

DI FAYER KORBUNES AND MAMENIU: YIDDISH TRIANGLE FIRE BALLADS

The 1911 Yiddish ballad “Di Fayer Korbunes” [*Die Fire Korbunes* | The Fire’s Sacrifices], an almost immediate response to the Triangle Fire tragedy, is a complex and contradictory piece: earnestly poignant yet bitterly ironic; barbed with references to an ancient Jewish cultural-religious past as well as to dystopic modern immigrant times; and critiquing the catastrophic results of exploitative capitalism from within its own competitive commercial sheet-music packaging. The song’s powerful title and final refrain have an alternate translation, with biblical undertones: the word *korbonas* (plural of *korbn*) is used in the Torah specifically to describe those animal sacrifices roasted at the Temple altar. Hence the song’s terrible, none-too-implicit political meaning superimposed on liturgical understanding: those who died at Washington Place were burnt offerings, sacrificed in a land worshipping the Dollar.

“Di Fayer Korbunes” and its apparent rival “Mameniu” [Mama Dear] were two contemporary Yiddish-language examples of the widespread ‘disaster ballad’ genre, as heard for centuries in far-flung cultures. This type of song, chronicling gripping topical events, is found in Yiddish music certainly going back to Eastern European minstrel traditions. But mass print publication of such Yiddish material was primarily a New World phenomenon, and New York’s Lower East Side was its hub in the early 20th century. The sheet-music industry of this place and time usually centered on selling current hits from lively, contentious downtown Yiddish theaters, as well as nostalgic and novelty songs and laments, all to be played and sung by the buying public. So speedy production, as well as certain promotional styles, were already ingrained in the business. “Di Fayer Korbunes” shows tension between these standard forms designed for profit and the cultural expression of grief, horror and fascination surrounding a most stark, massive and local tragedy. The song’s lyrics are full of Yiddish/English vocabulary (“pay,” “*fektori*,” “fire/*fayer*,” etc.), reflecting the transitional language of a fast-paced immigrant generation adapting to American ways.

“Di Fayer Korbunes” was an entirely original text written by lyricist Louis Gilrod (1879-1930) and set to a 1905 melody composed by David Meyrowitz (1867-1943). This earlier song, entitled “*Boir Choro Wiachperebu*” [quoting Psalms 7:16], was published with piano & vocal arrangements credited to Jac. Kamenetzky (later known as Jack Kammen, whose instrumental folios of klezmer and international music became perennials). Gilrod and Meyrowitz had already jointly created such songs as “*Got un zayn mishpet iz gerekht*” [God & His Judgments Are Just] for famed actor/producer Jacob P. Adler’s 1903 play *Tsebrokhone Hertser* [Broken Hearts] and 1904’s “*Yisrolik kim abeym*” [Yisrolik Come Home] for star Boris Thomashefsky. Gilrod was himself an immigrant who had arrived from Eastern Europe at age 12, and by 17 he was an actor founding a dramatic club in Newark. His 334 Broome St. letter-head from the 1910’s reads, in English: “Character Comedian & Song Writer.” While we do not know whether the notion of a ballad addressing the Triangle Fire originated with Gilrod, clearly the rights to the earlier melody were already owned by Theodore Lohr Publishers, who issued “Di Fayer Korbunes” in print as well. The enterprising Mr. Lohr also operated a music storefront at the same business address, 286 Grand Street, purveying not only sheet music but also violins, bows, strings, cases, instrument repairs, and lessons of all kinds: “All the latest Yiddish Music always in stock. Music Teachers and Students will always find our prices the lowest.”

Around the corner from Theodore Lohr’s emporium — and likewise also about one mile from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Building — the Hebrew Publishing Co. of 50 Eldridge Street apparently rushed their own Yiddish Triangle Fire ballad into print, taking a pre-existing song by one of its best-known tunesmiths, Joseph Rumshinsky (here credited as J.M. Rumshisky), with lyrics by Anshel Schorr. The sentimental tearjerker “Mameniu” was reissued, supplementing its two maudlin verses about motherless children with a newly added final verse and reworked refrain devoted to a mother whose daughter has been immolated at the factory. “Mameniu”’s added promotional Yiddish text also uses the phrase *Der Troyer oyf di Triangle Korbunes*: “Elegy on the Fire-Victims.” Both companies’ Yiddish Triangle Fire ballads sold at the usual first-edition prices: 50c for piano and vocal, 30c for violin parts. But while cover art for “Mameniu” shows a staid portrait of its celebrated composer, the cover art and tag line for “Di Fayer Korbunes” create a strangely stylized, rather outrageous depiction of the Triangle Fire itself.

Lohr Publishing sheet music albums of this vintage generally used custom cover drawings and, like most such music publications, boasted whether in English or Yiddish of the songs’ hits, successes, and acclaim — although in this case, the imagery and word choice become so dissonant and fictionalized as to perhaps defy even the motive of attracting customers. The cover’s top line reads simply, if maybe perversely: THE POPULAR FIRE SONG. Then, following the Yiddish song title is emblazoned a graphically detailed engraving which contradicts the well-known awful truth that fireladders were not tall enough to reach the highest floors. In this illustration, while smoke and flames surround young women desperately crowding the top three floors of a building clearly labeled TRIANGLE WAISTS, firemen are shown climbing to the rescue. It is an unfathomably false picture, despite the terrified expressions on the women’s faces and the lone central figure who seems indeed to have just jumped from the uppermost ledge.

Both of these Yiddish Triangle Fire songs conclude with the agony of a mother whose daughter has perished. Both evoke the dreadful specter of a child shrouded in death rather than ever reaching a wedding canopy. The woman driven to madness in “Di Fayer Korbunes” voices a fierce final irony: In lashing out at the people around her in the morgue, she uses the adjective ‘*klige*’ [*kluge*] — smart, clever — which, besides rhyming with the description of her as ‘*meshige*’ [*meshuge*: insane], evokes the fatal paradox of a hyper-rational, technologized system which has trapped and killed so many workers. Enraged and distraught, in this version of the story she not only mourns but falls dead beside her daughter’s body.

Over the last 100 years, “Mameniu” has remained relatively well known, while “Di Fayer Korbunes” was all but forgotten until recently when the Library of Congress brought it back to light. Louis Gilrod continued to write Yiddish lyrics prolifically through at least the early 1920s, with his song texts appearing much more often in Hebrew Publishing Co. products, and apparently no longer with Theodore Lohr. In fact, Gilrod teamed up numerous times in the decade after the Triangle Fire with composer Rumshinsky, together creating such comedy titles as “*Demedzshd Guds*” [Damaged Goods]; “*Washington, Lincoln un Moise Rabeiny*” [Washington, Lincoln, and Moses] dealing, however crudely, with ethical issues of race relations; and “*Fifti-fifti*” [Fifty-Fifty] featuring verses on Socialists’ dreams, egalitarian marriage, crooked doctors and drug companies, and schemes between gangsters and policemen. Gilrod’s output also continued to include dramatic subjects, such as Jewish soldiers in WWI. Hebrew Publishing continued (as Lohr never had) to include Yiddish lyrics in both their original alphabet and Romanized transliteration, and to use the same tired but familiar portraits on their songsheet covers. Yiddish music’s Tin Pan Alley went on commodifying current events without entirely assimilating or avoiding controversy.