

## Two Shtetl Folksongs: *Die Soche* and *Der Mai Lied*

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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

### *Der Mai Lied*

Menchen shteyt oyf ganz frie  
Ervacht fun ayer geleger  
Zeit die sheine armonie  
Mit dem naturlichen zeger

Beimolech raushen, feigolech zingen  
Melodien jirmen feigolech alerley  
Eisriklech tantzen und shpringen  
Und tzum tact halt tzi der salovey

### II

Feigolech, fligolech vie auch die bien  
Auf dem brek fun dem mantl oyageshtikt  
Dos vais, dos royit, dos green  
Yedes shtipt dos piskiole und pikt

Bleimolech greslenoys zeire heyrolech  
Die mamme, die Natur ferkemt zei zer shein  
Tropn rosae falt of zey vie perolech  
Und shvenkt zei aus die niskolech sehr rein

## III

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*.

## IV

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 hobn hossene *in a gitter shoo*  
 Pliesket alle dammen mit die hent  
 Die klesmer, feigeln sind shoin fun lang do  
 Yedes halt in moul sein instrument

## V

Rei, 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 bavart zie mit shterndlech  
 Men heibt shoyn un tzu der *chuppeh* tzu gehn

## VI

**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**

## VII

Der hymmel is dos *kessibe blat*  
 Die oysies zenen die shtern  
 Die kessibe leint der **ALTER GOT**  
 Az dos porfolg zol nisht tzisheynt 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 *interfierers* (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!



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 *shturmak*, 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

feminine.

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 *toyvilt 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!

### *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 braught keine ame  
 Keine dienst keine bonne  
 Kein fressner of dem kopf

Zie darf kein hut, kein feder  
 Zie shpartziert nisht keseyder  
 Zie furt nisht in die beyder  
 Saidn Frayteg tzum marki

Kein putz, kein balmarsirten  
 Alein in hoys a virtin  
 In dem feld a hirtin  
 Und zie 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 dovk'a hign  
 Nodn gib ich tzvey tzign  
 Und zie leibt glicklich mit ir man!



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 *shtetl* 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 *shtetl* 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 *shtetl* 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 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 *shtetl* 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 *shtetl* 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.