin.

We knew nothing of music or musicians. We lived in a quiet region of the world, devoid of artificial sounds.

This was all to change, with the liberation of Poland in 1918. When the village had been occupied by the Russians, they built a large military base in the nicest part of town, between the river and the school. Ugly barracks of unpainted wood and stone were constructed in a wooded area, and the overgrown bushes and fallen trees were left untouched. It was a nightmarish sight.

When Poland was liberated, teachers were desperately needed, and the decision was made to establish a teachers' academy. This was to be built in the area where the Russian military had been housed. Some buildings were torn down, and new ones were built. The park was restored, and hundreds of young men arrived in town, seeking to become Polish teachers.

They brought new life, and new culture, to our little town. They also brought music, and a good music school. Suddenly, we heard the sounds of violins and other musical instruments.

I became charmed with the sounds of the violin, so I watched the students practice. It looked so easy: the left hand on the strings, fingers touching gently; the right hand holding the bow, going up and down. What could be easier?

Enough of the toy violin from my uncle Zisha; I felt that I must have a *real* instrument. I began to pester my mother and grandfather: "Buy me a violin," I begged again and again.

Ultimately, my grandfather not only took me to Zamosc to buy an instrument; he also engaged a young student to teach me.

I was anxious to start playing, but initially I was forbidden to touch the violin; it waited in its case in a locked armoire.

First, I had to learn to read music. It was not easy, but I learned the basics. Later, I was instructed how to hold the instrument, and finally, how to play some notes.

The sounds that emanated from my violin were neither sweet nor pleasant. Even then, my fingers were wide and thick, and when I attempted to place one on a single string, I actually pressed down on two of them. I held the bow too heavily, producing harsh sounds—screeches, actually.

I tried and practiced, while driving listeners to distraction, and in time I managed to produce some recognizable sounds from a well-known waltz.

I wasn't the only one to acquire a musical instrument; several other young villagers did the same. I envied my friend Benjamin, the cobbler's son. He was able to play beautiful music without any lessons, simply by listening to others. He was said to play by ear.

Benjamin showed off with his playing. He would keep his windows open, stand up, almost leaning out, and play waltzes and other melodies that the academy students had performed. He even tried to teach me—after my instructor had given up.

This gave us an idea: Why don't we organize an orchestra? We could get together with the other young men who played musical instruments—some had horns; there was even a drum—and all play together.

I liked this plan. Within a group of players, I knew my own less than stellar musical efforts would not be so notice-

able. I could sit in and charm the young girls I hoped would look at me.

Our repertoire was very limited. We knew little about music, or musicians. We (badly) copied some melodies that we had heard the students play. In fact, our group was just about ready to fall apart, when a new source of music came into our lives and opened up our musical vistas. Radio had arrived in our town!

For weeks, we saw people attaching wires to the tallest trees and highest posts in the park adjacent to the college. We speculated about this activity, never having observed nor heard of such strange behavior before. At last, an announcement was made that musical concerts and world news could be heard twice a week, for a fee roughly equivalent to 25 cents.

On Wednesday and Sunday nights from eight until eleven o'clock, we could listen to programs coming through the air from faraway places, such as Warsaw, Krakow, Berlin, and Vienna.

We always rushed to the academy to make certain we would be admitted. Once inside, we were seated at long tables, facing the wall. Listening devices were put over our heads; these were an early version of earphones. A wire was plugged in, and someone manipulated and adjusted various radio knobs until the music could be heard, loud and clear.

This was all new and strange for us. We heard the works of composers such as Brahms, Beethoven, and Tchaikowski. We learned new terminology: symphony, concerto, rhapsody. We listened carefully and sought more musical knowledge.

We bought books about composers and music. Paderewski, a great pianist, became Poland's prime minister, and we heard his live and recorded performances from all over Europe, even great cities such as Rome and Moscow.

All these sounds were new and intoxicating to us, but they were also beyond our abilities. Our group couldn't write down the notes, nor play these complex melodies.

Not until there was a big Jewish wedding in our town, with musicians coming from Lublin to play and entertain, did we learn of a strangely named type of musical group. They were called klezmerim, and their music was Klezmer.

We loved their sounds. These were interpretations and blends of Chassidic, Gentile folk, and even classical music. They had their own Jewish Kvetch humor and rhythm. It touched our hearts. We could, and did, copy all their moves. We also liked the Badchen, the master of ceremonies, who had a good singing voice and a matching sense of humor. He entertained the crowd, but mostly sang to the bride, making her both cry and smile.

“Oh dear girl, say goodbye to the free life, you will be taken over by your husband to do his bidding. It will be bad and good. You will have many children, with a lot of worries and pleasures...” and on and on it went.

We decided to become a Klezmer band. We improvised, created sounds, made our instruments “talk.” It sounded great, crowds came to hear us, and soon we had our own Badchen. One funny young man in our group had learned to mimic the antics of the Lubliner Badchen, and he was perfect in this role.

After much discussion, we decided to aim at becoming professionals and earning some money.

Since I was a poor violin player, but had the gift of gab, the others appointed me to be the impresario and manage the group. I started to look for what would now be called a “gig.” I heard about a wedding to be performed in Bilgoraj, about 40

miles away. My grandmother's sister and her family lived there. We saw them often; two cousins had married each other.

I went to their town, found the bride's father, described our Klezmer group, and sold him on the idea of hiring us. We agreed on the fee, and I happily returned to my musical partners.

It was winter, and I hired a horseman with a big sled to take us to Bilgoraj and back for the overnight trip. Early in the morning, with all our instruments packed in the sled and our spirits high, we left for our first moneymaking adventure.

The wedding was to be held in a large prayer house, or outside if the weather would permit. We unpacked our gear and started to rehearse, attracting many small children.

The indoor ceremony started early, just as the snow stopped falling, and we (including the *Badchen*) performed perfectly. People—mostly women—danced. A few couples were among the dancers, but most just listened to our lively melodies, and some even sang along.

By eleven o'clock that night, the wedding was over and the guests had dispersed. The klezmerim huddled in the corner where the woodburning stove was lit, and we tried to keep warm. The Bible students came back; some studied all night, dozing on and off. More students returned in the morning.

I went to see the bride's father to collect our fee. I found an unhappy man. He cried, telling me that not enough presents were collected, so he couldn't pay me the agreed price. I threatened to take him to the Rabbi. He explained that the wedding had cost him everything he had, and now he had nothing left.

After arguing and some threats, he agreed to pay us half the promised fee. I reluctantly accepted. We had just enough to pay the horse owner for the transportation.

We got ready to return home. Tired and hungry, I went to visit my mother's aunt. Her family owned a large produce store. I was sure they would feed me, but no food was offered. The store was full of barrels and sacks of potatoes, beans, peas, grain, and flour—nothing substantial for a young man to dig into. After a while, they gave me a big bag of dry mushrooms to take home.

On the way back, hungry and dejected, I dug into the bag and started eating the dry mushrooms. By the time we arrived home, I must have eaten half the bag's contents. As I got out of the vehicle the food came up, and I emptied my stomach on the ground. My mother witnessed this, and she soon had a large dish of chicken soup with dumplings ready. I swallowed the hot delicious soup, and mother put me to bed, where I slept for something like 20 hours.

After resting, we decided to continue with our rehearsals and improvisations. We soon got our second gig, and this time it was in our home town. Performing at a prestigious wedding, we were a great hit, and without incident we were paid exactly the amount set in our agreement.

Now we had money! Even so, we decided to stay together strictly as a pleasure band, and leave the professional work to others. We gave ourselves a banquet in the town's only restaurant. We invited friends, then blew all the earnings away in one great party.

Soon, very soon, we began to lose musicians. The poor economic conditions and rampant antisemitism drove many young people to emigrate. A few smuggled themselves into Palestine; some went to Belgium to work in the diamond industry; some left for Canada, and others for the United States.

My immediate family started to prepare for our coming trip to San Francisco, where my father had preceded us.

The violin went into the armoire. But coming home one day, I heard music—marvelous sounds, emanating from my room. It was hard to believe what I saw.

My little brother Leon—five years younger—had gotten a duplicate key, taken out my violin, and was practicing on his own. I then learned that he had been listening to my instructor's lessons and had been playing the instrument for some time—all without my knowledge.

Leon looked at me with his large, shining eyes, wondering what I would say and do. He looked so funny that I had to laugh. I took the violin out of his hands, then promptly gave it back to him: "It's yours, brother; take good care of it. You play well."

From then on, wherever Leon went, the violin accompanied him. On the train to Gdynia, the boat to Antwerp, the ship to America, and the train to California... my little brother played the fiddle. People thought he was a gypsy and gave him money. When we arrived in San Francisco, all his pockets bulged—not just with coins, but with folding money, too.

In the 1930s he went to New York, married, moved to New Jersey, and became a poultry farmer to provide for his family. With his own labor he built his home and many chicken coops. All the while, he pursued his real love and talent: painting and sculpting. There was no time for the violin, which had been tucked away on a shelf in a closet.

Leon became a father of two children. Eventually, his daughter married a British scholar, and they live in London. She also has children, and the youngest, Amy, plays the piano. Visiting her grandfather, she discovered the old violin resting in its case on a now dusty shelf. Upon examining it, she



decided that she wanted to play this instrument. She took it home and has restored it.

Two years ago, I got a phone call from London. It was Amy: “Philip, someone wants to talk to you.”

“Who? Who?” I inquired.

It was not a human; it was the voice of a violin, singing. Amy was playing a melody—“Zigeunerweisen”—that I could never master, and she was playing it on the violin that was once mine, so many years ago.

I bent down my head, and tears flowed from my eyes. The shtetl and all my friends are gone, my brother Leon is dead, and I am now an old man.

But my boyhood violin has come back to life, and it is in the capable hands of a family member. Its music will live on.