

IDELSOHN
THE FOUNDER AND BUILDER OF THE SCIENCE OF JEWISH MUSIC
A CREATOR OF JEWISH SONG
A. Irma Cohon, *Los Angeles*

It is with great pleasure that we present A. Irma Cohon's account of Idelsohn's life, character and works. For many years the lives of Mrs. Cohon and her husband, Rabbi Samuel Solomon Cohon (1888-1959), were intimately connected with Idelsohn's life and works. Irma Cohon was born in Portland, Oregon on September 8, 1890. She studied at the University of Cincinnati where she met her future husband, then a rabbinic student at the Hebrew Union College. They were married in 1912 upon their graduation. Rabbi Cohon became one of the most important spokesmen of Reform Judaism in the United States, and a prolific writer on Judaica. He was influential in re-establishing a "favourable attitude towards traditional Jewish observances, the Hebrew language, and the idea of Jewish peoplehood" in American Reform congregations, and was the "principal draftsman" of the famous "Columbus Platform" adopted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1937 (see *EJ*² V, 694).

Rabbi Cohon's interests and convictions were supported by his wife's great interest in traditional Jewish music. Her efforts to educate the Jewish public in the value of its musical heritage began long before her acquaintance with Idelsohn. In 1923, the year of Idelsohn's arrival in the United States, the Council of Jewish Women in New York published a second edition of her *Introduction to Jewish Music in Eight Illustrated Lectures*. Thus Idelsohn could find no better supporters than Rabbi Cohon with his progressive theological ideas and his love of Jewish tradition, and Mrs. Cohon with her love of Jewish music.

On her acquaintance with Idelsohn, Mrs. Cohon writes in a letter to Bathja Bayer: "You ask how and when I became acquainted with Idelsohn. Because of my deep involvement with the Synagogue, as rebbitzin and teacher, I wrote a welcoming note to him, when he came to New York [Winter, 1922/1923]. That year, Idelsohn addressed the meeting of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, in Cape May, New Jersey. There, Rabbi Cohon invited him to our Chicago home. Shortly thereafter, Rabbi Cohon was called to the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Idelsohn circled our country on a lecture tour, from Chicago to the west coast, through the south, and then north to Cincinnati."

Rabbi and Mrs. Cohon were instrumental in establishing Idelsohn as Professor of Liturgy and Jewish Music at the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, in 1924 (see Idelsohn's autobiographical sketch in English in this volume). Irma then became his personal secretary and remained so until 1935. While working with Idelsohn, she built up a private collection of his writings and compiled an initial (unpublished) bibliography (see the

introduction to the annotated bibliography of Idelsohn's writings in this volume).

Mrs. Cohon's personal knowledge of Idelsohn's life and character makes her essay an invaluable contribution to the understanding of the man and his works. However, while her reminiscences of Idelsohn are vivid and most reliable, doubts may be raised as to the accuracy of the biographical and bibliographical details she presents. We decided not to attempt to correct any such details – interested readers may compare details with parallels in other relevant articles in the present volume – but to print Mrs. Cohon's presentation of Idelsohn's life, character and works as a rare document; a precious personal statement by one of his best and most intimate friends.

LIFE INTEREST Jewish music “as a tonal expression of Judaism and of Jewish life.” Music, to Idelsohn, was not an ornament, but the heart-throb of life. As a physician with his thumb on the patient's pulse, so he, with his ear to the people's song, sensed from it, that people's spiritual health, cultural honesty and maturity and moral virility. And, by the nurture of the faithful tradition of that song, he purposed to foster, in the present and the future generations, those sterling attributes from which the song had sprung.

PURPOSE The preservation of the pure strain of Jewish music: its original elements, its unique lines.

METHOD Gathering the *living* record from the lips of the people.

Collecting *all* Jewish music.

Classifying it.

Analyzing it: distinguishing its original and its grafted material, isolating component elements, discerning structural scheme, noting variants and their root relation. In this analysis lay the key with which Idelsohn unlocked the song, comparing it with all related and all neighboring song.

TOOLS Ancient Hebrew learned sources: regulations for ritual song; specifications of material and manner.

Living interpretation and custom.

All scores.

All accounts of music and musicians.

Art and folk music of all nations among whom Jews had lived.

The phonograph – Idelsohn was the first to record with this “magic box” in Palestine.

Scientific tone-measuring equipment.

His chiefest tool was himself, for in his blood flowed the intimate knowledge of the life, the verbatim ritual and many of its variants, the note by note musical expression, and the prescribed and habitual usages of the various and varied communities of Israel. Unlike art song, preserved by trained specialists, unlike

the song of other religious bodies, entrusted to officiants, the Synagogue song is – on the one hand, regulated by a mass of minute laws springing from the interpretation of the text, the significance of the occasion, the devotional intention, the art of singing, and the usage of the given community; and on the other hand, is the property of every member of the community, and lives on the lips of each Jew. Hence, to know the local song tradition as it evolves in the course of generations, is first to live every word and practice of a large and involved ritual, and every custom of the particular group, because the song fits these as the flesh fits the human frame. Next, one must be so familiar with the life of the given place, as to readily and surely distinguish between the incapacity, idiosyncrasy, or error of an individual, and the intention or pure song from which untrained voices usually deviate.

Trained scientific musicians with the best equipment and the assurance of subsidies, go into the field, collect tunes, phrases, chants; and often spin intricate theories out of what a person intimate with the community, would recognize as merely a blunder.

Idelsohn's phenomenal memory that made his mind a reference library (often paged as definitely as the source volume) carried his laboratory with him, into the daily life of the people, instead of dragging the people to the artificial environment of tools.

Accustomed to modern European life, Idelsohn suffered in the primitivity and ill odors and unsanitariness of ancient settlements. But he moved in, and lived for a time where the tradition that he sought was rooted.

OUTGROWTH STUDIES Oriental phonetics; church song in Orient and Occident; origin of Gregorian chant; folk, religious, art songs of all nations among whom Jews have lived.

ACHIEVEMENT Source material: the ten great volumes of the *Thesaurus of Hebrew-Oriental Melodies*, covering the traditional ritual music of the various Jewish communities; compositions of some of the famous Synagogue singers, preserved in manuscripts; and religious and secular folksong.

History of Jewish music, constructed on the basis of all the accumulated musical material, all the historical and literary research, and a mastery of the practical art of the cantor.

Science of Jewish music – evolved on a fresh-hewn path of search and doubt and experiment; and constructed on laboratory principles. Idelsohn demonstrated that all the voluminous and intricate musical tradition of the Synagogue is rooted in the simple motives of the biblical chant.

Practical scores: music written for male choir; music written for mixed choir; the first one-voice service for congregational use; Song Book containing the

musical ritual of the complete Jewish year; volumes of school songs; wedding music; the first Hebrew opera ever written.

PERSONALITY AND APPEARANCE An arresting colorful personality – alike to strangers and intimates, by reason of appearance, his association with exotic lands and life, his vast acquaintance with people, his fabulous memory. Associates knew his passionate intensity, his consuming will, his moods that laid themselves on everything and everybody about him. He could suffer in stolid silence or storm in bitter rage. He could brood as a monument of stone, and again chatter with joyous loquacious zest. He abandoned himself absolutely to the luxury of sea and mountains; or, in total oblivion of the world about, with volcanic energy, he struggled in creative labor. The intensity of the man magnified his senses and his emotions. He was loved and hated, feared and scorned, flattered and maligned. But personal tragedies that repeatedly carried off the last book of a newly built library, the last bread for his family, never jostled or blurred the treasures of his accumulated learning; and storms that swept away friends never swerved the direction of his purpose.

He was a heavy-boned, heavy-set, broad-shouldered man whose head loomed large on even these expansive shoulders. His receding hair-line set a careless dark wreath upon his head. His mustache and Vandyke beard somewhat softened his features and added many years to his ruddy face. Like the salt tang of the sea, the flavor of his person could not soon be forgotten.

LIFE Abraham Zvi Idelsohn, born July 1, 1882; Pfilsburg, Curland, Russia (now Latvia).

Father – Azriel, a shochet and baal t'fillah.

Mother – Deborah.

One of seven children, surviving from sixteen births.

At six months, carried to new home in Libau.

To the age of 12, in the Chedorim.

12–17, in the Yeshivas.

17–18, sang in choir and studied with Cantor Mordecai Rabinovitz of Libau, learning Chazanuth and its literature, European music, score reading, singing, theory. Rabinovitz possessed a gift for adapting classic harmonization to the character of the Synagogue song. During this period, the boy devoured modern Hebrew literature.

Before he was 19, he left for Berlin, where he was immediately accepted to the Sternsches Conservatorium and to the choir of the Charlottenburg Synagogue. In the same year, he sang in Baruch Schorr's choir.

At 20, he was made chazan in Leipzig. He had a big baritone voice. In Leipzig, he attended the Gewandhaus Concerts of Nikisch; and, in the Royal Conserva-

tory of Music, studied harmony with Professor Jadasohn, counterpoint with Krehl, composition with H. Goelner, history of music with Kretchmer, also voice and piano. He studied chazanuth with Cantor H. Schneider, from whom he professed to having imbibed much of the real Jewish sentiment in music, and from whom he received also helpful suggestions for his vocal work. In this year (1902), he married Zilla, daughter of Cantor Schneider.

At 21 (1903) he became chazan and shochet in Regensburg. Here, he was an omnivorous reader of world literature. He attacked any language with dictionary and diligence. He built up a large personal library. Here, he lost his first-born. He left this post for a position as chazan in Johannesburg, South Africa.

At 23 (1905) he and his wife and baby daughter journeyed to Jerusalem, without promise or prospect, and only the burning desire to live in the Holy Land. Through poverty, tragedy, illness, and war, he labored there, for sixteen years. He was chazan; he taught Hebrew songs (created and collected by him) in the children's schools, running from one to another, from early morning to late afternoon; he taught in the Hebrew Teachers' College and in the Jerusalem School of Music. He was called to sing Schubert in the families of government administrators. Through all this time, he collected tunes, chants, motives, musical usages.

Once every month, he suffered an attack of malarial fever. He suffered a temporary loss of hearing. During the insufferable heat, he would sit with his feet in a tub of water; and continue his writing and classifying.

In the grim struggle for existence in Jerusalem, often the family bread-money bought the songs and chants of those who would sing to him. Here, he published *Shire Zion*, a book of seven four-part Hebrew songs.

In 1910 he published a theory of music, in Hebrew, *Toras Han'gina*. In the same year he published in Berlin *Shire Tefillah*, synagogue songs for cantor and choir; and his *Sefer Hashirim*, a volume of original and collected Hebrew songs, in which the score was printed for the Hebrew text, running from right to left.

In the meanwhile, the Royal Academy of Sciences in Vienna had granted him a four year subvention for investigation in Oriental and Jewish music. In 1913, he journeyed to Vienna, in response to an invitation to present the results of his study; and remained for a time, with Professor Exner, to set his work in order. (v. Academy Proceedings #175, 1917). In this year, his *Aussprache des Hebräischen* was published by the Gesellschaft zur Foerderung der Wissenschaft des Judentums; and his *Die Makamen der arabischen Musik* appeared in Leipzig.

In this same year, 1913, at the Zionist Congress in Vienna, Idelsohn met the great Hebrew poet Chaim Nachman Bialik, with whom, for years to come, he was to labor in the forefront of Jewish cultural life. Bialik urged Idelsohn to

contribute essays to his Hebrew journal on the subject of Jewish music. Idelsohn now had material collected for six volumes of his projected *Thesaurus*.

In 1914, the first volume appeared: *Songs of the Yemenite Jews*, with an introduction in German. The publication was subvended by the Royal Academy of Sciences in Vienna, and printed by Breitkopf und Härtel in Leipzig. It was to be eleven years before the second volume would appear. And twenty years were to be consumed in bringing out the complete work of ten volumes. Only his identification of himself with this work, could have reined so stormy a nature to the industry and patience demanded by those long years of postponements and disappointments. 1914 brought the World War. Idelsohn was drafted into the Turkish army, first as a clerk in a military hospital; then as band-master in the trenches at Ghaza.

In 1917, the *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Breslau published Idelsohn's "Die Vortragszeichen der Samaritaner"; and the Royal Academy of Sciences in Vienna – as mentioned above – brought out the results of Idelsohn's long investigation, under the title *Phonographierte Gesänge und Aussprachproben des Hebräischen der jemenitischen, persischen, und syrischen Juden*.

In 1919, he returned to his teaching, research, and writing, with which he remained in Jerusalem for about two and a half years more.

In 1921, he left Palestine, taking his wife and four children back to Germany. Within the following months, he achieved the publication of many of his works. He brought out his second collection of original and edited Hebrew songs, under the old title *Sefer Hashirim*, with the score running from right to left (Berlin 1922); his *Tz'lile Ha-eretz*, original and collected Hebrew songs for schools (Berlin 1922); his *Tz'lile Aviv*, seven original Hebrew solos with accompaniment (Berlin 1922); his study *Der Kirchengesang der Jakobiten* (Archiv für Musikwissenschaft – 1922); and what was very dear to his heart – his *Jephthah* – music drama in five acts – original text and score, the first Hebrew opera ever written. This work he had performed in Jerusalem, arranged with an orchestra of authentic oriental instruments.

Bialik suggested that he prepare, in Hebrew, the history of Jewish music, for publication by Bialik's press, D'vir. Idelsohn undertook this obligation.

By the end of 1922, the Benjamin Harz Verlag, Berlin, had published Volume II of the *Thesaurus of Hebrew-Oriental Melodies: Songs of the Babylonian Jews*, with German introduction; and Volume III: *Songs of the Persian, Bokharan and Daghestan Jews*, with German introduction. He lectured in Vienna, Berlin, Breslau, Posen, Leipzig, London, Oxford, Amsterdam, etc.

In 1923, he left his family in Leipzig, and came to America. For some months, he remained in New York City, as chazan and director of congegational song. He

lectured before the Chicago Rabbinic Association and before the Central Conference of American Rabbis, meeting in Cape May, New Jersey, on "Synagogue Music - Past and Present" (see the Conference Year Book of 1923).

In this year, Harz (Berlin) published the second volume of the *Thesaurus* with English introduction; and Volume IV: *Songs of the Oriental Sephardim* in two editions - one with Hebrew, one with German introduction. Idelsohn's essay "Der Jüdische Tempelgesang" appeared in Guido Adler's *Handbuch der Musikgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main).

During the winter season of 1923-24, Idelsohn covered the length and breadth of the United States, on a lecture tour.

Early in 1924, he settled in Cincinnati, where the task of cataloguing the Birnbaum Jewish Music Library was entrusted to him. During this period, under the strain of crushing personal and family problems, he suffered what, at the time, was not so diagnosed, but which development years later indicated to have been a cerebral hemorrhage, from which he apparently recovered completely. In this year, he produced: *Synagogue Service for Friday Evening in F Major* - "based upon the Ashkenazic mode of Adonoy Moloch; utilizing the mode of Mogen Ovos," published by the National Council of Jewish Women; *Synagogue Service for Friday Evening in E^b Major*, "based upon the ancient Pentateuchal mode, utilizing the mode of Mogen Ovos," also published by the national Council of Jewish Women; *Synagogue Service for Sabbath Morning in E^b Major*, "based upon Psalm mode in major, utilizing the mode of Ahava Rabba," published by Sinai Congregation of Chicago, "in memory of Emil G. Hirsch 1852-1923." A wedding song with text from the Song of Songs: "Set me as a Seal upon thy Heart," Cincinnati, 1924; a study: "Mosche Pan - Ein vergessener deutscher Synagogenkomponist des 18. Jahrhunderts." In Hebrew, *History of Jewish Music*. The first volume was published by Dvir, Berlin, 1924. The three remaining volumes lie at the press, unpublished.

In the autumn of 1924, Idelsohn was appointed to establish the Chair of Jewish Music and to lecture on Jewish liturgy, at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati.

In December 1924, he lectured, by invitation, before the convention of the Music Teachers' National Association. The address was subsequently published by that body: "The Distinctive Elements of Jewish Folksong."

In 1925, The National Council of Jewish Women published *The Harvest Festival - A Children's Succoth Service*, music by Idelsohn. Harz brought out Volume I of the *Thesaurus* with English introduction.

The treatise "Song and Singers of the Synagogue in the Eighteenth Century" appeared in the *Hebrew Union College Jubilee Volume*, Cincinnati, 1925.

By the Fall of 1925, Idelsohn had a home prepared for his family; and brought his wife and two youngest children from Germany.

In 1926, he published his *Manual of Musical Illustrations for Hebrew Union College Lectures*.

His essay "Der Missinai-Gesang der deutschen Synagoge" appeared in the May 1926 number of the *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft*.

In 1928 and 1929, Benjamin Harz of Berlin published two editions of the fifth volume of the *Thesaurus: Songs of the Moroccan Jews*, one with Hebrew introduction, the other with German. The manuscripts of these books had been lying at the publisher's for four and four and a half years, respectively. This was the last volume published with two different introductions.

In 1928, Idelsohn published his *Jewish Song Book*. In simple and compact form, it met the needs of Synagogue, home, and school, for the complete cycle of the Jewish religious year. It combined original compositions and the selected best of Jewish songs. For the first time, it printed hymns, not for the imaginary four voices, but as they are sung - unison with accompaniment; a form promptly imitated in the subsequently published Jewish Hymnal. Within the year, the edition was exhausted; and in 1929, Idelsohn published a revised and enlarged edition, with the prefaced hope that it "reach the Jewish hearts" and be "a voice for their faith." This edition also melted away fast. Idelsohn prepared the manuscript of a third edition, larger and improved. His great desire was to offer this book to all Israel, before his death. In this hope, he was disappointed. He would indeed have rejoiced to know that an enlarged and improved edition subsequently circled and still circles the globe.

In 1929, Henry Holt and Company, New York, published the 535 page book which it had requested Idelsohn to write: *Jewish Music in its Historical Development*.

For the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods, Idelsohn wrote a popular presentation of *The Ceremonies of Judaism*, which the Brotherhoods published in a bound pamphlet in 1929; and in enlarged bound book in 1930. In 1929 Idelsohn published a new approach to his subject: *Parallels Between the Old French and the Jewish Song*. To the *A. S. Freidus Memorial Volume* (New York 1929), Idelsohn contributed "Collections of and Literature on Synagogue Song."

In January 1930, Idelsohn was ordered flat on his back for six months, because of an affection of the coronary vessels of the heart. The following autumn, he returned to his College lectures.

During this year, the Hebrew Union College issued his *Diwan of Hebrew and Arabic Poetry of the Yemenite Jews* (in the original languages) with notes in Hebrew by N. Torczyner. In 1931-2, the *Hebrew Union College Annual* carried his illuminating article "The Kol Nidre Tune."

In 1932, Henry Holt published, as companion volume to the earlier work issued by that house, his 404 page *Jewish Liturgy and its Development. Acta Musicologica*, for May of that year, carried Idelsohn's article: "The Features of the Jewish Sacred Folk Song in Eastern Europe."

In 1932-33, The American Council of Learned Societies in Washington D.C., undertook the financing of the publication of the last five volumes of Idelsohn's *Thesaurus of Hebrew-Oriental Melodies*. In consequence, the volumes – all with English introductions – now appeared in rapid succession. Four were issued in 1932, printed by Hofmeister in Leipzig: Vol. VI: *The Synagogue Song of the German Jews in the Eighteenth Century* – according to manuscripts. Vol. VIII: *The Synagogue Song of the East European Jews*. Vol. IX: *The Folksong of the East European Jews*. Vol. X: *Songs of the Chassidim*.

In 1933, the set was completed with the publication of vol. VII: *The Traditional Songs of the South German Jews*, issued in the twentieth year after the first volume had appeared. In these massive tomes – a monument to the devoted labor of one man – are stored the treasures of song from which it was Idelsohn's hope that renewed authenticity, strength, and beauty would flow into the musical creations of Israel.

The *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft* for June-July published Idelsohn's "Deutsche Elemente im alten Synagogengesang Deutschlands." In the special Idelsohn number of *Der Jüdische Kantor* – Hamburg, February 1933, appears the essay "Der Mogen Ovov Steiger." It was later published in English translation, in the *Hebrew Union College Annual*, in 1939.

For the encouragement of congregational singing, and for use in such congregations as employ but one or two voices, Idelsohn prepared the *Friday Evening Service – One Voice or Solo and Unison* (N.Y.: Bloch Publishing Company, 1933). This is the first musical service of its kind to be published.

Idelsohn now suffered a succession of cerebral hemorrhages, with attendant paralysis – temporary, but increasing in duration and in area. His face still wore its florid color; there was still in him the presence of the man of major proportions. But he was broken in his prime. He was shattered at the age of fifty.

In May 1933, the Hebrew Union College bestowed on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity. By sheer force of will, he mounted the platform unaided, and stood at his full height, during the ceremony.

By 1934, he was permanently incapacitated; and his weak and ailing wife became his twenty-four hour a day nurse.

In September 1935, he was carried to Miami, Florida, for the possible enjoyment of his so-loved salt air and the bright sunshine. But he could no longer use his hands or stand alone; and he could eat almost nothing.

The 1936 *Hebrew Union College Annual* included an essay long awaiting publication: "Traditional Songs of the German (Tedesco) Jews in Italy."

He lost the power of speech. Prostrate and silent, he could move but a single finger and his eyes. Yet he struggled with the violent impatience of his spirit, to make himself understood. And often, in her extraordinary keenness, his wife could discover his wish that a certain publisher be addressed – or thoughts equally unrelated to his sickroom. He suffered helpless, hopeless torture. But his heart pumped on; and would not let him die.

In September 1937, he was transported to Johannesburg, South Africa, where most of his relatives lived.

And, from there, on 14 August 1938, came the cabled word that he had slipped from his "mattress grave" into eternity, leaving behind him a few friends and the indebtedness of all Israel – of all the musical world.

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ISRAEL ADLER, BATHJA BAYER and ELIYAHU SCHLEIFER
in collaboration with Lea Shalem

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