

MISHPAHA¹ – MYTH OF CONTINUITY? A Concert of Jewish Music in Prague

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„It is in the Czech Republic, particularly in Prague, that the representation and „selling“ of the Jewish component as an integral part of the mainstream – and to a mainstream, not necessarily Jewish, public – has been most diligent, organized, and universal. Captivated by the night-to-day drama of the so-called Velvet Revolution as well as by the city's physical charms, tourists flocked to Prague (...). All of Prague's glorious architecture, charming cobbled alleyways, and richly fascinating history became an attraction – including its important Jewish component. Just as Rabbi Löw and the Golem were reinforced as symbols of Prague the magic and mysterious, Franz Kafka, the Czech Jew who wrote in German, whose sister died in Auschwitz, whose work was discouraged if not outright banned under communism, became the symbol of the multicultural „Mittleuropean“ ideal, so diametrically opposed to the monolithic imprint of the ousted regime. The headlong tourist influx produced a market for Jewish souvenirs, postcards, books, T-shirts, and many other tourist items.“³

Among Prague tourist items, you can always find some CD's with Jewish music, and almost always you will find recordings of the local Jewish group Mishpaha. In the city where – like other Middle-European cities – Jewish culture has become a visible component of the public domain, the Jews themselves, however, are now practically invisible (only about 1.500 Jews live in Prague, out of one million). Prague – a city, which fits into the frame of Gruber's „virtual Jewish

¹ The Czech transcription of the music group's name is „Mšpacha“.

² This paper is based on Veronika Seidlová's research done in the framework of the project „Prague as Sound Quilt“ and on the research done by Petra Hlávková resulting in the BA thesis „Mšpacha: příběh jednoho sboru“ („Mishpaha: The Story of One Choir“), Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague, 2006. All the interviews with the choir members were accomplished by Petra Hlávková. The information about the personality of Ladislav Blum and the ŽNOPS-choir come from Veronika Seidlová's BA thesis „Synagogální kantor Ladislav Blum“ („Ladislav Blum: Cantor of the Synagogue in Jerusalem Street, Prague“), Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague, 2003.

³ Gruber, Ruth Ellen (2002) *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe*. Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press, p. 144-145.

world“⁴ or which has even been called the „Jurassic Park of Judaism“⁵ – still may offer an interesting platform for a research in Jewish music. For the purposes of the „Prague as Sound Quilt“⁶ project, we decided to describe a performance of what is, perhaps, the most famous Jewish music group in the Czech Republic – Mishpaha.

Description of the musical event

We attended a concert of the Prague music group Mishpaha (which means „family“ in Hebrew) on the 11th November 2004. The performance took place in the Žižkov quarter at the Atrium music hall, where the choir regularly performs. The Atrium is a renovated baroque church, used for classical music concerts. The evening's atmosphere was formal, people were dressed up in their Sunday best, one man wore a „yarmulke“ on his head. The audience was comprised of 60, predominantly, middle-aged people who half-filled the hall. Our „family“ on stage looked slightly unbalanced – as it consisted of 14 women and two men. The women, of various ages (approx. 13-70 years old), wore black dresses and scarves with a Star-of-David, with which some of them covered their hair. Both men – one over sixty, the other younger (actor Petr Vacek) – wore a „yarmulke“ on their heads. Petr Vacek chaired the entire concert and communicated with the audience in an informal way. He presented the choir and its history, emphasized the fact that Mishpaha has always meant an amateur singing among friends, and during the concert, read the Czech translations of songs, and, together with another actress Lenka Termerová (who is also a member of the group) interspersed the singing with readings of Hassidic stories. The spoken word played an important role during the concert – it was given the equal time as it was given to the music. The repertoire consisted mainly of so-called „zemirot“ – semi-religious „table songs“ in Hebrew. Furthermore, two

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Eli Valley, *The Great Jewish Cities of Central and Eastern Europe* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1999), p. 53 ff. In: Gruber, *Virtually Jewish*, p. 145.

⁶ More about this project in Zuzana Jurková's text „Prague: Musical Anthropology of the City as a Patchwork“.

Hassidic songs⁷ (which are also considered semi-religious as a whole) and one Zionist song⁸ (the only one of a secular character) could be heard. What the choir did not sing at all were any Ashkenazi secular songs in Yiddish⁹. Apart from a Yiddish refrain of one Hassidic song, all the texts were in Hebrew. Melodies were arranged into the (for Central-Europeans) usual two- or three-part harmonies, going in thirds. The conductor accompanied the choir on the piano, sometimes joined by a violin, flute, guitar, wood-blocs or rattles - once even by a small African djembe-drum. The instrumentalists were members of the choir and when they weren't playing they sang together with the others. This was also the case for the conductor Helena Ester Divecká (born Rothová) who was conducting while she was singing. Some singers sang from music, some sang by heart or had a look at the music of others; some of them were evidently nervous, others visibly supported the soloists. The sound of the choir was heterogeneous (individual voices stuck out), their voice production was naturalistic, very loud (almost constantly), and they often sang out-of-tune. However, they sang with great enthusiasm and also so inspired the audience that they tirelessly clapped their hands. During the concert, Petr Vacek made a comment that the group had to simulate a few mistakes during their performance. Otherwise, their singing might seem too calm and perfect. But if the audience would hear some shortcomings, it might feel sympathetic toward the amateurs. At the end of the concert, the audience repeatedly called for encores.

Research on the audience¹⁰

The audience consisted mostly of acquaintances, friends and relatives of the choir-members, of whom some are of Jewish origin.

⁷ The two Hassidic songs Mishpaha sang in this concert were "Hora hadera" (partly in Hebrew, partly in 'meaningless' syllables) and "Jababam" (partly in Yiddish, partly in 'meaningless' syllables); for the term "Hassidic song" see below.

⁸ The song sung in concert was "Tzum galil". We consider the song to be Zionist because of its text. Translation: "The pioneer is for the work, the work is for the pioneer. / The peace is for the nations, the nations are for the peace."

⁹ "Yiddish folk songs" were traditionally sung by Ashkenazim (originally "German" Jews of Western and Eastern Europe), whose vernacular was the Yiddish language - a mixture of German and Hebrew.

¹⁰ Structured interviews accomplished with 24 interviewed on 11. 11. 2004.

(Even the conductor herself does not know the exact ethnic composition of the choir. However, while choosing new members, Jewish origin is preferred.)¹¹ Among the audience, we also found Jewish studies and Hebrew language students, Protestants, and people interested in spirituality in general. Most of the persons interviewed regularly attended the concerts of the Mishpaha choir. Apart from Mishpaha, the interviewed persons said they listened to music of a similar genre (e.g. other Czech groups playing or singing Jewish music, namely, the groups Adash or Ester), and they also very often listened to Classical music, sometimes Folk, Irish music or Rock. Mostly they defined what they listened to by specifying what they did not listen to at all: Pop music and Czech Brass bands. For them, Mishpaha symbolized an alternative to the mainstream, and even one of the few possibilities to express their Jewish identity.

„I had two reasons to come. First, I'm interested in music, and second, I'm interested in Judaism. I consider music to be one of the substantive parts of Jewish culture. I've been at Mishpaha concerts several times; there is nothing much else in Prague. Otherwise I listen to various kinds of music apart from contemporary Pop music which I don't listen to, by any means, because it has no meaning for me.“ (20 year old man)¹²

Mass-media image

Reflections by the audience on Mishpaha, perceiving the group as an "alternative" and as a "way to Jewish identity", corresponds with the group's self-presentation in the media, particularly on the internet. Their websites also reminded us of the past existence of the choir as part of the culture that had been oppressed by the totalitarian regime; a choir which thus became a part of Jewish political dissent¹³, mediating ethnic identity. Mishpaha is also characterized as a tradition of family

¹¹ Helena Ester Divecká, interview, 18.4.2005.

¹² See footnote 10.

¹³ (also so-called „underground culture“); „The choir emerged from the inner needs of a nationality which was initially neglected. Even membership in the choir was almost a subversive act against the regime, as was folk music in general, as was demonstrated by the role of singers and of folk songs during the 'velvet revolution'. (...) The choir spread not only songs, but also the tools of national identity.“ <http://music.taxoft.cz/mispaeha/history.htm>

singing¹⁴, non-professional, but with faith¹⁵, as a way to spirituality¹⁶ and as a music group which consciously aims to bring back a lost folk culture¹⁷, drawing on continuity, on the source of authentic tradition¹⁸. In similar ways, Mishpaha is presented by others as well: "While the usual route through which Jewish music has become known to many music groups was following: Galicia (possibly Lithuania, Belorussia, Moldavia, Roumania) – North America – CD-recordings, they [Mishpaha] draw on local roots."¹⁹ Concerning the repertoire, Mishpaha refers to itself as a choir that arranges and performs Hassidic, Yiddish, and Hebrew songs.²⁰

Short introduction into the musical context of the Ashkenazi Jews

The music of the Ashkenazi Jews and its inner structure can be seen from several perspectives. The most general and simplest differentiation seems to me to consider whether the music is religious, semi-religious or secular. Religious music is traditionally performed in the synagogue, it is sung on religious texts in Hebrew and Aramaic, and, according to religious denominations, the music instruments are either used or avoided. The semi-religious music uses liturgical texts as well, but traditionally, it is sung at home during the Sabbath and at other Festivals (so-called 'table songs' or *zemiroth*). The genre of semi-religious music also includes *Hassidic* songs, because "the music of strictly observant ultra-orthodox *Hassidic* Jews (i.e. those who wear 18th century Polish costume), as a whole, is regarded as semi-religious, since there is no clear dividing line between the 'sacred' and 'secular' in *Hassidic* life."²¹ The text is often partly in Hebrew or Yiddish and partly sometimes consists of syllables like „yay“,

¹⁴ „Mishpaha still means the same tradition of family singing (...).“ <http://music.taxoft.cz/mispacha/history.htm>

¹⁵ "The greatest experience of family singing is the simplest one: more important than your profession is the fact, that (if) your heart is in the right place and you have faith."

¹⁶ <http://music.taxoft.cz/mispacha/history.htm>

¹⁷ <http://music.taxoft.cz/mispacha/historie.htm> ¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ <http://music.taxoft.cz/mispacha/history.htm>;

¹⁹ <http://klezmer.hyperlink.cz/kapely.htm>

²⁰ <http://music.taxoft.cz/mispacha/history.htm>;

²¹ Knapp, Alexander. *The Musical Heritage of the Jews*. Paper presented at the conference „The Jewish Enigma“, The Open University 1992.

„yababam“, „biri biri bom“, etc.²² Secular music embraces the music traditionally performed outside the synagogue, i. e. the folk songs in Yiddish²³, *Klezmer* (which derives from an old tradition of instrumental music played by itinerant Jewish bands at both Jewish and Christian weddings and other festivities)²⁴ - and other secular genres, of which, in the Mishpaha-context, Israeli folk music is the important one. (Israeli folk music apart from other characteristics, it is a mixture of Ashkenazi, Sephardi²⁵ and Oriental styles.)

Mishpaha and its historic context

The Jewish community has been present in the city of Prague since at least 956-966.²⁶ Up until 1941, when the first transport of Jewish men left for Terezín²⁷, Prague was a multiethnic and multicultural city consisting of three ethnic groups: the Czech majority and the German and Jewish minorities.²⁸

Prague has always functioned as a center of Jewish life in the Czech lands. In the pre-war Czechoslovakia of the 1920s and 30s, there were approximately 30,000 Jews living in Prague, out of the 354,000 Jews in the whole Republic.²⁹ In that culturally tolerant, democratic state consisting of the historic Czech lands (Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia), Slovakia, and a part of today's Ukraine, Jewish people could declare Jewish 'nationality', as well. In the 1921 population census, they declared the following nationalities:

²² „There are two main forms: the *Niggun* (improvisation) and the *Riqqid* (dance). Improvisations, typically, are set not to words but to a repertoire of syllables. These have sometimes been referred to as 'meaningless' or 'nonsense' syllables. Nothing could be further from the truth, for they are enormously meaningful and expressive to those who sing them and hear them.“ (Knapp, *The Musical Heritage of the Jews*.)

²³ Alexander Knapp adds: „Many so-called Ashkenazi 'folksongs' have been composed in relatively recent past by well-known musicians; but if the music strikes a popular chord, it becomes the property of the „group“. (Knapp, *The Musical Heritage of the Jews*.)

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Sephardim: originally „Spanish“, Jews of the Mediterranean.

²⁶ Pékny, Tomáš (2001) *Historie Židů v Čechách a na Moravě*. Praha: Sefer, p. 12.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

²⁸ Soukupová, Blanka (2006b) „Tvář města od konce druhé světové války do současnosti. Na příkladu židovské Prahy.“ In press, p. 1.

²⁹ Čermáková, Radka (2003). „Československá republika – nový stát ve střední Evropě a Židé“. In: Blanka Soukupová – Marie Zahradníková (eds.). *Židovská menšina v Československu ve dvacátých letech*. Praha: Židovské muzeum v Praze, p. 15.

Czechoslovak (21%), German (14%), Hungarian (8%), Russian (1%), Polish (0, 5%) and Jewish (51%).³⁰ The number of people who declared Jewish nationality correlated with the number of Jewish people who were orthodox. Generally, it's possible to say that the further east in the Republic they were, the more Jews declared themselves of Jewish nationality³¹ and practiced Orthodox Judaism.³²

In the Czech lands (i.e. the area of today's Czech Republic), the Jewish minority was not homogenous either³³ and were then struggling with internal problems. The majority were so-called 'assimilants' who, whether Czech or German, had rather liberal religious attitudes and kept a distance from Orthodox Judaism.³⁴ The rest were comprised of Orthodox Jews and Zionists.³⁵

Concerning the language, since roughly the beginning of the nineteenth century, Jewish communities of Czech lands have spoken Czech and German (and that's why these German speaking Jews were regarded as part of the three-million German minority), but generally they didn't speak Yiddish anymore. The processes of emancipation and assimilation also related to music. As Abraham Zvi Idelsohn explains:

"Beginning with the sixteenth century and down throughout the Ghetto period, Jewish folk-song was cultivated; and it discontinued with the readmittance of the Jew into the society of his neighbours, because his separate social life ceased then to exist. In Western and Central Europe Jewish secular folk-song

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Kružíková, Jana (2003). „Židovské náboženské obce a ortodoxní Židé v Československé republice ve dvacátých letech 20. století.“ In: Blanka Soukupová – Marie Zahradníková (eds.). *Židovská menšina v Československu ve dvacátých letech*. Praha: Židovské muzeum v Praze.

³³ In 1921, out of 125,000 Jews in the Czech lands, 26% of them declared a Jewish nationality, 35% declared a German nationality and 38% a Czech nationality. (Čermáková, Radka (2003). „Československá republika – nový stát ve střední Evropě a Židé“. In: Blanka Soukupová – Marie Zahradníková (eds.). *Židovská menšina v Československu ve dvacátých letech*. Praha: Židovské muzeum v Praze, p. 18.)

³⁴ Kružíková, Jana (2003). „Židovské náboženské obce a ortodoxní Židé v Československé republice ve dvacátých letech 20. století.“ In: Blanka Soukupová – Marie Zahradníková (eds.). *Židovská menšina v Československu ve dvacátých letech*. Praha: Židovské muzeum v Praze, p. 98.

³⁵ Soukupová, „Tvář města...“, p. 1.

vanished about the beginning of the nineteenth century, while in the East European countries it continued until lately (...).“³⁶

However, Yiddish songs might also have been sung in the area of today's Czech Republic even later because of the influx of Jewish refugees from Galicia during the First World War, and immediately after it.³⁷ According to Philip Bohlman, “the confrontation between Eastern and Central European Ashkenazi cultures became a factor of Jewish identity in Berlin, Prague, Vienna, and other cities of the Central European monarchies (...).“³⁸ In Czechoslovakia of the 1930s, there also very presumably had been some influence of the American Yiddish theatres, and related genres. Nevertheless, we don't know much about Jewish musical life in pre-war Czechoslovakia due to the fact that no systematic research has yet been done.³⁹ E.g., it is sure that the tradition of singing *zemirot* together during Sabbath meals existed here, although we are not clear about how the songs sounded.⁴⁰

Unlike traditional Jewish musicians who had been vanishing since the time of the *haskalah* (18th-century Enlightenment) of Ashkenazi Jews,⁴¹ musicians of Jewish origin began to be involved in music of the dominant culture at that time.⁴² Later, at the beginning of

³⁶ Idelsohn, Abraham Zvi (1929) *Jewish Music in Its Historical Development*. New York: Henry Holt, p. 379-380.

³⁷ Pěkný, *Historie Židů...*, p. 134.

³⁸ Bohlman, Philip (2000) “Jewish Music in Europe” In *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music: Europe*, T. Rice – J. Porter – Ch. Goertzen (eds.) New York and London: Garland Publishing.

³⁹ There were only a few articles written around 1930 by musicologist Paul Nettl (father of ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl). On the basis of his research, Paul Nettl was convinced that Bohemia was the center of “Jewish music-making”. Using both the comparative musicological method and sociological studies, he tried to find connections between Jewish folksongs and western art music, and to answer the question of why the Jewish musicians were so popular among the Christian majority. The main focus was given to klezmer-musicians living in 17th and 18th century, who played both for Jews and for the majority; and to Jewish musicians who composed and performed western art music in the 19th and in the beginning of 20th century. Over a half century, Paul Nettl's work has remained the only academic study concerning traditional Jewish music-making in the Czech lands. (Nettl, Paul. “Bemerkungen zur jüdischen Musik- und Theatergeschichte in Böhmen.” In: *Ročenka dějin Židů v ČSR* (1930), p. 479-484.)

⁴⁰ Much might be revealed in the music collection of Jewish museum in Prague which has not been made accessible up to now (this should change next year).

⁴¹ See Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in Its Historical...*, p. 379 ff.

⁴² In 19th century esp. Gustav Mahler; in the first half of 20th century Viktor Ullmann, Hans Krása, Ervin Schulhoff, Walter Kaufmann, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, David Popper, etc. (Pěkný, *Historie Židů...*, p. 619.)

the 20th century, this trend continued to evolve due, particularly, to the personality of Gustav Mahler - the most important western art musician of Jewish origin, born in the Czech lands. During the decades prior to World War II, the influences of Jewish musicians were also important to European Jazz and popular music. According to Bohlman, "Jewish musicians made a decisive contribution to European cabaret, many of which, particularly those in the large cities of Central Europe, may have had a largely Jewish clientele".⁴³ As the process of assimilation carried on, mainstream musicians of Jewish origin regarded themselves (and were regarded) less and less as Jews; their Jewish identity ceased to be important for them until they - shocked - received a summons to join the transports to the Terezín ghetto. That was particularly the case of the so-called "Terezín composers" - western art musicians such as Viktor Ullmann, Hans Krása etc. who started to musically cope with their Jewish identity only in the "exemplary" Nazi ghetto of Terezín, where a certain level of musical life was allowed.

On the eve of World War II, some 118,000 Jews lived in Bohemia and Moravia. At the war's end 80,000 Czech Jews had been murdered.⁴⁴ Those who survived either succeeded to emigrate before the war or after, some of the German-speaking Jews even were victims of the revenge taken on the Czech Germans (including the mass evacuation of German inhabitants ordered by the state). The number of Jewish people who remained in Bohemia and Moravia in 1945 was 15,000⁴⁵, including the new immigrants from the Transcarpathian Ukraine, which had become a part of the USSR.

The mentality of the survivors went through difficult process. Mostly, they had rejected their Jewish identity and had chosen the path of a total merging with the Czech nation. Many of them had also become idealistic Communists (fascinated by the incredibly positive myths about Stalin and the victorious Red Army which had liberated Terezín)⁴⁶ - until the anti-Jewish show trials in the 1950s (ordered by

Stalin's regime and accomplished by local Communist authorities) left them bereft of political, as well as religious beliefs.⁴⁷

The Jewish identity of children born after the Holocaust was often hidden as a "family secret". In many cases, their sense of identity started to become consolidated in 1967 during the Six-Day War in Israel, in the wake of which almost all Communist states broke relations with Israel and, in some countries, including Czechoslovakia, embarked on harsh new anti-semitic (or anti-Zionist) policies.⁴⁸ The personal history of Leo Pavlát - contemporary director of Jewish museum in Prague and former anticommunist dissident Jewish activist may serve as an example to show how young Czech Jews were searching for their identity at that time: "The short-lived reforms during the Prague Spring in 1968⁴⁹ were another catalyst in his exploration of Jewish identity; the hard-line regime imposed after the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 intensified both his sense of Jewish identity and his anti-Communist dissent."⁵⁰

In 1970, in an anti-Communist dissident atmosphere, Mishpaha was formed. It was the first group of Czech Jews since World War II performing Jewish music. The group has arisen as a family ensemble: two sisters - Hana Rothová (a historical musicologist) and Helena Klímová (a psychologist) - together with their families and their friends from the University choir began to meet at home to sing Jewish songs. The Mishpaha websites present the beginning of the group as follows:

"(...) a few women decided that instead of merely gossiping about the impossibility of free expression and the notorious oppression of Jewish culture by the totalitarian regime, they ought to fight against it in the simplest way: Jewish song. While the youngest children were sleeping, in the bedrooms of Prague flats, the first choir was forming, which would study and spread something natural and hard to ignore - folk and religious songs. The choir emerged from the inner needs of a nationality which was initially neglected. Even membership in the choir was to be almost a subversive act against the

⁴³ Bohlman, "Jewish Music in Europe".

⁴⁴ Pěkný, *Historie Židů...*, p. 638.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Soukupová, Blanka (2004) "Židovská identita ve 20. století: Tradice a historická změna" In *Měštiny v městě: Přeměny etnických a náboženských identit v 20. století*, D. Luther - P. Sallner (eds.) Bratislava. p. 106.

⁴⁷ Gruber, *Virtually Jewish...*, p. 146-147.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 78.

⁴⁹ For the first time, Czech society and the government have also been blamed for their indifference to the Holocaust and to those who survived. At the same time, the Terezín-ghetto theme became known even abroad. (Soukupová, "Židovská identita ve 20. století...", p. 112.)

⁵⁰ Gruber, *Virtually Jewish...*, p. 173.

regime, as was folk music in general, which was demonstrated by the role of singers and folk songs during the "velvet revolution".⁵¹

Yet a more personal and detailed view is given by Helena Klímová. She and her sister were born to a Jewish mother and Czech father. Both parents were deported during the war and the children found themselves in an orphanage until they were adopted by a family of Czech Protestants.⁵² Later, Helena got married to the writer Ivan Klíma - particularly recognized in the world as a Jewish author - who had spent three years in Terezín. After returning from there, he supported Communist ideas until August 1968 when he rejected the Warsaw Pact invasion. In 1969 - 1970, Ivan Klíma gave lectures on Czech literature at the University of Michigan. As soon as he came back to Czechoslovakia, he was excluded from all institutions, was prohibited to publish, and his family was persecuted as well. Helena remembers the motivation for founding the Mishpaha in connection to the persecution of her own family:

„There were yet another motives. Partly, there was a very strong personal motive, my sister was a musicologist and in the year 1970, as you know, the purges began, and actually, we all were dismissed from employment; the whole family was persecuted because of my husband. You surely know that even the relatives of various troublesome people were persecuted. She lost her job and still had not been married at that time and I felt so sorry for that. So we started to think together about what she might do. Before, (...) she had worked for the Supraphon music company and also wrote articles for a music journal (...) And then I got the idea that some collective singing might make her happy because we had had such a tradition at home, we used to sing a lot at home, (...) our father used to play violin and mother used to play piano, that is what I remember from my early childhood, and then, when we grew up a bit, we all sang together, we did three-part singing with our father (...) so the family singing was always connected with such a nice feeling and besides, we both used to sing in various choirs during our childhood. Thus, we thought it would be nice to found such a family choir because at that time, around the year 1970, public life was so restricted and many such cultural activities had moved back into households - and then also the [era of] samizdat began.⁵³ Well, we started to meet and since we both knew a lot of Czech folk songs (...) but we didn't know any Jewish songs at all - our mother was Jewish, father not, and mum always tried to push her Jewish identity a bit aside because for her, it was

⁵¹ <http://music.taxof.cz/mispacha/history.htm>;

⁵² <http://music.taxof.cz/mispacha/historic.htm>

⁵³ underground periodicals which enabled dissident groups to organize and spread information about government abuses to fellow citizens and to Western nations.

connected with danger, she survived a concentration camp - but for us it was interesting, so we thought we could try how the Jewish songs actually sound like, we didn't know any. And my sister, being in part so musically educated and partly quite enterprising, went to various archives and talked to various people and began at once to find these songs, and at that time, no one actually knew anything similar. And then, a very personal thing played a role in it, my sister met her future husband Miki Roth at that time, (...) Miki used to sing beautifully and knew lot of songs, he came from the border between Slovakia and Hungary and he had experienced that local pre-war culture, so he was such a living source of songs. He also sang solo-parts and I remember that (...) we had our first performance around 1970⁵⁴ and I remember the date because my daughter was seven years old and sang solo there, and I presume it was in the Spanish synagogue.”⁵⁵

Helena Klímová, here, mentioned yet another “determining factor” for Mishpaha’s beginnings: the personality of Hana’s husband Miki Roth. Miki came from the Transcarpathian Ukraine and remembered lots of Yiddish songs⁵⁷ from his childhood. (In this sense, he was the “source of the authentic tradition” for Mishpaha, as mentioned on the group’s website). In his early years, Miki attended the German-Jewish lyceum in Brno and, consequently, had been studying at the Faculty of Medicine until the war. During the war, he served in the Czechoslovak Exile Army. Since the 1960s, he had worked as an interpreter for the Prague Information Service. (Later, particularly in 1990s, he became cantor⁵⁹ of Prague’s Old New Synagogue.) Not surprisingly, in an anonymous document coming from 1965 under the name “About Bringing Unhealthy Intentions into the Activities of Jewish Religious Communities”⁶⁰, Miki Roth is mentioned as one of the organizers of subversive activities among the Jewish youth.

⁵⁴ More precisely in 1972 in the Spanish synagogue in Dušní street. (Mishpaha’s chronicle; see Petra Hlávková’s BA thesis “Mispacha...”.)

⁵⁵ Helena Klímová, interview, 8.8.2005.

⁵⁷ Miki Roth sings seven of them on the recording of Mishpaha made in the year 1994, the choir accompanyies him several times.

⁵⁹ A singer who leads the prayers during the service.

⁶⁰ “O zanášení nezdravých politických záměrů do činnosti židovských náboženských obcí”, published in Roš Chodeš 2/2004.

However, particularly Helena Klímová's activities caused a forbidden touch of dissent and underground culture that has existed around Mishpaha. This became even more intensified in 1977 when Helena Klímová signed, together with hundreds of other Czech dissidents, a document entitled "Charter 77"⁶¹ – a petition which demanded that the Communist government adhere to the human rights provisions of the Helsinki Accords of 1975. The text was never published in the official media; virtually all signatories were arrested, interrogated, and often consequently dismissed from their employment. Referring to Mishpaha, Helena remembers that one of their first public performances appeared soon after Charter 77 was signed. Mishpaha cooperated with signator Karol Sidon at that time:

„Karol Sidon who is rabbi at present, but who was a forbidden author at that time, wrote a drama called 'Ester' and it should have been performed during the Purim festival. We, Mishpaha, offered to help and had rehearsed it, and finally, the performance was given. However, it was shortly after the Charter and the security organs were thirsting for Karol, and one or two days before the play should have been performed, they arrested him and took him into custody and they detained him during all that time, so poor Karol didn't see his play.“⁶²

The presence of the Charter 77 signatories obviously was the reason why the Jewish Community in Prague did not want to officially take Mishpaha under its patronage until 1987⁶³, although having an official entrepreneur was a *sine qua non* condition for public performing. Nevertheless, the group did not want to be connected with

⁶¹ „Through the 1970s and 1980s, the regime's emphasis on obedience, conformity, and the preservation of the status quo was challenged by individuals and organized groups aspiring to independent thinking and activity. Although only a few such activities could be deemed political by Western standards, the regime viewed any independent action, no matter how innocuous, as a defiance of the party's control over all aspects of Czechoslovak life. The regime's response to such activity was harassment, persecution, and, in some instances, imprisonment. The first organized opposition emerged under the umbrella of Charter 77." (http://workmall.com/wfb2001/czech_republic/czech_republic_history_dissent_and_independent_activity.html) In January 1977, the manifesto appeared in a West German newspaper and was immediately translated and reprinted throughout the world. Among the original 243 signers were artists, former public officials, and other prominent figures led by three spokesmen: playwright Vaclav Havel, philosopher Jan Patočka and former Communist foreign minister Jiri Hajek. Shortly thereafter, Havel was arrested and spent several months in prison, followed by house arrest, Patočka died during interrogation. By 1989 about two thousand people had signed the Charter, most having done so that year.

⁶² Helena Klímová, interview, 8.8.2005.
⁶³ Helny in 1987, Mishpaha has been accepted by the Jewish Community in Prague. (see Petra Hlávková's BA thesis "Mishpaha...")

the official Jewish institution either because it was strictly supervised by the communists. Helena comments:

„And we used to sing (actually rehearsed) mainly at home because we were not allowed to sing in public anywhere. Everything was under censorship at that time. (...) That is to say, when a music group wanted to establish itself somewhere, it had to have its so-called entrepreneur, who actually was the censor. And we didn't have anyone, of course, so we couldn't sing anywhere (...) we formed independently and on the contrary, we kept a distance from the Jewish Community for it was under Communist supervision. We kept a distance from it. Not from the Jews, but from the Community.“⁶⁴

Thus, they mainly sang at home. One of the first members, Zdena Skoumalová (who is not Jewish) remembers:

“We had our regular meetings at Roth's, they used to have such a beautiful penthouse creating a wonderful historic background. We met there every week, and some from the house had to for sure suspect us because ten to fifteen people were meeting there in broad daylight. And they also must have had heard us, but they were high-quality neighbours. It was beautiful...“⁶⁵

However, different members had different expectations of Mishpaha. Zdena presumes that Helena Klímová wanted to perform more for the dissidents, while Hana Rothová seemed to be more concerned with Jewish music, as such:

“Hana thus wanted to foster that folklore, and she wanted to make something out of the choir, she wanted the choir to become legalized in the course of time. In the meantime, she looked for musical stuff coming from the West. (...) She wasn't interested in performing at that time. (...) But Helena was different, I remember when we rehearsed only for the second time, she wanted to make a performance (...) for the dissidents. When I remember our first semi-public performance in Klíma's living room, it was impossible to stand the sound of it... [laughing]“⁶⁶

Nevertheless, in 1979, the group sang a few songs at the Jewish Community building. That time, Hana asked the cantor of the Jubilee synagogue (one of the only two synagogues where services had been led in Prague during the Communist regime) to conduct the choir. The cantor Ladislav Blum⁶⁷ – who was a professional singer employed in the Mens Choir of the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra – agreed and

⁶⁴ Helena Klímová, interview, 8.8.2005.

⁶⁵ Zdena Skoumalová, interview, 29.4.2005.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ More about Ladislav Blum (1911 Vělké Kapušany, Slovakia – 1994 Prague) in Veronika Seidlová's BA thesis "Synagogální kantor Ladislav Blum", Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague, 2003.

obviously convinced the Jewish establishment to found the "Židovské naboženské obce pražské sbor" (The Choir of the Jewish Religious Community in Prague), the so-called "ŽNOPS". Under this name, Mishpaha performed at the Community festivals such as Purim and Chanukah, strengthened by few students of Ladislav Blum's wife Terezie, who was a singing teacher. Among other members singing in the choir in this period, there were many important Jewish personalities such as the above-mentioned Karol Sidon, contemporary chief-rabbi in the Czech Republic, and poet Jiří Daniček, now president of Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic. However, it soon became apparent that the cooperation of amateur singers with virtually professional vocalists was causing problems since both groups had different musical conceptions. The Blum's with their "professional" group, where non-Jewish persons prevailed, emphasized the aesthetic aspects, while the "amateur" group stressed the "Jewish" aspects – they considered singing which is using "classical" western-art technique to be beautiful, but lacking its "Jewishness". Gradually, the groups separated from each other until 1987, when they began to exist in parallel. Concerning the opinions on "Jewishness" in their music, another Mishpaha singer Anna Sterecová claims:

*"It is not possible to sing Jewish songs just as a performance. In the Jewish Community, at one time, there was even one more choir (...). Cantor Blum [its conductor] brought conservatory students of his wife's there. They had beautiful, almost operatic voices, but that choir lost that Jewishness then. Admittedly, the songs performed by the vocally educated, perfect voices, led by cantor Blum, sounded great, but perhaps exactly because of that perfection, they lacked the atmosphere, that always made me fascinated. The Mishpaha choir had different problems. Although we – the amateurs – fought many times with the basic problems of choir singing, we managed (mainly due to Miki) to transmit the distinctive atmosphere of the songs, something what makes the songs Jewish."*⁶⁸

The fact that the "suspicious" people from Mishpaha were given the possibility to perform during the Jewish festivals was also related to a certain political liberalization having come in the second half of 80s. Helena Klímová says:

"Then, in the 1980s, the next period came, and it was actually a period similar to the second half of the 60s, something was in preparation, something was in

*the air and Mishpaha began to take on more people, they ceased to be afraid and they come to us and sang with us (...) and at the [Jewish] Community, they also ceased to be afraid, otherwise they were very terrified (...) and when we [performed] for the first time there, I remember that many people in the audience were crying, because they heard the songs of their childhood which we even didn't know."*⁶⁹

Nevertheless, Mishpaha still could not perform outside the Jewish Community. The only exceptions were Protestant churches:

*"(...) and actually the only places where they let us sing were the Protestant churches. We are grateful to the Czech Brethren up until today, that they let us sing there, because it was a risk for them. And we also sang at the liturgical music festivals, our first recordings came into being there. It was met with great interest and enthusiasm among people, although the reasons for it wasn't our technical perfection, we were technically quite imperfect, but it was something new for them, as it was for us."*⁷⁰

For legal public performances outside these semi-legal circuits (since every religion in the atheist regime was considered subversive), they needed to find an entrepreneur. (For if they wanted to accomplish it through official channels without the entrepreneur, they would have to give the list with names of members and their employers would have been informed about it.) Since there were lot of psychologists in the choir, they asked their friends from the Department of Psychotherapy belonging to the Czech Medical Society of Jan Evangelista Purkyně to shield them. The institution agreed and finally, in May 1989, half a year before the so-called "velvet revolution", the foundation contract had been signed.

After the fall of Communism, the Jewish minority in Czechoslovakia had been estimated at around eight thousand, of whom one thousand lived in Prague.⁷² Moreover, the average age in the Jewish communities was very high, due to the fact that many younger people had gone into exile. Nevertheless, this period of time was marked by the re-integration of Czech Jews aimed at creating a new image of history by emphasizing the benefits which had been brought into Czech culture by Jewish culture; followed by refusing assimilation and the aim to arrange contacts with Jewish institutions abroad, particularly in Israel – which was considered to be their second

⁶⁹ Helena Klímová, interview, 8.8.2005.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷² Pěkný, *Historie Židů v Čechách a na Moravě*, p. 638.

⁶⁸ Anna Sterecová, interview, 30.8.2005.

domicile.⁷³ Slowly, Jewish cultural, religious and academic life has been reviving. Jewish kindergartens and schools are being set up, Hebrew language courses organized, periodicals issued, and, in many towns and cities, special events devoted to Jewish culture are being organized.⁷⁴ A festival of Czech, German and Jewish culture are being "Nine Gates" takes place every year focusing mainly on klezmer music and Jewish composers of western art music. In addition, recordings and concerts of Sephardi ballads have been made in the Czech Republic (irregardless of the lack of a Sephardi tradition being present here, but following the international "Sephardi revival"). Apart from Mishpaha, two or three other choirs perform and record Jewish (particularly Israeli) songs.

Mishpaha itself went through many changes at that time: the "old" generation was replaced by a younger one, since many members left to devote themselves to their own cultural activities and to new jobs which they could not have had in the past. Some of them also felt that there was no longer the need to protect Jewish culture, or that it could be done by their children, who had in the meantime grown up. These „Mishpaha children“ who had sung in the group ever since childhood were strengthened, on the other hand, by the many new members.

Another change was that Mishpaha has been given full support from the Jewish Community, regardless of the fact that rabbi Karol Sidon is Orthodox (unlike most of Mishpaha members). As Helena Klímová says: "Although Karol is Orthodox, he never wanted us to be such."⁷⁵

Mishpaha had, thus, started to fulfill a representative function, as well: the group performed at important Community events (e.g. at the inauguration of rabbi Karol Sidon; events of the American Joint Distribution Committee), at the theatre shows for the Czech majority or foreign tourists (concerts in the Atrium-hall, performances for a

German travel agency at the Jewish Community building, etc.), on tour to Israel, and finally, Mishpaha also recorded its first two CDs. In 1997, Mishpaha's conductor Hana Rothová died. The group was very deeply affected by her loss and was trying to cope with the question as to whether it was worthwhile to keep rehearsing and performing without her. Finally, the members decided that Hana would have wished them to continue and so, her twenty-two-years-old daughter Helena Ester Divecká took over the leadership of the choir.

Helena Ester, together with her husband (whom she met in Mishpaha) are more religiously observant than her parents and are more oriented towards Israel (she herself spent one year there, and her husband Jan graduated at the Yeshiva Machon Meir in Jerusalem). By denomination, they are Orthodox. Helena Ester gained her musical experiences as a pianist of the instrumental group Klezmerim⁷⁶ which was also founded by her mother Hana. (At the beginning, Klezmerim sometimes provided instrumental accompaniment for Mishpaha, beside their own solo appearances; today, both ensembles exist independently.) Like her mother, Helena Ester makes song-arrangements for both Mishpaha and for Klezmerim, yet her style is different – less classical, more varied, more dramatic and (as mentioned by the members) "more difficult to remember"⁷⁷. The change of leading personalities, enhanced even more with the death of Miki Roth in 2000, was felt as very significant by the members as concerned the arrangements, repertoire (less Yiddish and more Hebrew songs) and types of performances (fewer ecumenical events). Since 1998, the songs have also been interspersed with Hassidic stories. Helena Ester Divecká explains her reasons to do so, as follows:

"Judaism is primarily a religion but also everyday-life, family; it is a language to a certain extent, an ethnicity, a prayer. That's why we read Hassidic stories during our performances – to bring not only a cultural-aesthetic experience to people, but something more. Even very short prayers or psalms need

⁷³ Soukupová, "Židovská identita...", 113.

⁷⁴ Bożena Muszkalska describes a similar situation in Poland. (Muszkalska, Bożena (2004) *Manifest Identities. Studies of Music and Minorities*. U. Hemetek – G. Lechleitner – I. Naroditskaya – A. Czekanowska (eds.); Cambridge Scholars Press, London.)

⁷⁵ Helena Klímová, interview, 8.8.2005.

⁷⁶ Hana Rothová wrote about Klezmerim: "In 1993 I invited six young musicians (then aged 11-17) to join our Prague based **MISHPAHA** choir. Soon I started arranging music for the different instruments they play. Today they are all secondary school and university students and most arrangements are the work of my daughter, Helena. The group under the name **KLEZMERIM** first featured on the **MISHPAHA 2** CD. Since then the group has performed regularly both at home and abroad." (<http://music.taxof.cz/klezmerim/intro.htm>).

⁷⁷ Helena Klímová, interview, 8.8.2005.

explanation (...) [and] for everyone, it is easier to remember something already heard before. This, people might come to synagogue and recognize something they have heard from us."⁷⁸

Since 2002, Mishpaha's repertoire has been structured more in accordance with the Jewish festivals (Shabbat, Hanukkah, Purim, Yesharim (who provided the song's-context) at educational events focused on the topic of Jewish festivals held at the Education and Culture Centre of the Jewish Museum in Prague. However, the religious side of the coin of Mishpaha's music-making is, for many of its members, not as important as the spiritual one. As Zdena Skoumalová and Helena Klímová put it:

"Today, there might be three Orthodox people in Mishpaha. The others are atheists or they are not concerned with the religion so much. I think the people in Mishpaha experience spirituality through music; we don't feel the necessity to designate it somehow. I would say that through music, we all meet on a spiritual level."⁷⁹

"To me, spirituality is connected with music, but definitely not with eating kosher – that is unintelligible to me, other commands and prohibitions alike, (...) members feel this in a similar manner."⁸⁰

At the present, Mishpaha has around 15 constant members, both Jewish and non-Jewish, of different, but mostly intellectual backgrounds (students, writers, scholars, actors, etc.). The group regularly performs, and has become well-known even among the Czech majority. Unlike the various forms of Jewish musical attempts having arisen during the post-Communist period, Mishpaha is considered to be a music group which can make „genuine“, „authentic“ Jewish folk music „drawing directly“ from the pre-war music tradition.

Interpretation

Without any doubt, Mishpaha is – due its thirty-five years of existence – the longest performing Czech Jewish-music-ensemble since the war. For some Czechs, it has even become a symbol for

⁷⁸ Helena Ester Divecká, interview, 11.3.2005.

⁷⁹ Zdena Skoumalová, interview, 29.4.2005.

⁸⁰ Helena Klímová, interview, 8.8.2005.

Jewish music, as such. We might ask: what do the Czechs expect from a music group being a symbol for the music of the minority, and how does the group itself manage with such expectations?

If Czechs expect them to be some „familiar exotic“, they might be disappointed. Mishpaha's performance in the Atrium Hall was an usual concert, of an usual uniform Czech choir singing; perhaps with slightly unusual melodies in a foreign language – but certainly arranged in a similar manner to the usual Czech-choir-arrangements. On a very general level, Mishpaha looks and sounds like a slightly peculiar, but Czech, choir. This is not surprising if we are aware of the fact that „one can look at the music of virtually any Jewish community and find similar examples of borrowing and adaptation of the local musical style.“⁸¹ „Classical“ arrangements are, thus, not only seen in Mishpaha's case but show an understandable development when Central-European Jews educated in western-art music applied this music-language onto the music of their own cultures. The sound and shape of the choir might be similar to mainstream (Czech) ones, although the melodies might not necessarily be so.

The melodies themselves are a different question. In the 1970s, when Hana Rothová began to look for Jewish songs to sing, nobody any longer remembered them – apart from few people who had come to Prague from the Transcarpathian Ukraine (like Miki Roth) or the Slovak-Hungarian border (Ladislav Blum), where different cultural influences had prevailed. Therefore, she put together the songs her husband remembered, and the pieces she – accidentally (since the possibility to get to any material from the „West“ was very limited, and almost impossible) – had found in song-books or recordings published abroad. Similar ways of finding repertoire, had been common to many post-Communist countries where „empty spaces in the local memory have been filled with Jewish music imported, mainly from Israel and America“.⁸²

The common process of shifting from local ethnic traditions towards Israel (where different musical styles have merged into a larger one), thus creating a distinctive pan-Jewish identity is, however,

⁸¹ Kaufman Shelemay, Kay (1997) „Mythologies and Realities in the Study of Jewish Music“ In *Enchanting Powers: Music in the World's Religions*, L. E. Sullivan (ed.) Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, p. 303.

⁸² Muszkatalska, „Expression of the Jewish Identity...“

even more enhanced by Mishpaha's music-making under the leadership of Helena Ester Divecká. Maybe that's one of the reasons why we did not hear any Yiddish songs at the concert.

Similarly, it also seems that the spiritual aspect of music-making, already emphasized by Hana Rothová and her generation, is being highlighted even more by the younger generation (the process of replacing the secular Yiddish songs with semi-religious Hebrew *zemirot* also fits into this framework).

Spirituality is also closely related to the specific aesthetic conception of Jewish music. Above all, Jewish conceptions of music privilege the human voice,⁸³ since vocal music provides an ideal vehicle "to support the [sacred] text, to prod the memory, and to insure that the word is transmitted to the next generation".⁸⁴ Moreover, music also mediates a personal contact with God. This conception "carries an implicit aesthetic message that applies in general to the relationship between the human voice and the text; the text and its meaning always takes precedence over the beauty of the singing, for its own sake".⁸⁵ The ability to produce beautiful tones is pleasant, though not important. The criteria of what sound is desired might differ (though again, they might not) from a western-art conception of round, lucid sound (such sound would be considered by many Jews as "calm", "boring", "superficial", "non-Jewish" – remember the conflict about the ZNOPS choir). Since the aim is an individual's confession to God, the voices might not blend; they might stick out and shout – all at the same time. This might result in a situation when, as in the case of Mishpaha, the aesthetic codes are being "switched", by accepting or even emphasizing a voice production which they might otherwise dislike. This common process might happen consciously or unconsciously: Mishpaha members know that they are singing "differently" and that they "have to" sing differently; nevertheless, they have an urge to legitimize it in front of their audience. That might be why they emphasize so much the intentional amateurism, the pleasure coming from non-professional music-making; even leading to a proclamation of "simulated errors and shortcomings". (Apparently, the situation is more complex, not

⁸³ Bohlman, "Jewish Music in Europe".

⁸⁴ Kaufman Shelemay, Kay (1997) "Mythologies and Realities..."

⁸⁵ Bohlman, "Jewish Music in Europe".

allowing us just to simply state: "They don't know how to sing", although this also might partly be the truth.)

Since the above mentioned conception of music "differs markedly from European non-Jewish or Christian conceptions, where the identity of melody takes precedence over that of text"⁸⁶, we can also presume that – from this point of view – for Mishpaha it is not important what melodies they sing, but how and what texts they sing. So, why do they emphasize that they draw on the "source of an authentic tradition"? And what does the "authentic tradition" really mean? Can one really anticipate musical continuity as well? Kay Kaufman Shelemay speaks about the "moral pressure to restore a nation's memory" providing thus „an unbroken chain“ which resulted in a "well-established mythology of a Jewish musical tradition made of whole cloth, rather than the patchwork one actually encounters"⁸⁷:

*"But music (...) becomes a symbol of the people who perform and transmit it. Here, we approach the genesis, and the continuing power, of the myth of continuity. On a very general level, all Jews understand themselves to have a common ancestry, a shared historical past, and a common belief system. Belief in the existence of a shared musical tradition is implicit to this worldview, despite the presence of the ubiquitous heterogeneity."*⁸⁸

Although the "task can no longer be limited to find continuities"⁸⁹, we can say that, in the case of Mishpaha, continuity does not necessarily lie in its music itself, but in its context – in the spirituality, in the expression or confirmation of religious or/and ethnic identity⁹⁰, in the tradition of family singing, and so on.⁹¹ In this specific case, the continuity also lies in the long history of the music group itself (already two performing generations) which is, moreover,

⁸⁶ Bohlman, "Jewish Music in Europe".

⁸⁷ Kaufman Shelemay, Kay (1997) "Mythologies and Realities..."

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Concerning the identity of Mishpaha musicians, it is being furthermore supported by non-musical factors as clothing (e.g. Star-of-David-emblem, scarves or hats covering hair of women, "yarmulke" in the men's case) or certain additional activities (reading Hassidic stories, in this case).

⁹¹ The act of expressing identity or of approaching spirituality during the Mishpaha concert does not relate only to the musicians, of course. It is a collective activity concerning both musicians and the audience.

supported by its anti-establishment history, and a reputation as an alternative to the mainstream. To conclude, we can say that the concept of continuity (whatever it concretely means) is the main factor creating a group identity of Mishpaha and its audience.

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