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Milken Archive of Jewish Music Virtual Museum Introduces Volume 12

Legend of Toil and Celebration: Songs of Solidarity, Social Awareness, and Yiddish Americana

Imagine what would happen if millions of aliens—industrious, adaptable, and not entirely English-speaking—suddenly landed in the United States and began remaking both themselves, and the country as a whole.

That's essentially what happened during the last two decades of the 19th century and the first two of the 20th, when more than two million Jews left Eastern Europe and came to America in search of a better life. Much extraordinary music resulted from that vast migration, samples of which can be found throughout the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: The American Experience. But nowhere will you hear more of it, or more insightful and illustrative examples, than here in [Volume 12](#): some tender, some triumphant, but all of them flowing directly from the immigrant experience.

Many of those newly minted Jewish Americans came from the *shtetls* of Russia and Poland, echoes of which can be heard in "[The Holyday Calamities of Avremele Melamed](#)," Maurice Goldman's virtuoso turn for cantor, choir, and orchestra. (Go online to the [Milken Archive's virtual museum for video excerpts from a live performance](#).) Most spoke Yiddish. And all hoped to find in the *goldene medina*—literally, the "golden land"—the economic opportunities and personal freedoms that had eluded them back home.

You can hear their heartfelt patriotism in songs like "[Amerike mayn vunderland](#)" ("America, My Wonderland"), with its closing allusion to the Stars & Stripes, by the Polish-born [Mikhl Gelbart](#); "[Ikh hob dikh lib Amerike](#)" ("I Love You, America"), by the Ukrainian-born cantor [Joshua Samuel Weisser](#); and "[Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor](#)," from the 1949 Broadway musical *Miss Liberty*, by the Russian-born cantor's son Irving Berlin. Berlin's setting of the famous Emma Lazarus poem brims with cheerful optimism—a quality that is but briefly dimmed by a hushed interlude, only to rush back in like the sun peeking out from behind a cloud.

Life in the new world was not all sunshine and roses, however. Many who came expecting to find the streets paved with gold wound up living in airless tenements and slaving away in sweatshops, their dreams deferred if not completely derailed. The Polish immigrant Morris Rosenfeld, who himself toiled in the garment factories of the Lower East Side, became known as the "poet laureate of labor" for his grim descriptions of life in the needle trade. "[Mayn yingele](#)" ("My Little Boy") tells the story of a father who works such long hours that he never sees his young son awake; and you needn't understand Yiddish to hear the sorrow at the heart of "[Mayn rue platz](#)" ("My Grave"), a song that many interpret as a tribute to the 146 workers who were killed in a fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in 1911.

Given the exploitative conditions under which so many of them worked, it's not surprising that American Jews were at the forefront of the labor movement, or that much American Jewish music of the period had a progressive, at times even revolutionary, bent. There's no mistaking the call to arms in Gelbart's stirring "[Makhnes geyen](#)" ("Forward, Let Us Move!"), with its invocation of "the masses... marching in the struggle for victory"; or in "[Mayn tsavoe](#)" ("My Testament"), a sober setting of a poem by the Russian-born radical socialist David Edelstadt ("...when I will die, carry to my grave our flag... sprinkled with the blood of working men"). "[A mol in a tsayt](#) (Once upon a Time): Legend of Toil," by [Lazar Weiner](#), the past master of the Yiddish art song (see [Volume 9: The Art of Jewish Song](#)), is basically an ode to unions, its tale of embattled coal miners ennobled by Weiner's elegant, multilayered music. Weiner, who was born in Ukraine and died in Queens, wrote the cantata for the socialist fraternal order known as the [Arbeter Ring](#), or Workmen's Circle, an organization that survives to this day.

American Jewish composers of the immigrant era also recast a good deal of traditional Jewish material in secular, sometimes left-leaning form. Weiner's former student, Maurice Rauch, turned a classic Yiddish short story about a saintly Hasidic rabbi into a secular humanist cantata that is by turns somber and uplifting ("[Oyb nit nokh hekher](#)"). Edelstadt's "[Piramidn](#)," meanwhile, is a folk-like Passover song that not only omits any mention of God, but portrays Moses as a kind of proto-labor leader. And the "[Third Seder of the Arbeter Ring](#)" gives a similar makeover to the entire Passover meal. Secular, left-leaning seders once drew large crowds with their socially conscious skits, dances, and songs. The selections here include a bouncy version of "[Ma nishtana](#)," or the "Four Questions"; the lovely "[Zog maran](#)," with its terraced, descending melody; and a rousing "[Dayenu](#)" from which all references to God have been neatly excised.

The music of Volume 12 covers as much territory as the immigrant experience itself. There is hope and disillusionment; passion and grief; nostalgia and the urge to remake oneself in a land of opportunity—a land where anything is possible, if not always easy. These themes inhabit not only the American Jewish experience, but the American experience writ large; and they resonate as powerfully today as they did a century ago.

So cue up Volume 12, and listen to our shared past, our communal present—and our collective future.

Founded in 1990 by philanthropist Lowell Milken, the Milken Archive of Jewish Music reflects the scope and variety of Jewish life in America. The Archive's virtual museum www.milkenarchive.org is an interactive guide to music, videos, oral histories, photos and essays.

For information or interviews, contact media@milkenarchive.org.

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