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Ethnogenesis and the Interrelationship of Musical Repertoires Among the Jews of Eastern Europe

Walter Zev Feldman

Abstract I will attempt to integrate my remarks about the musical creativity of the East Ashkenazim in response to recent historical paradigms about the Jewish people worldwide. The key concept is the distinction between the many numerically small and geographically local “embedded” Jewish communities, as opposed to the much larger and geographically widespread Jewish cultures, which can be defined as “transnational.” Since the later sixteenth century only two such transnational Jewish cultures existed—the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim. The Ashkenazim of Eastern Europe constituted the largest portion of the Jewish people in modern times, and their musical creativity shows far deeper internal connections and developments than that of any other Jewish ethnoses. Through recent linguistic research into the origin of the Yiddish language, plus musicological paradigms addressing genre, musical articulation, intonatsia, and “ethno-hearing,” I will suggest how these facts and concepts can help to explain the salient musical patterns of the East Ashkenazic Jews.

Keywords ethnogenesis, Ashkenazim, transnationality, embeddedness, intonatsia

The field of ethnomusicology is predicated upon the existence of an “ethnos,” a historical cultural community, whose musical practices can be studied, whether synchronically or diachronically. Both in the Diaspora and within the State of Israel, the current discourse on “Jewish music”—both outside and often even within

academia—is cluttered with a mixture of naïve and ideological arguments that posit either a self-evident cultural as well as religious unity of the Jewish people worldwide throughout historical time, or else its opposite, that is, the cultural and even biological hybridity of all the groups identified as “Jews.” Neither of these extreme views can be justified.

The Ashkenazim of Eastern Europe constituted the largest portion of the Jewish people in modern times, and their musical creativity shows far deeper internal connections and developments than that of any other Jewish ethnos. I will attempt to integrate my remarks about the nature of musical creativity of the East Ashkenazim in response to the historical paradigm created by Moshe Rosman in his influential series of essays titled “How Jewish Is Jewish History?” (2007), as well as recent research by Arye Edrei and Doron Mendels concerning the “split Diasporas” of Jewish late antiquity (2007, 2010). While none of this recent Israeli historical research took any aspect of expressive culture into account, it does provide an essential context in which to view the later musical practices of the Jews worldwide.¹

Edrei and Mendels are concerned with both linguistic and religious practices of the Jewish people in late antiquity. Their basic thesis is that the Jews were split into two large linguistic camps—an Aramaic-speaking and partly Hebrew-reading population in both Roman Palestine and Persian Babylonia (and adjacent territories), and a largely Greek and Latin-speaking population in most of the Roman Empire. Egypt represented a “middle-ground,” where all these languages had been in use by Jews for some centuries. Before the destruction of the Second Temple, Judeans had settled in several areas of Roman Africa. There they created a complex series of both urban and rural societies, including much interaction with and instances of the conversion of Berber tribes to Judaism, and sometimes later to Christianity. All of these groups contributed to the emergence of Sephardi Jewry in Iberia under Arab rule.

In Edrei and Mendels’ reading of the evidence, only the Aramaic-speaking zone contributed significantly to the development of rabbinic Judaism, and hence to modern Jewry. The Roman Jews wrote the Greek language in Greek—and not Hebrew or Aramaic—characters. Contrary to Max Weinreich’s thesis of an ancient “Yavanic” or Judeo-Greek language, they had been linguistically integrated with their urban pagan environment. The Greek- and Latin-speaking Roman zone essentially became a major homeland of Christianity. Most of the Jews who remained in Europe after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, and the Germanic and other invasions, had mainly become Christians already in late antiquity. As such there was little continuity from ancient to medieval Jewish communities in most of the Roman lands, with the notable exception of the city of Rome, some other parts of Italy, some areas of Greece, and parts of North Africa.

According to Edrei and Mendels, the existence of Jews in medieval Europe who practiced rabbinic Judaism is based on both intellectual and demographic movements from the Middle East and Byzantium in the eighth and ninth centuries, and not on continuities from Roman times. By way of contrast to the Roman West, the Aramaic-speaking Jews in both Persian Babylon and Roman Palestine constituted a broad cultural unity, which defined itself in consciously Jewish terms. They were the formative Jewish culture of late antiquity. This historical interpretation also accords well with the earlier research of Arthur C. Zuckerman, who documented the invitation of high-status Babylonian Jewish families into Carolingian France during the later eighth century, where they were granted great privileges. While some of Zuckerman's particular conclusions have been challenged, there seems little doubt this group had formed one important nucleus of the Jewish ethnos who would later emerge as the Ashkenazim.

Within a century after the Arab Conquest, this transnational, Aramaic-speaking Jewish culture was transformed into an Arabic-speaking and Judeo-Arabic-writing Jewish culture. A notable exception to this process of linguistic Arabization seem to have been the Jews of northern Mesopotamia and the adjacent territories of Iran and Syria.

Moshe Rosman treats early modern and modern times, in which he divides the cultural practices of Jewish communities according to the model of “embeddedness” within a single host culture over many centuries, which, as he says, implies “hierarchy and dependency” as opposed to “transnationality.”² The cultural pattern of embeddedness is opposed to the situation of geographically extended Jewish communities, speaking a single language over a wide territory, to whom one might apply the term “transnational.” In modern times only two such “transnational” Jewish cultures existed—Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire and some parts of North Africa, and Ashkenazim in Eastern Europe. During the following seven to eight centuries, the global configuration of Jewish communities would change drastically. Rabbinic Judaism would be established everywhere, but formerly large transnational Jewish communities might become smaller and local, and new transnational communities would be formed.

The “embedded” groups were tied to a single geographic area and hegemonic nation for many centuries or even millennia. Examples of the latter are the Jews of Yemen, Syria, Iran, and Bukhara in the East, and of the city of Rome and parts of Greece in the West. All of these embedded and transnational Jewish communities have modern descendants, who until recently had dwelled in their “traditional” home countries. By the nineteenth or earlier twentieth centuries, it was possible for musicians and scholars to document aspects of their synagogue liturgy, paraliturgical, and secular music. As we will see below, while there is no exact correlation between

cultural “transnationality” and all musical repertoires and performance styles, the transnational Jewish groups had the population, the territory, and the cultural “will” to create musical features that differed significantly, or sometimes fundamentally, from their non-Jewish neighboring or host cultures.

A somewhat divergent example of this process are the Neo-Aramaic-speaking Jews of northern Mesopotamia, now popularly known as “Kurdish” Jews. They represent the historical transformation of a transnational into an embedded community. After the early seventeenth century, northern Mesopotamia (i.e., modern northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey) became increasingly marginalized economically. Urban life declined, and no single hegemonic ethnic group remained. Only the local Christians and Jews—who lacked access to political power—continued to speak some form of Aramaic. The retention by the Jews of the Neo-Aramaic spoken language—which they called “Targum”—rather than adopting Arabic or Turkish, proclaims the local nature of their culture. Thus their continued use of Aramaic into modern times became a mark of their relative “embeddedness.” By way of contrast, the use of Aramaic by their ancestors in antiquity had been a mark of “transnationality”—indeed they had been the “transnational” Jews par excellence. The secular folk music and dance of all these contemporary Jewish and Christian groups are closely allied to that of the Kurds, who became the demographic majority and the de facto dominant ethnic group.

In accordance with Rosman’s framing—and according to my own research—we may view the Eastern Ashkenazim as possessing a fundamentally different type of expressive culture—manifested in all forms of music and dance—from the smaller embedded Jewish communities of modern times, whether in Europe, North Africa, or Asia. At least since the seventeenth century, the former created an interlocking system of religious and secular musical repertoires that interpenetrated one another over a vast geographical territory. None of these repertoires were derived from any local non-Jewish musical practices. The latter (embedded communities), while retaining the Jewish religion and many sociological features of Jewish culture, generally confined their Jewish musical expression to certain parts of the Hebrew liturgy, and not at all in their vernacular folk song or dance. These were usually more or less identical to those of their much more numerous Gentile neighbors. Indeed, it was mainly the Eastern Ashkenazim who had developed a highly distinctive form of dance. The only partial analogue might be the Sabbath eve dances of the male Yemenite Jews.

The eastern Sephardim of the Ottoman Empire represented another paradigm from either the small, embedded Jewish communities or from the East Ashkenazim. They created a secular folksong combining elements coming from early modern Iberia, and from the Turkish, Greek, and Balkan musical cultures of the Ottoman Empire. But—unlike the Ashkenazim—they did not create a consciously Jewish

form of dance, nor any distinctively Jewish genres of instrumental music. The Sephardim spread the Ladino folksong across a wide geographical area, but—with very few exceptions—they tended not to introduce liturgical elements into it. No doubt this was partly because the Ladino secular songs were mainly created and sung by women. On the other hand, Sephardi hazzanim created genres of religious song in Ladino. Some of these had a quasi-liturgical function, while others were purely para-liturgical. These represent a variety of subgenres, some of them displaying creative use of several elements, including an “intonatsia” rather different from the Hebrew liturgy, either of the hazzan or of the congregation. This entire repertoire has been studied very little.

The linguistic bases for creating plausible hypotheses for the emergence of the Jewish cultures within both Western and Eastern Europe—who would eventually be termed the “Ashkenazim”—has been stated with more precision in recent years by Alexander Beider, developing and critiquing earlier theories of Weinreich, Katz, and others. While the ethnogenetic questions regarding these Jews are by no means resolved, it is becoming possible to speak about a variety of cultural developments within both Central and Eastern Europe from the sixteenth century onward.

The great linguist Max Weinreich had coined the terms “Ashkenaz I” for the medieval Jewish culture of the Rhineland and other Western German territories, and “Ashkenaz II” for the Yiddish-speaking Jewish culture in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. But the later role of the Czech Lands within Weinreich’s “Ashkenaz I” and “Ashkenaz II” scheme was not entirely clear. The pre-Ashkenazic Jews of Bohemia/Moravia, were part of the large Slavic-speaking Jewish culture termed by the rabbis “Knaan” (Canaan). Bohemia/Moravia was never home to a truly embedded Jewish community, as its previous connections with the Jews of Byzantine territories were already noted by Weinreich.³ The ultimate origin of the Bohemian/Moravian Jews since the ninth century points both to Byzantium, and possibly also to Armenia and other eastern territories of Anatolia. These movements imply a prior linguistic history involving Greek, South Slavic, and possibly vernacular Aramaic. Beider also confirms some of these eastern origins with names on Jewish gravestones as far west as Brandenburg.⁴

The Jewish adoption of the Czech language, while continuous for at least four centuries, was then followed by a prolonged era of bilingualism both before and during the time that the Bohemian Kingdom came to be absorbed by the Austrian Habsburgs. As urban dwellers, the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia were in prolonged contact both with Christian and Jewish speakers of Middle High German (MHG). This process eventually produced the Eastern Yiddish language, but not earlier than the middle of the sixteenth century.⁵ The linguistic predominance of MHG is not the same as demographic dominance of Rhineland Jews. Beider noted: “There are

no known historical references to mass western migrations to eastern Europe.”⁶ By far the predominant demographic movement of Jews eastward was from Bohemia, Moravia, and Germanic Danubian areas to Poland and later to Lithuania (i.e., Ukraine/Belarus).

One of Beider’s major contributions was to separate linguistic from demographic data. He views Yiddish as a confluence of two branches of Germanic—MHG plus southeastern, Danubian varieties of German, plus western Slavic. MHG became the dominant factor after prolonged Jewish bilingualism with West Knaanic—Judeo-Czech. All three linguistic elements remained productive throughout the history of Yiddish, plus “adstratal” features coming from Polish and eastern Slavic. Hebrew/Aramaic was thoroughly integrated into the phonological and semantic system of Yiddish. Thus it is not correct to view speakers of Yiddish in Eastern Europe as being predominantly of Rhineland provenance, although a minority undoubtedly were so. There was an established medieval Jewish community along the Rhineland, who were in part the heirs of the earlier “Zarfatic” French Jews, and who were known as “Ashkenaz.” But the later dominance of a predominantly Germanic language among the Jews who came to dwell in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth does not imply the kind of simple migration of Rhineland Jews eastward that would justify the term “Ashkenaz II” for the Jewish culture of this broad territory, stretching from the Black to the Baltic Sea. Considering all of these facts, Weinreich’s Ashkenaz I and Ashkenaz II thesis becomes untenable.

In addition, there had been a considerable Jewish population in the territories that later became Lithuania. Neither the fall of Khazaria in the later tenth and eleventh centuries, the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century, nor the short-lived expulsion of the Jews from Lithuanian territory between 1495 and 1508 erased the considerable Jewish populations of the what we would now call Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania. After the eighth century (or even before), these East European countries were never empty of Jews. While it is likely that many of the ancestors of these Jews had immigrated in response to the conversion of the Khazar royal house to rabbinic Judaism in the eighth century, the vast majority of them were not native speakers of the Turkic Khazarian language. The linguistic legacy of Khazar in modern Hungarian is quite clear, but there is no such evidence either from Yiddish or from the little surviving documents of “Judeo-Rus.”⁷

From both the Harvard historian Omeljan Pritsak and Weinreich we learn that in the Ukrainian and Belarussian territories, after the fall of the Khazarian Empire, Jews became speakers of the East Slavic Rus language for the next four to five centuries. Moshe Taube’s research demonstrates the cultural productivity of some of these Jews in the fifteenth century, leading to a major Judaizing movement in the Orthodox Church, and then to the expulsion of the Jews from the Lithuanian State in 1495.

Rus would be replaced by Yiddish in Galicia, Ukraine, and Lithuania proper by the mid-sixteenth century, and in eastern Belarus only in the mid-seventeenth century.

But what might be the correlation between linguistic and musical traits among immigrating groups as well as local groups who had assimilated the language of the newcomers? As it became established and later documented at each end of the wide demographic zone of the Yiddish-speaking Jews, their music is divided into broad repertoires, and then into more specific genres. But none of these repertoires or genres shows the kind of coterritorial sharing that we might expect of an “embedded” Jewish culture. Pritsak assumes that during the rule of the various Rus principalities, Jewish culture had been predominantly local, and hence, as we might say, “embedded.” But this Rus-speaking Jewry—particularly in Ukraine—had considerable contact both with the Crimea and even with distant Constantinople (after 1453, Istanbul). As is well-known, several Crimean towns were home to continuous Jewish communities, speaking either Greek or Turkic Cuman. This alone could suggest musical patterns that might well have diverged from those of the majority of the Christian Rus-speaking population. But of course, at this distance of time, we can never know this musical situation with any certainty.

By the later seventeenth century, the demographic center of world Jewry was shifting definitively from the Sephardic and Near Eastern to the East Ashkenazic zones. As the largest transnational Jewish group in the world, closely linked by language and many aspects of culture in a region stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, the Ashkenazim in Eastern Europe regarded themselves as the Jewish “nation” and were generally so regarded by their neighbors.⁸ While certain basic musical features were transmitted from the German Empire and Bohemia/Moravia to Jews in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a new, largely unprecedented, interlocking system of liturgical, paraliturgical, professional, and folkloric musical genres developed in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and adjacent areas. The Eastern European Jews were now part of a cultural process, involving their internal musical needs and creative expression; aspects of mimesis and differentiation with regard to their immediate non-Jewish neighbors; memory of their previous historical experiences; and larger transnational musical influences and techniques—reaching them both from the West and from the East. Taken together, these cultural shifts created a new system of repertoires and genres that was unique among Jewish cultures.⁹

Any presentation of the East Ashkenazic musical repertoires must also refer to the performance practices within these repertoires. The most consistent and elegant definitions of the “micro-level” of ethnic performance practices was the invention of Russian ethnomusicology. This had its beginnings in the later Tsarist era, but was refined and codified in the earlier Soviet period, especially by Boris Asafiev and later by Izaly Zemtsovsky (Petersburg and California). Using terms such as “intonatsia”

(Asafiev) in Russian, or “articulation” and “ethno-hearing” (Zemtsovsky) in English, this broad theoretical approach posits the existence of a cultural consensus about the expression of rhythm and tempo on every musical level; about the attacks and approaches to a pitch; to the timbral coloration of the human voice or especially legato musical instruments; and so forth. While individual musicians may create certain personal styles or techniques, within a “traditional” and largely oral musical culture, performance practices must meet the approval of the larger society, which set limits on the individual musician.

The stylistic difference between the Ashkenazic North and South was included within the broader distinctive musical “intonatsia” (Asafiev) or “articulation” (Zemtsovsky) developed by the Ashkenazim. This distinctive “articulation/intonatsia” for Ashkenazic vocal music was already referred to by Beregovski in the 1930s.

Where two or more cultures and languages meet geographically or socially, musical items or whole genres are often borrowed, but only once they have been adapted to the dominant “ethno-hearing” or “intonatsia” of each culture. Within Eastern Europe—which has some twentieth-century history of ethnomusicological documentation—examples abound (e.g., shared musical genres of Turks and Greeks in the Aegean/Bosphorus area; multiethnic “Macedonia”; and partly shared instrumental repertoires of Moldavians and Jews in Bessarabia).¹⁰ The insider to any of these cultures (or even the musically informed outsider) can immediately perceive whether he or she is listening to a “zeybek” dance melody or song (Turkish) or to a “zeimbekiko” (Greek), to a “bulgareasca” (Moldavian) or to a “bulgarish” (Jewish).

An original musical practice seems to have developed since the early seventeenth century throughout the broad region of Eastern Yiddish speech. There is no evidence that a comparable musical system had ever existed within the German territories. Moreover, the Jews in the German Empire displayed musical originality mainly within the religious sphere and rather little in the secular. There was no Jewish secular musicians’ class. Earlier scholarly “revelations” about the medieval Jewish troubadour-like *shpilman* have been shown to be misunderstandings of a single Judeo-German text.¹¹ It is only by the second half of the eighteenth century that we can see evidence of *klezmer* musical practice among German Jews, evidently brought there by Czech and Polish *klezmerim*. In approximately the same era, we see the Eastern Ashkenazim adopting certain folk dances both from northern Germany and from a broad Danubian region, of which the most influential was the contra dance *sher*. But contrary to Beregovski’s suppositions, these were certainly not “survivals” from a putative medieval German-Jewish folklore. The *sher*, in any case, was not invented until the seventeenth century.¹² We can conclude that by this era, the expressive cultures of the three ends of what might be called the Ashkenazic world (the German, the Czech, and the Polish/Lithuanian) were aware of each other.

It is significant to note that, according to all the known data, it is only the East Ashkenazim—among worldwide Jewry—who had created a distinctive musical intonatsia, apart from the language of the text, or the larger musical form. And this feature characterized all musical genres of the Eastern Ashkenazim to a greater or lesser degree. Among the “embedded” Jewish communities or the Sephardim, it would seem that certain repertoires, even particular familial repertoires, show tendencies in such a direction, setting them apart from local non-Jewish musical practices. Examples exist among the various Jewish communities of Morocco, or the Jews of Southern Uzbekistan (Shahrisabz).¹³ But the social conditions of these usually numerically small communities did not encourage a broader development of such musical “articulation.” Thus the concept of “intonatsia/ethno-hearing” separates the musical practices of the Eastern Ashkenazim from all other documented Jewish cultures.

Among the East Ashkenazim, the Jewish intonatsia was most evident in the public repertoires, performed mainly by Jewish males—synagogue liturgy (*davenen* and *khazones*), Hasidic *niggunim*, Shabbes *zmires*, wedding *badkhones*, *klezmer* wedding and dance melodies. The shared Jewish intonatsia dominated the predominantly male repertoires of religious song in Yiddish. It was rather less prominent—although still evident—in the secular Yiddish song, with its historically more private and female representation, and with genetic links to older Western European song. It is a major musicological desideratum to better document how this intonatsia actually functioned within the distinct Ashkenazic musical repertoires.

Unlike the musical practices of both the Sephardim and the many “embedded” Jewish communities, all of the non-liturgical repertoires of the East Ashkenazim show significant input coming from the music of liturgical prayer. In this case more from the type of non-professional chant—*davenen*—than from the professional *khazones* of the cantor. This derives from the simple fact that most Jews actively participated daily in *davenen*, and not only in the more or less passive listening to the singing of the cantor.¹⁴ These musical prayer elements are particularly strong in paraliturgical song, in Hasidic *nign*, in the “core” repertoire of the *klezmerim*, and in the religious genres of Yiddish song. They figure rather less prominently in secular Yiddish song, but certain aspects of articulation in performance, as well as occasional musical allusions to the liturgy, exist there as well.

The Eastern Ashkenazim were not an “embedded” Jewish culture, nor were they ever primarily a village population. Even those Jews who came to reside in villages—especially during the eighteenth century—typically carried on urban professions, whether crafts or part of the ubiquitous tavern business and alcohol trade.¹⁵ Thus as a rule, sharing by the Jews of peasant musical repertoires was extremely marginal. Indeed, many male Jews living in the towns (*shtetl*) or cities did not

even speak the peasant vernacular language of their region. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the one large exception were the recently emancipated Jews in Greater Hungary under Habsburg rule and the successor states in modern Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and so forth, who were generally becoming identified with the Hungarian language and culture to a large degree.

Under these social and linguistic conditions, it would be a mistake to look at any of the musical repertoires of the Eastern Ashkenazim as primarily a variant or outgrowth of any local East European culture. The most that can be said was that there was a broad stylistic differentiation between a Jewish “North” (Lithuania, Belarus, Northern Poland) and a Jewish “South” (Ukraine, Galicia, Southern Poland, Moldova). In this regard, it is crucial to integrate Max Weinreich’s dictum: “Not only Jewish history, but ‘Jewish geography’ too, is a separate topic, which occasionally coincides with general geography, but more frequently does not.”¹⁶

NOTES

1. Versions of the following paragraphs appear also in my “Introduction to the Study of the Yiddish Folksong” on the website of the online project “Inside the Yiddish Folksong.”
2. Rosman, *How Jewish Is Jewish History?*, 84–86.
3. Weinreich, *The History of the Yiddish Language*, 82.
4. Beider, “Yiddish in Eastern Europe.”
5. Beider, *Yiddish Dialects*.
6. Beider, “Yiddish in Eastern Europe”; Stampfer, “Violence and Migration.”
7. Many Turkic loanwords in Hungarian are derived from Khazar/Bulgar and not only from Ottoman/Oghuz. Two obvious examples are *tenger* (sea) and *irni* (to write).
8. McCagg, *Habsburg Jews*.
9. See Feldman, *Klezmer*, 31–58.
10. Chiselita, “Interferente culturale.”
11. Baumgarten, *Old Yiddish Literature*.
12. Feldman, *Klezmer*, 261–68.
13. This statement is based on my unpublished fieldwork and recordings with the Malakov family of cantors and musicians from Shahrissabz (2000), then resident in Queens, New York.
14. Feldman, *Klezmer*, 41–42.
15. Dynner, *Yankel’s Tavern*.
16. Weinreich, *The History of the Yiddish Language*, 47.

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