

YUVAL

STUDIES OF THE JEWISH MUSIC RESEARCH CENTRE

Volume V

THE ABRAHAM ZVI IDELSOHN MEMORIAL VOLUME

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Portrait of A.Z. Idelsohn

From the A.Z. Idelsohn Archives at the JNUL, Mus. 9 (16)

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Edited by

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

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FOREWORD

The present volume is dedicated to the memory of Abraham Zvi Idelsohn (1882-1938), "father of Jewish music research." The volume was meant to appear on his centennial, but, to our regret, the publication was delayed. During that year, 1982, two musicological conventions, one in Jerusalem and the other in New York, were dedicated to Idelsohn. During the Jerusalem convention, the A. Z. Idelsohn Street in the new quarter of Ramot Alon in Jerusalem was ceremonially inaugurated.

The volume is divided into two sections. The first section "Biography and Bibliography" contains documentary and bibliographical items related to Idelsohn's life and work. Here we reprinted his two autobiographical sketches (one in English and a somewhat different counterpart in Hebrew) and his 1910 declaration of the establishment of *Maḳôn šīrat yisra'el* in Jerusalem. An introduction precedes each document and an English translation is provided for the declaration. The documentary part is enlarged with a personal memorial essay by Irma A. Cohon who worked with Idelsohn for many years, and a general appreciation of his scientific *oeuvre* by Edith Gerson-Kiwi. The bibliographical part contains annotated bibliographies of his writings and musical compositions.

The second section, "In Idelsohn's Footsteps", contains fourteen scholarly papers related to Idelsohn's areas of research and interests. Among these are evaluations of his methods and of his contributions to musicology and linguistics. Other articles attempt to open new paths in fields which were close to his heart, such as psalmody, Yemenite and Sephardi song, Italian synagogal music, even Hindu chant. These and many more occupied Idelsohn at one time or another, and the articles are meant as tributes to his broad vision and versatile activity.

The more we know about Idelsohn's life, the better will we be able to understand his work. His lifetime is clearly divided into three periods or chapters.¹

The first chapter, from 1882 to 1907, is the European. Abraham Zvi was born on June 11, 1882 in the small town of Foelixburg in Latvia, where his father,

1 The present biographical survey is an enlarged version of that in the preface of *A. Z. Idelsohn Archives at the Jewish National and University Library*, edited by Israel Adler and Judith Cohen (*Yuval Monograph Series*, vol. IV), Jerusalem 1976. Some details have been emended, and a few clarifications added. An exhaustive Idelsohn biography does not yet exist; its preparation is a research project on its own account.

Azriel, served as the district *šôhet* and *ba'al tefillah*.² During his childhood, the family moved to the neighbouring town of Libau, where he received his early education, mainly in the *heder*. From the age of twelve (perhaps thirteen) until seventeen he studied in different religious academies (*yešivôt*) in Lithuania. He then returned to Libau and began studying cantorial art and music theory with the *hazzan* A. M. Rabinowitz. From 1899 to 1902 he wandered extensively: he lived for a few months in Königsberg;³ travelled to London hoping to study at the Jews' College; returned to Libau; sojourned in Berlin, where he studied music at the Stern Conservatory (presumably in 1901); served for a short time as *hazzan* in Augsburg; from there he moved to Leipzig, where he again served as *hazzan* and studied at the conservatory. In Leipzig he married Zilla, the daughter of the *hazzan* Hillel Schneider.⁴ Later, from July 1903 to July 1905, he served as *hazzan* in Regensburg. From there he went to serve as *hazzan* in Johannesburg, South Africa, remaining there for a year until his immigration to Palestine.

Idelsohn's musical (and, no doubt, cultural and spiritual) heritage is that of Lithuanian Jewry. In the beginning of his *Wanderjahre* as a young cantor, he acquainted himself with the Jewish tradition of Northern Germany; in Augsburg and in Regensburg he studied the tradition of South Germany. In Johannesburg, whose congregation was based on Lithuanian immigrants, he made use once more of his own musical heritage. His scholarly training was acquired simultaneously with his work as *hazzan*. Already in Libau, Cantor Rabinowitz had shown him ways of understanding *hazzanût* as well as European art music. In the Berlin and Leipzig conservatories he acquired additional knowledge, as much as was possible in the difficult circumstances of his life at that time. Idelsohn does not tell us about any formal studies after his departure from Leipzig in 1902; henceforth he would be self-taught.

The second chapter, from 1907 to 1921, is the Palestinian, or rather the Jerusalem period.⁵ His activity here was interrupted only twice: in the winter of

- 2 In his birth certificate, the date was erroneously given as July 1, and the error was copied in later documents. See the autobiographical sketch in Hebrew published in this volume.
- 3 Idelsohn visited Eduard Birnbaum in Königsberg, but no firm relations developed between them. See Idelsohn's autobiographical sketches and the introductions.
- 4 Zilla Idelsohn gave birth to four children; three daughters, Shoshana, Jessica and Dina and a son, Eliyahu, who died in infancy.
- 5 The exact date of Idelsohn's arrival in Palestine needs clarification. He himself used to name only the Hebrew year 5667 (i.e., September 20, 1906 to September 8, 1907). In the archives there is a "passport" of two pages (actually a "laissez passer") issued in Port Said by the government of Egypt on May 10, 1907 (Mus.7[677a]). The document states that the person certified lives in Jerusalem and that the certificate was issued for a voyage to Europe. The document includes Idelsohn's wife Zillah, his daughter Shoshana and his son Eliyahu. We have not yet found any evidence that Idelsohn travelled from Palestine to Europe at that time. Ships sailing from South Africa to the Mediterranean passed through Port Said. Ships departing from Port Said for

1913/1914 he visited Vienna on the invitation of the Academy of Sciences there; and during the World War he served in the Turkish army, mainly as band conductor. The Jerusalem period was the decisive one in both his life and work. In Jerusalem, amidst the almost complete “gathering of exiles” which already existed there, he discovered the great diversity of the musical traditions of the people of Israel. At the same time, he also discovered the diversity of the traditions of the other peoples of the Near East, Muslims and Christians. He discovered, collected, absorbed and reflected; and he began his scientific *oeuvre*, which would soon center on the formation of his monumental project, the *Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies*. He earned his livelihood working as a *hazzan*, as a teacher in grade schools and in teachers’ seminaries, and by giving private lessons. He was also active in the cultural life of the Jewish community; he composed various works and published anthologies of songs; he established choirs, and in 1910 he even tried to establish an institute for the research and cultivation of Jewish music (“*Makôn širat yisra’el*”). At some point during this period he began composing an opera, *Yiftaḥ* (Jephte) – the first opera composed in Palestine.⁶ For a while he Hebraized his name as “א. צב” or “Ben Yehuda”.⁷

In the summer of 1921 Idelsohn left Jerusalem and Palestine. His motives require explanation. The hardships of war brought about a decline of population, a severe impoverishment and a general atmosphere of depression in the Jewish community (the old *yiššuv* as well as the new one); recuperation was very slow.⁸ Since his immigration to Palestine, Idelsohn had been absorbed in the experience of discovery and intellectual growth and in his contribution to the building of the new Jewish settlement; but at the same time he had gradually become worn out and his health declined, mainly due to malaria. Like many others, he could not find the stamina to wait until the situation should improve and it was also obvious that even if living conditions became better he would not be able to survive merely on research, which had now become his main occupation. His existence as musician and scholar demanded not only suitable economic conditions, but also a proper academic milieu; this Palestine could not supply.

Europe would frequently anchor at Jaffa on their way north. A vivid description of such a voyage from Port Said to Jaffa is found in Idelsohn’s story *Le-ḥayyim ḥadašim* (see no.13 in the annotated bibliography of Idelsohn’s writings in this volume).

- 6 Details are given in the bibliography of Idelsohn’s musical compositions in the Hebrew section of this volume, under § 1.
- 7 Lack of knowledge of Idelsohn’s Hebraized name has caused some confusion in recent descriptions of life in Jerusalem at the beginning of the century, and, most regretfully, in various song books.
- 8 British military rule was enforced gradually, region after region, during the war; in 1920 the civil government took over, and the mandate was declared in 1922.

The third and last chapter in Idelsohn's life is the American one. Apparently Idelsohn left Palestine in the summer of 1921, going first to Germany. He stayed in Berlin for over a year, making arrangements to publish his *Thesaurus* and the song books he had compiled in Jerusalem; he even found a publisher for his opera. In the winter of 1922/23, he travelled to the United States and embarked on a year long cross-country lecture tour. The Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati then invited him to catalogue Eduard Birnbaum's collection of Jewish music. In 1924, shortly after his arrival, he was appointed Professor of Liturgy and Jewish Music at the college. One may say that the year of 1922 marked the beginning of the fulfillment of Idelsohn's mission. This was the beginning of the period when he gathered the fruits of his labours. He completed the publication of the *Thesaurus* with the volumes dealing with the Ashkenazi traditions, he published many articles and text books to aid his teaching; he also planned an extensive Hebrew book on Jewish music (*Tôledôt han-negînah ha-ivrit*, of which only the first volume was ever published).

He became famous in the United States and Europe, even among musicologists. In 1929 he published his English book *Jewish Music in Its Historical Development*, which became a "bible" in its field.

All his hopes for the further realization of his dreams were shattered by fate. In 1930, his health began to deteriorate, he was partially paralyzed and his speech was severely hampered. In 1934 the college allowed him to retire. From September 1935 until September 1937 he stayed in Miami, Florida, and then he travelled (or rather was carried to) Johannesburg, South Africa, to live among his family (his three daughters and his brother Jeremiah). On August 14, 1938, Idelsohn died at the age of fifty-six.

The honorary title "father of a discipline" can be awarded only to him who lays the foundations and constructs the edifice that makes up the discipline. This, indeed, is the significance of Idelsohn's work. The edifice he built over two generations ago remains solid and useful even today. Changes and additions have been made in the details and a few emphases have been shifted. A number of problems to which he gave confident answers have returned bearing the same question marks as before. But these modifications are all the result of a natural process; and this process is still taking place within the edifice which Idelsohn built.