

INTRODUCTION TO IDELSOHN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

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In 1934, Idelsohn's rapidly deteriorating health forced him to retire from his teaching position at the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati. The retirement, at the early age of fifty-two, came only two years after the triumphant completion of the German version of the *Hebräisch-orientalischer Melodienschatz* and marked the end of Idelsohn's scholarly career. Forced illness provided ample time for reflection and stock taking, and Idelsohn wrote, perhaps dictated, two autobiographical sketches which were published in the following year. The first sketch, in Hebrew, appeared in January 1935 in *Die Chasanim Welt*, the journal of the organization of Jewish cantors in Poland; the second, in English, was printed half a year later in Jacob Beiml's *Jewish Music Journal* (New York).

The English sketch is longer and more detailed than its Hebrew counterpart. Thus, for instance, the statement about the author's studies with Eduard Birnbaum, a mere sentence in Hebrew, becomes, in English, a short paragraph relating that Idelsohn was never actually instructed by Birnbaum and criticising the latter's Germanized cantorial art. Moreover, important facts that are described in detail in the English text are skipped over in the Hebrew. The influence of Tolstoy's ideas on Idelsohn and his attempt to live as a Tolstoian disciple are not at all mentioned in the Hebrew sketch. Hence it seems at first glance that the Hebrew text is a mere abbreviation of the English autobiographical sketch. But this is not so.

Idelsohn, a man of multi-faceted character and genius, felt all his life that he had a mission to carry out and a message to spread wherever possible. He wrote in four languages to different kinds of readers, always selecting suitable data, emphasizing particular details and adopting the style that would best interest the potential readers of each article (cf. "Problems of Registering Idelsohn's Work" in the Introduction of "Idelsohn's Scholarly and Literary Works..." in this volume). The two autobiographical sketches present the same attitude. The Hebrew sketch written, as its subtitle states, "especially for *Die Chasanim Welt*," is addressed to modern East-European Jewish cantors, most of them orthodox and many with a strong Zionist tendency. The English counterpart is intended for the general American reader. Consequently, the two presentations of his own

life differ in the selection of events and the emphasis given to certain facts and ideas.

Idelsohn may have not felt the necessity to describe his basic concept of Jewish music for the well informed *hazzanim*, and therefore the Hebrew version does not contain the concise statement of the four principles stated in the English sketch as Idelsohn's *credo* of Jewish music. On the other hand, the Zionist readers of the Hebrew sketch would appreciate the various details of the attempt to establish an institute of Jewish music in Jerusalem as well as his other activities there. They would also understand his account of the opposition of the "zealots of Jerusalem" to his efforts. The Hebrew sketch has the tone of Idelsohn's deep-felt personal attitude to the essence of Jewish music. The Hebrew language lends itself to prophetic locutions; therefore strong expressions such as "the German music that devastated the music of the synagogue" or "the *galût* (exile) of the Hebrew soul" can be found only in the Hebrew sketch. On the other hand, the English autobiography is crowded with everyday data and events. Details of Idelsohn's activities while serving in the Turkish army, or names of well known American Jewish personalities such as Rabbi De Sola Pool, Prof. M. (i.e. Mordecai) Kaplan and Dr. Stephen Wise who helped him in one way or another and the names of his "sincerest friends," Prof. and Mrs. Samuel S. Cohon who were instrumental in his establishment as teacher at the Hebrew Union College and "furthered my cause in various ways," all these can be found only in the English autobiography.

There are various other minor differences between the two sketches. Most notably, Idelsohn does not mention his birth date in the English text, whereas in the Hebrew text he gives the correct date as 24 Sivan 5682 (corresponding to 11 June 1882) and notes that his birth was registered in the official documents on the first of July 1892.

In summary, it is clear that the two sketches should be read as complementary documents. Yet even so, they are incomplete. They gloss over some important facts, and at times puzzle the reader as to the true sequence of events, or even leave him with a few enigmas to solve. Thus, for instance, even if it is true that Eduard Birnbaum never instructed Idelsohn officially, the latter's debt to Birnbaum is greater than stated in the autobiographical sketches. Idelsohn knew Birnbaum's important contributions to the history of Jewish music and even availed himself extensively of this scholar's notes when he catalogued the Birnbaum collection in Cincinnati, yet none of this is mentioned in the autobiography. Sequence of events, especially those related to Idelsohn's youth, differ in the two sketches, and explanations of important decisions are insufficient in both texts. For example, Idelsohn's decision to leave South Africa after a short stay there is not fully explained. Beyond the quest for the origins of Jewish music,

beyond the lofty Zionist ideals, sincere and deep as they were, even beyond Idelsohn's apparent nomadic tendencies, there may have been local circumstances in Johannesburg that made his sojourn there difficult. Perhaps much depended upon the way he was accepted as cantor there.

The sketches are also silent upon other matters that would be of interest to biographers or to students of Jewish music. Idelsohn, who was an admirer of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who wrote stories for the latter's newspaper and even adopted the name Ben-Yehuda as a Hebrew equivalent of Idls-Sohn, never even mentions the great linguist's name in his autobiography. The account of Idelsohn's activities in Jerusalem, even in the Hebrew text, does not provide details as to how he found and selected his informants and what the circumstances were in which he recorded them or how he went about transcribing the melodies.

A few enigmas are sprinkled in the texts; the most puzzling is the following statement in the Hebrew sketch: "In these years [1923-1933] I was able to complete the remaining volumes of my *Thesaurus*, to print them and also to gather materials for two additional volumes which are still in manuscript." One wonders why these two additional volumes (presumably vols. eleven and twelve of the *Hebräisch-orientalischer Melodienschatz*) are not mentioned by Idelsohn elsewhere. One also wonders what their contents were to be, which communities they were supposed to represent, and above all, what are the whereabouts of these manuscripts. There are no traces of them in the Idelsohn Archives at the JNUL.

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Idelsohn concludes the Hebrew autobiographical sketch with a paraphrase of Jacob's summary of his life (Genesis 47:9). "Here, in short," says Idelsohn, "are the events of my life, few and evil." This bitter statement is, no doubt, an expression of the despair of a most dynamic person now forced to terminate his vocation for good, but it may also reflect Idelsohn's frequent disillusion of dreams that never materialized and perhaps also the sense of failure over his unfulfilled Zionist mission to establish a universal institute for Jewish music in Jerusalem. Disillusion and failure are expressed elsewhere in the biographical sketches, it is more pronounced in the Hebrew text and more latent in English. All in all, the English autobiographical sketch is less pessimistic about past achievements but equally so about the gloomy future.

The text has been reproduced without changes, except for the tacit correction of spelling mistakes in English words and in names, and of misprints.

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