Musical archaeologists provide voice for the voiceless

‘Yiddish Glory’ album presents songs by survivors, victims

By ROBERT WIENER
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To those who want to prevent the voices of the Jews of the Soviet Union who suffered and died at Russian labor camps from being consigned to historic oblivion, Psoy Korolenko and Anna Shternshis are heroes.

With a deep baritone voice and a set of gifted hands on the piano keyboard, Korolenko has helped bring to musical life hundreds of recently unearthed songs written by those forced to work for the former Soviet Union and who faced starvation and death during the years of World War II.

The music was written in schools, in shtetls, in labor camps, and in Red Army barracks; it was written by Jewish soldiers in the Russian army, by adults of all ages, and by children as young as 10. They are the work of Jewish victims and survivors in the Soviet Union between 1944 and 1947, many of their words and music set down on tattered pieces of paper.

Some 60 years after the discovery of hundreds of such songs by researchers for the Cabinet of Jewish Culture of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, 18 have been recorded on “Yiddish Glory: The Lost Songs of World War II,” an album released by the label Six Degrees Records that features Korolenko and nine other musicians.

Korolenko set about reconstructing the songs in a way that would blend their meanings with the musical tastes of a contemporary audience. He said he was essentially conjuring imaginary relatives who lived during that era to get a sense of their musical tastes.

“My task was to rethink or imagine what melodies my [imaginary] Uncle Mischa would use to sing this song that was written in the 1940s,” he told NJN at his home in Morristown.

His partner in the project was Anna Shternshis. Like Korolenko, she was born in Moscow. After earning her Ph.D. in modern languages and literatures from Oxford University in 2001, Shterns became a scholar of Soviet-Jewish culture. While conducting research in Ukraine, in the Cabinet of Jewish Culture, she came upon an obscure collection of Yiddish songs gathered during World War II.

“Some of the texts were extremely violent. Some were laments. Some were satirical,” she told NJN from her home in Toronto. The discovery opened a specialized field of study for Shterns. “I decided I wanted to take these materials out of purely academic circles and present them as actual music.”

So she consulted Korolenko, an old friend who said he knew that Shterns “cherished Soviet heritage and Yiddishkeit and anti-xenophobia and anti-imperialism.”

Shterns also turned to Korolenko, he said, because “she knew I already sang Soviet war songs with a group of klezmer and pop and classical musicians.”

They teamed up for the first time in 2015, with Shterns lecturing and Korolenko giving musical context to her words. She calls their work “musical archaeology.”

Korolenko had changed his first and last names from Pavel Lion to honor Vladimir Korolenko, a Russian journalist and short story writer who was a champion of social justice in czarist Russia and wrote a great deal about Jews in
particular.

“Knowledge of these places, the knowledge of what happened during the war, is still not where it should be,” said Shternsis. When she and Korolenko chose the songs that appear on “Yiddish Glory,” she said, “the important thing was to give voices to people we rarely hear.”

Translated lyrics provided in the CD’s liner notes show several pronounced themes, some a combination of love and violence:

“I will attack Hitler until he’s wiped out, and then I will return home to you,” reads a line from “A Walk in the Forest,” written in 1944 by a 25-year-old tailor from the city of Odessa in Ukraine.

The composer of “Taybl’s Letter to her Husband at the Front,” written that same year, includes: “I’m sewing Hitler a burial shroud, singing a little song and darning. My Misha, dearest, you will arrive in Berlin and split open all of their heads.”

“Yoshke from Odessa,” written by a Red Army member in 1943, has no such romance in its tone: “Oh, you Germans, you fancy yourselves as such impressive butchers! We’ll slice strips from you, as we would from a non-kosher animal!”

“My Mother’s Grave” was written in 1945 by a grieving 10-year-old boy in Ukraine: “I never saw my mother again. They drove her to her death, to the other side. But the bitter suffering will soon come to an end. The enemy will be snatched and defeated.”

The infamous Babi Yar ravine near Kiev — where 33,771 Jews were killed by German forces and Ukrainian collaborators on Sept. 29-30, 1941 — was memorialized in a song written in 1947 by a 73-year-old woman who was likely a witness to the atrocity: “By night and by day the gunshots shattered. The people saw their own deaths approaching. Oh, blood gushed out from all sides. The earth was stained red from all the blood.”

There was a far different tone in “Happy New Year 1944!” by an unknown writer in Kazakhstan on the eve of the Allied victory over the Nazis:

“Some peace and joy around the world. Just to spite those silly little Germans. Hitler will be thrown around in fiery and icy hells. And he can kiss our asses.”

Shternsis said the tracks on “Yiddish Voices” are giving voice to hundreds if not thousands of those who were silenced.

“There are people today who witnessed horrible injustice and violence, but their experiences are never talked about in their direct voice,” she said. “They rely on journalists and archivists and historians to tell their stories.

“But in our project, we give voice to those who never got to tell their stories. They were silenced by Hitler or by Stalin. I think nobody deserves to have their voice never heard.”

She, Korolenko, and sometimes the entire “Yiddish Glory” ensemble often perform at university conferences in the United States and Canada, principally before Jewish audiences. But they have also traveled to Germany, “where most of the audience is not Jewish, and the Germans actually understand the lyrics,” Shternsis said.

In an April 9 concert at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in Manhattan, Shternsis and Korolenko presented an hour’s worth of such songs, with translated lyrics projected on a screen, along with cartoons of the era caricaturing the Nazis, Hitler, and Haman, the villainous persecutor of the Purim story.

Although she has extensive collections of Yiddish war songs written in Ukraine and Central Asia, Shternsis remains in search of “hundreds if not thousands more of them” in the archives, in particular songs that came out of the Minsk ghetto in Belarus.
“Today it is so much easier to write your experiences on blogs and social media,” she said. “But in that society people did not know how to express what they had seen. So, they relied on songs they knew, and used them to express what they were witnessing, and most important, what they were feeling.”

Said Korolenko, “What is important for me is that this project brings together what is amateur and what is professional, what is historical and what is contemporary, and what belongs to a particular culture, such as Jewish, and what is more universal, such as Soviet or European or even human.”

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