

January 28, 2014

## Remembering Pete Seeger and his Jewish Influence

**The history of the Israeli song that went to #2 on the Billboard charts**

Pete Seeger, the iconic American folk singer and composer of such notable standards as "If I had a Hammer," "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" and "Turn, Turn, Turn" who passed away on Monday, January 27 at age 94 is also remembered by the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: The American Experience for his recording of "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena," a Billboard #2 Top Hit for Seeger's band, The Weavers.



"Legendary songwriter, singer, and political activist Pete Seeger's 'Tzena, Tzena, Tzena' was a great example of the power of music not only to entertain but to bring people together," said Milken Archive of Jewish Music founder Lowell Milken.

"Tzena, Tzena, Tzena" was originally written in Hebrew in 1941 by Issachar Miron who had fled Poland as a teenager and was, at the time, serving in the Jewish Brigade of the British Army in then-Palestine. Miron composed the melody; Yehiel Chagiz wrote the lyrics; and in 1946 Julius Grossman wrote a "third part" to the song, which is the version Seeger heard.

### [Watch the video: Pete Seeger and the Story of "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena"](#)

"Until I started living in New York at age 19-20," Seeger recalled in an interview for the Milken Archive in 2000, "I knew so little about Jewish culture, it's shameful." It was in New York that Seeger befriended some Jewish musicians. "And it was from one of these young men that I learned Tzena, Tzena in 1948."

As Seeger explained, he performed the song with The Weavers in a Greenwich Village nightclub, not knowing anything of the song's history or even its meaning. The famous band leader Gordon Jenkins heard them, and then arranged for them to record the song with English lyrics he composed. "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena" went to #2 on the Billboard Top Hits (the other side of the single "Goodnight Irene" would go to #1).

Tzena is a rousing call to "join the celebration" with "people from every nation" who'll "dance the hora" until "dawn will find us laughing in the sunlight dancing in the city square."

In 2000, the Milken Archive interviewed Seeger and Miron during the recording of a new version of "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena," a three language, English-Hebrew-Arabic version which the two composed a few years before. Seeger and Miron wanted the message of Tzena to be relevant for a new generation.

Seeger was known as much for his music as his activism over the years, whether in defiance of the McCarthy era blacklist, or in support of civil rights, environmental causes, the anti-war movement and international disarmament.

"Pete Seeger was one of those very rare individuals who lived fully in accord with his beliefs," said Milken Archive Curator Jeff Janeczko. "At a Madison Square Garden concert held in honor of his 90th birthday, Pete took to the stage wearing jeans and a baseball cap and led the massive crowd in a sing-along, unwilling—even in this context—to differentiate himself from the thousands in attendance."

"The truth is Pete Seeger made ["Tzena, Tzena, Tzena"] a Song of Peace, made it a Song of Joy," Miron told the Archive in 2000. "May God Bless Pete Seeger and may God Bless the singers." The Milken Archive mourns the loss of Pete Seeger along with all those all over the world whose lives he touched.

Pete may be gone, but he left an indelible mark on the world and inspired generations of musicians for



whom music and social activism are inseparable. Like the familiar refrain of one of his favorite songs, his soul goes marching on.