Two Shtetl Folksongs: Die Soche and Der Mai Lied
Ghitta Sternberg

Among the songs my mother used to sing to me, there were two folksongs, the melodies of which lingered in my mind throughout the years: "Die Soche (The Plough)" and "Der Mai Lied (The May Song)." In both cases, only a few stanzas of each played stubbornly with my memory. Then, quite unexpectedly, in an old exercise-book of my mother's, dated 1904, on yellow, now brittle pages, handwritten with pen and ink in Yiddish (with Latin letters), I found the two songs, much longer and also interesting on several levels. Both songs deal with topics not usually found in *shtetl* folklore. In both cases, although each develops its own theme, the ending is quite unique; in the case of "The Plough," in fact, the ending is quite unexpected.

Since my voice is better seen than heard, efforts to have the melodies transcribed posed a problem, until the pianist Ted Lazarus earned my everlasting admiration when, based on my humble renditions, he succeeded in transcribing the two songs for piano.

As is common in folksongs, the melodies are simple and repetitive throughout. Anyone interested in the complete texts of both songs may find them in my book, *Stefanesti: Portrait Of A Roumainian Shtetl* (Pergamon Press, 1984), which you will probably find in your local Jewish library. This particular *shtetl* was completely destroyed during WWII. Fortunately my parents came here in 1938 and my mother salvaged truly a treasure-trove of photographs, etc., which others did not have the opportunity to save when they were evacuated, never to return.

I believe both of these folksongs merit attention, if only for their historic significance. I am including here only a few stanzas of each, as well as the melodies of both.

Outrement, Québec

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*Der Mai Lied*

| Menchen shteyt oyi fane free | Beimolech raushen, feigolech zingen |
| Ervacht fun ayer geleger     | Melodien jirmen feigolech alerley   |
| Zeit die sheine armonie     | Eisriklech tanten und shpringen    |
| Mit dem naturlchen zeger    | Und tsum tactalt tzi der salovey   |

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II

| Feigolech, fligolech vie auch die bien | Bleimolech greslenoys zeire heyrolech |
| Auf dem brek fun dem mantl oyageshtikt | Die mamme, die Natur ferkemt zei zer shein |
| Dos vais, dos royit, dos green       | Tropn rosae falt of zey vie perolech  |
| Yedes shtipt dos piskiole und pikt    | Und shvenkt zai aus die niskolech sehri rein |
Zeyt nor ich beit aich vos is dos?
Ein alter boym naked un a blot
Der May nemt im shoin die mus
Und neyt yim oyf a gryinem hallot

Gyib nor a zind dem alten shturmak
Er hot shoyin gur an ander punem
Er bakimt shoin oyich a bisl farb in der back
Und dreit sich zvishn alle machetunem.

Gheyt nor vaiter mit dem trit
Vet yhr hern fun a chassene a klong
Macht nor yedes a naie lied
Und dos vet zein ayer drushe geshonk

Der Mai mit der Natur hohn hossene in a gitter shoo
Pliesket alle dammen mit die hent
Die klesmer, feigeln sind shoin fun lang do
Yedes halts in moul sein instrument

Rei, rei, rei, der chosn gheyt
A sheiner und a yunger cavalier
Die zin mit der l'vone shteyen greyt
Far interfieren gekimen aheir

Der chosn varft arof of ir a grinem decktiech
M'derkent nisht oib zi is a mohl shvarz geven
Die l'vone bavarft zie mit shterndlech
Men heiht shoyn un tzu der chuppeh tzu gehn

LIEBE, OFFNUNB, GEFIEL UND FREUD
Sind far der chuppeh die fier shtekens
Die licht is far a dek geshpreyt
Mizrach, Maaref, Tzufen, Tarom die ecken

DER MITTELPUNCT DIE NATUR IS A
KEDISCHE FINGERL
Der Mai halt dos oyf in der liftn
Auf dem fingerl dreyt sich aus die ganze velt
Auf dem is HIMMEL UND HERDE TZENOYF GEKUMEN

Der hymmel is dos kessibe blat
Die oysies zenen die shtern
Die kessibe leint der ALTER GOT
Az dos porfolg zol nisht tzisheyt vern

Und ven er vet afile farvarfn
Oyf dem vaybele a minchein
Un vet fun yir antloyfn ganz vayt
Zol er sich un ihr nisht kennen bageyn
Und zol tzerig kimmen tzu der rachtert zeit
The May Song

Good folks wake up it’s early morn;
Awaken, get out of your beds,
See the lovely harmony
With the splendid clockworks of Nature.

Saplings murmuring, little birds sing;
Chirps melodies are heard;
Grasshoppers dance and skip around
And the nightingale taps in tune the rhythm.

Little birds, tiny flies, and the bees too.
On the edge of the mantle are embroidered
This white, this red, that green
Each picks with its tiny beak outstretched.

Little flowers push their heads among the grass;
Mother Nature combs their hair so neat.
Dew-drops fall on them like little pearls,
And rinse out their tiny mouths so clean.

Look here please what do we see?
An old tree naked without leaves;
The May takes now his measurements
And sews for him a nice green overcoat.

Behold now please that craggy old stick;
He’s taken on quite a fresh new appearance.
He has now a little color in his cheeks
And mingles among all the machetunem (in-laws?).

Please go further one more step:
You will hear ringing of wedding bells.
Compose, please, each of you a song,
And that will be your wedding present.

Nature and May are wed with much good luck.
Ladies applaud, clap with your hands.
The bird-musicians have long been here;
Each ready holds in mouth his instrument.

Rah, rah, rah, rah, here comes the groom,
A young and handsome cavalier;
The sun and moon are ready now,
Arrived here to be intertierers (sponsors?)

The bridegroom bedecks her with a lovely green veil
No hint that she was ever black and grey;
The moon sprinkles her with stardust
They’re ready for the wedding canopy (?)

LOVE HOPE DEEP FEELING AND JOY
Are the four posts of the wedding canopy
Bright light unfolds like a bedspread;
East, West, North, South the four corners.

THE CENTRAL POINT OF NATURE IS THE WEDDING RING;
The May holds it up in mid-air.

Upon this ring turns round the entire world:
THE AIM FOR WHICH HEAVEN AND EARTH HAVE COME TOGETHER.

The Heavens are the kessibe (marriage contract)
Written with letters made of stars;
The kessibe is read by the ancient God
That this couple may never be parted.

And even if he will
No longer find his wife as attractive
And will run away from her, quite far,

May he not be able to live without her
And return to her at the proper time!

—English translations, with apologies, by Ghitta Sternberg
This song is a true "Ode to Spring." It is like a constantly moving series of tableaux depicting the awakening of Nature. At the same time, the images and sounds reflect the values of a specific culture: the shtetl.

We are invited to attend a wedding. In anthropomorphic fashion, the bridegroom, the month of May, is to wed Nature, his bride. It is early morning. Everything is awakening after a winter sleep. Saplings murmur, birds chirp and the month of May dances in mittn kuhn ("in the midst of it all). Nature’s mantle is embroidered with flowers, butterflies, birds, in red, white and green. Everyone is preparing for the important event. The little flowers sprout their heads among the blades of grass and mother Nature washes their little mouths with the fresh dew-drops, and combs each one in turn, just as any loving shtetl mother would do to prepare them for a wedding.

We are asked to notice an old, naked tree, forlorn in the woods. May takes his measurements and, lo and behold!, in no time the old shurmak, the craggy old stick, has acquired a little color in his cheeks and is mingling with all the machetunem. Please note, he is not simply a guest, he is dancing with the important relatives. To translate the kinship term machetunem with the bland "in-laws," is to miss the depth of meaning of shtetl values. Machetunem were endowed with a series of mutual rights and obligations based on trust, which only kinship ties would assure. In a society surrounded by what is perceived as alien strangers, trust was a most essential need for the well-being of the individual. Therefore, a network of extended kin played an important role. This also justified the parental concern for the selection of spouses, with an eye to the prospective in-laws.

Our attention is now directed to another segment of this rich canvas, where, in the deep green glen, we see a shepherd with his flock, playing a love song on his flute, accompanied by the nightingale’s sweet notes, while not too far behind follows his beloved.

All this while the morning star (Venus) on the blue firmament is preparing to depart and make room for the sun. Still another scene now appears on the screen as the sun awakens from her nap. Now the entire world responds like a magnet to the brilliant sun. Interestingly, both the sun and moon are spoken of as
The bard is in constant wonder; "Where," he asks in amazement, "can one find a person with ideas" who will explain what secrets the fresh green leaves whisper in the night, or what benedictions does the moon pronounce as she tovyilt sich (cleanses herself) in the lake? Here is another of those untranslatable terms, so fraught with meaning. The moon does not simply bathe or wade in the lake; the moon, just as any pious wife in the shtetl, prepares herself for the big event.

Sounds of wedding bells are now heard. We are invited to compose a song as a wedding gift for the newlyweds, while the ladies clap with their hands and the klesmers (bird-musicians) sing. The procession is ready for the ceremony in a gitter shoo (in a good hour). The wish of "good luck" ill conveys the flavor of shtetl values implied in this expression, since the importance of the lucky moment was unquestionable.

"Rah, rah, rah, rah," the bridegroom is arriving, announced by the trumpeting of the wedding march. The sun and the moon are ready to be interfirers, and we witness the ceremony as the bridegroom bedecks his bride with a green veil, so that the black earth is not black any longer. The moon sprinkles them with stardust; the pageant is ready for the chuppah, the wedding ceremony.

The term interfirers is not to be confused with its English homonym or with the role of best man or bridesmaids. Interfirers were the sponsors or attendants for the bride and groom at shtetl weddings. There is no equivalent for this role in our society, where the father "gives the bride away." As a rule the honor was bestowed on older married brothers or sisters of the couple, or on close relatives, and frequently not without an eye to the possibilities of future financial benefit to the newlyweds but also obligations on their part.

By the way, this is an interesting example of the subtle changes in customs which a culture may undergo in the process of acculturation. Superficial customs are often adopted, but if the culture is to survive, it is essential that core beliefs remain intact.

We now assist at the wedding ceremony under the chuppah, the wedding canopy. The bright light bedspread is unfurled with the four cardinal points: East, West, South, and North, forming the four corners of the splendid spread now covering the earth. Love, Hope, Trust, and Joy are the four poles supporting the canopy.

The fulcrum, the pivot, is the wedding band, held high by the bridegroom. On this symbol, the wedding ring, rests the entire world, the ultimate aim and design for which Heaven and Earth have come together.

The firmament is the ksibbe blat (the marriage contract) written with letters formed by the stars; the ketubbah is read by God Himself, who decrees that this couple may not be separated. And even if the husband might occasionally tire of his bride and stray away from her, he will not be able to exist without her and will return to her at the proper time.

Simplistic, you say? But how profound!

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Die Soche

In der Soche
Ligt dos mazl broche
Dos varé glick fun lebn
Kein zach mir nit feilt

Es kumt der fryi morgen
Ich darf nisht layen, borgen
Der Moyech darf mir nit zorgen
Of tog oyznes gelt
Es is ungegreit of winter
A magazin a gezinter
Ich zey und shnayd ganz minter
Frei in Gottes velt.

II

Meine Dame
Zie braucht keine ame
Keine dienst keine bonne
Kein fressner of dem kopf

Zie darf kein hut, kein feder
Zie shpartziert nicht keseyder
Zie furt nicht in die heyder
Saidn Frayteg tzum marki

Kein putz, kein balmarsirten
Alein in hoye a virtin
In dem feld a hirtin
Und zey is gezunt und shtark

III

Mein meidl
Neyech off a prost kleidl
Und tyi mit yir a shiddech
Un tziring und un gelt

Zeyt nor in shtot die kalles
Zey shteyen prost ba dolles
Zey ramen oys fun der shtib ales
Vos is nor faran

Mir is leicht tzo krign
A chosn dovka hign
Nodn gib ich tzvey tzign
Und zey leiht glicklich mit ir man!

Das tie

Der kolonie bashitzer
Die arbeiter stizer
Fin der ganzer velt
Ven fun die kolonien
Vern vern millionen
Velt Zion ersht dermonen
Ale groise lait!
The Plough

In the plow
Lies all good luck, all blessing
Truly life’s chances
Nothing do I need

Comes the early morning
I need not loan, nor borrow
My mind need not have cares
To fulfill the day’s debts

There is prepared for winter
A larder full and hefty
I plant and reap quite wakeful
Free in God’s own land

II

My wife,
She needs no maids, no servants
No charwoman, no nursemaid
No glutton on our heads

She needs no hats with feathers
No endless promenading
No trips to resorts or health spas
Except her trip to the market on Friday

No fancy dress, no masked balls
In the house a good housekeeper
Works hard on the fields
And she is in perfect health

III

My daughter?
I sew for her a plain dress
Arrange a marriage match
Without jewels or cash

Just see in town the brides
Poor as church mice they be
They clean out their father’s house
Of whatever they can find

For me it is not hard to find
A bridegroom, in fact a local fellow
Dowry I offer two goats
And she lives happily with her spouse

The protector of colonies
Who supports the workers
From the entire world
When from the colonies
Will become millions
Then Zion will remember
All these benefactors, great men!
This ballad written by the Jewish-Polish poet Eliachum Zunzer, probably some time in the Nineteenth Century, is interesting on several levels. Superficially, it idealizes the carefree, idyllic life of the farmer. Remembering that Jews were not allowed to own land, and farming was not a typical Jewish occupation in Eastern Europe, it is interesting to see this song extolling farm life, constantly comparing it to the trials and tribulations of the shetel merchants. On another level, it displays a panorama of values, using often pithy expressions fraught with expressions which must be understood in order to appreciate the meanings it intimates. The surprise ending adds yet another dimension to the theme and, I believe, is of historic importance.

For the farmer, the plough is a true blessing. In the process of acclaiming his good fortune, he offers us a catalogue of shetel values, reflected with perspicacity and humor. The farmer is happy to plant and reap, to feed the entire world. He regards with some disdain the extravagant spenders in town, who, trying to keep up with the latest fads, spend more than they earn. He deplores the shopkeeper who lives on borrowed money, worries about paying interest or about the tax collector. The farmer is free on God's own land, and his earnings are kosher, that is, not tainted.

For those who have the image of the shetel as a classless society, this may come as a surprise, for we learn that there was indeed a well defined hierarchy and that status symbols abounded. The farmer proudly points out that his wife needs no servants, no fresser of dem kop, implying that servants allowed the middle-class merchant's wife to enjoy promenading, attending balls, or joining in other such frivolous pastimes. Translating shpatzieren as "promenading" fails to convey much of the humor. After the Friday evening dinner of of a Sabbath afternoon, the main amusement was a stroll with friends. Champs Elysées in Paris it was not, but the pleasure, the enjoyment, was more than comparable: it was savored to the full. We glimpse a special way of life.

Travelling to spas or to "take the baths" was another status symbol in middle class shetel society. When we are told that the farmer's wife is not constantly promenading or going to spas, we glimpse a special way of life, not at all the Fiddler on the Roof. Furthermore, the amusing allusion to the "Friday trip to the market" as an alternative to the elegant resorts adds humor with a tinge of irony.

The final convincing argument is the farmer's pride and contentment in providing a proper marriage match for his daughter. This was a major concern, not taken lightly within the compass of shetel values, fraught with anxieties for the Jewish father, especially when he was blessed with many daughters. This farmer gently reminds us that, for him, finding a bridegroom is no problem at all. In fact, he happens to
find a local boy, that, someone he, the father, approves of and whose family he deems suitable as in-laws, which is very important! He offers two goats as dowry, and the children live happily ever after.

The interesting and totally unexpected aspect of this folksong is the surprise ending. After the song extols the free life of the farmer, we learn that this is a pitch for Zionism, the return to the Biblical homeland, at the time still under Turkish domination, but a dream for Eastern European Jews. It was the beginning of the Halutz movement, the origin of today’s *kibbutzim*. If only from this point of view, this Yiddish folksong is of historic significance and would merit attention from those interested in traditional *shtetl* lore.

In a review of Ghitta Sternberg’s *Stefanesti: Portrait of a Roumanian Shtetl* for the December 1984 issue of the *Journal of the American Libraries Association*, S.D. Spector noted that the people of the *shtetls* left "... a legacy of reverence for learning, a spirit of self-reliance, and a gift of resourcefulness that [their] inhabitants gladly shared with their new surroundings elsewhere." He left out an element that any fan of *klezmer* music can never forget: humor.

Deux chansons judéo-allemandes "Die Soche" et "Der Mai Lied"

De toutes les chansons que ma mère me chantait, deux mélodies m’ont particulièrement suivi jusqu’à présent: Die Soche (la Charrue) et Der Mai Lied (La chanson du mois de mai). Je n’avais retenu que quelques lignes de chaque chanson. Mais d’une façon inattendue, voilà que j’ai retrouvé dans un vieux cahier de ma mère, portant la date 1904, ces deux chansons écrites à la main, à l’encre et à la plume en judéo-allemand (Yiddish) à caractères latins, sur des vieilles pages jaunies et fragiles. J’ai trouvé les chansons plus longues plus et plus intéressantes à plusieurs points de vue. Les deux chansons traitent de sujets qui ne figurent pas normalement dans le folklore shtetl. Dans chaque cas, il y a un thème distinct, et la conclusion est unique. Dans le cas de La Charrue, la conclusion est particulièrement inattendue.

Puisque ma voix n’est pas spectaculaire, la transcription des mélodies s’avérerait problématique. Le pianiste Ted Lazarue mérita mon admiration lorsque il réussit la transcription des deux mélodies, suivant l’écoute de mes interprétations limitées.

Comme c’est le cas dans la plupart des chansons folkloriques, les mélodies sont simples et les éléments répétitifs ne manquent pas. Les lecteurs trouveront les textes complets des deux chansons dans mon livre, *Stefanesti: Portrait d’un shtetl roumain* (Pergamon Press, 1984). Ce shtetl fut complètement détruit durant la deuxième guerre mondiale. Heureusement, mes parents ont émigré au Canada en 1938 et ma mère a sauvégardé tout un trésor de photos, etc. que bien d’autres malheureusement n’ont pas pu préserver quand ils ont été évacués sans possibilité de retour.

Je crois que ces deux chansons méritent notre attention, ne serait-ce que pour leur importance historique. Les paragraphes suivants contiennent quelques versets de chacune chanson, ainsi que leurs mélodies.