

The Jewish Music Research Centre and the Jewish Music Collections at the Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine in Kyiv: An Historical Record

By Edwin Seroussi (September 2021)

Jewish Music Collections of the Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine in Kyiv, aka the “Beregovski Collection,” [henceforth: the Kyiv collection] has attracted the attention of musicians and scholars of Jewish music ever since they resurfaced in the aftermath of the downfall of the Soviet Union. Different and at times contradictory narratives surround the attempts by individuals and institutions to secure public access to this unique historical repository of sound and ethnographic documentation of Eastern European Jewish music and folklore. The complicated paths of encounter between scholars from around the globe and the Kyiv collection continue to this day, three decades after it started.

The Jewish Music Research Centre (JMRC) is one of the institutions that has invested efforts to access the Kyiv collection for the benefit of the wider scholarly and artistic communities and the broader public. The present report, prepared on the launching of the webpage dedicated to JMRC projects related to the Kyiv collection, provides an accurate record of the institution’s past involvement with this resource. At the same time, this document traces plans for the JMRC’s engagement with materials of the Kyiv collection in the future.

In the summer of 1994, the then-director of the institution called at that time the Vernadsky Central Library of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in Kyiv, Prof. Alexii Semenovich Onishchenko, visited the Jewish National and University Library (JNUL [today the National Library of Israel]) in Jerusalem. As the JMRC was embedded within the JNUL, its director, the late Prof. Israel Adler, hosted Prof. Onishchenko at the National Sound Archives (aka “Phonoteque”).

Onishchenko mentioned to Adler on that occasion that the Vernadsky Library held a substantial collection of wax cylinders of Jewish materials. Soon after, in 1995, Adler traveled to Kyiv in pursuit of the collection. Realizing while in Kyiv that the cylinders were indeed the famously “lost” Beregovski collection, Adler engaged in a public relations and fundraising campaign to mobilize institutions and individuals in order to make the Kyiv collection available to the public. Soon after a formal agreement was signed between the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences and the JNUL for the exchange of materials and information and collaboration in the processing of the collection.

In retrospective, Adler’s overenthusiastic reaction shows that he was unaware of parallel efforts made to disseminate the existence of the Kyiv Jewish collections (although not necessarily the music ones). His enthusiasm could

be explained by the excitement generated by the opening of the Russian and Ukrainian archives of Judaica to Israelis in the post-Soviet period. Had Adler read Zachary Baker's 1992 article on the Jewish collections in Kyiv, he would have realized that "To anyone familiar with the background of the Kiev Institute's library [i.e. Institute for Jewish Proletarian Culture], the offhand assertion that it had 'never been described in print' is inaccurate. Indeed, there is a considerable body of literature regarding these collections, much of it published well before 1989. Perhaps the claim was made in ignorance of the connection between the newly discovered [Vernadsky] library materials and those that were assembled in Kiev during the firsthand inspections of the collections." (Zachary M. Baker, *History of the Jewish Collections at the Vernadsky Library in Kiev*, "Shofar 10, no. 4 [1992; Special Issue: Yiddish and Ashkenazic Studies], pp. 31-48, quote in p. 34 and also references to music collections in p. 45 and note 27)

Adler could have also read the 1994 report by Joseph C. Hickerson, at the time the Librarian and Director of the Archive of Folk Song at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, about his visit to the Vernadsky Library in Kyiv in late March 1994 published in the *Folklife Center News* (16, no. 3 [Summer 1994], pp. 5-7). This report is not only illuminating for the early pictures of Dr. Irina Sergeyeva and Dr. Lyudmila Sholokhova illustrating it, but most importantly for one picture that speaks millions. It shows that a major institution in "the West," the Library of Congress, also knew about the recorded Jewish music collection in Kyiv. The LoC was negotiating the possibility of assisting the Ukrainian institution to transferring the cylinders (still not digitizing!) to tapes just a few months before Prof. Onyschenko's visit to Jerusalem. Thus, we know now that many different negotiations and international connections were forged at the same time around this recorded music collection, evidently without the parties' knowledge of one another's dealings with Kyiv. When Adler suggested, just a few months later, the good services of the Vienna Phonogrammarchiv, mobilizing even the International Music Council of UNESCO as mediator, the Vernadsky Library had already made its decision, we now know, to engage in the digitization of the collection with its own technological personnel and means.

Another source readily available for consultation by Adler prior to Prof. Onyschenko's visit to Jerusalem was Eda Beregovskaia's memoir of her father's life and work, *Arfy na verbakh: Prizvanie i sud'ba Moiseia Beregovskogo* that appeared in Moscow and Jerusalem in 1994. In this work, she explicitly mentions the fate of her father's collections. Adler became acquainted with Eda Beregovskaia's work later on. Thus, the Jewish music collection in Kyiv did not need to "be discovered" even though the knowledge of its content and let alone public access to it were still extremely limited.

Thanks to an initial successful fundraising to "save" the Kyiv collection Adler established the "Kyiv project" at the JMRC. In the first stage, the project

consisted of the full bilingual (English/Hebrew characters) computerization of the original catalogues of the collection, including, when available, the musical incipits. A rather large team of librarians, experts in the then revolutionary Aleph cataloging system and in the Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew languages, engaged in this project from 1996 to 1999. Adler made public his plans in his essay “A la recherche de chants perdus: la redécouverte des collections du “cabinet” de musique juive de Moisei I. Beregovski”, *Ndroje balendro: musiques, terrains et disciplines: textes offertes à Simha Arom*, ed. V. Dehoux and others (Paris, 1995), 247–67.

The expectation was that parallel to the computerization of the manuscript catalogue in Hebrew characters, the entire collection, included digital copies of the surviving recordings (many already damaged or erased) and all the accompanying *formulars* containing the musical and textual transcriptions of the songs would become available in Jerusalem. That promise never materialized. Only the catalogue of the A section of the Kyiv collection, i.e. the descriptions of the recordings, was computerized in its entirety using the Aleph system developed by ExLibris in use by the NLI since 1999. The database itself unfortunately became unusable after the last version of Aleph (500) system was discontinued by the NLI. A hard copy was printed for the record and a PDF version of is available at the JMRC website.

Yet, one tangential result of Adler’s efforts was the transformation of the recorded collection of Jewish sounds from the Vernadsky Library into a valuable symbolic asset of diplomacy in the complicated bilateral relations between Ukraine and the Jewish State. On November 24-27, 1996 the then President of Ukraine Leonid Kutchma visited Israel. On the 25th he addressed the Knesset, Israel’s Parliament, and the following quote from the end of his speech speaks for itself:

“Honorable Speaker of the Knesset, it is a pleasure for me to use this opportunity to offer you a present from the Ukrainian people – a CD with the voice of Sholem Aleichem, the great son of the Jewish people and of the Ukrainian, and additional recordings of Jewish compositions. These recordings were done at the beginning of the present century on Edison phonographic cylinders. It was thought that it was impossible to renew them, and look, with the efforts of Ukrainian scientists, who developed an original system to renew them, these works received a new life. We hope that from now on these works will be heard in your homes and in your hearts, and that the voices of the past will assist today to strengthen our friendship.” (quoted from the official Knesset records, <https://www.knesset.gov.il/Tql/knesset/Knesset14/html/19961125@19961125001@001.html>, translated by E.S.)

In 2010, the late Dr. Irina Sergeyeva, curator of the Jewish collections at the Kyiv library since 1990, visited Jerusalem on the occasion of the major meeting of the [Ukraine Jewish Encounter Initiative](#). A printed copy of the

catalogue was given to her for the records of the Library in Kyiv and talks about possible future collaborations, joined by Dr. Lyudmila Sholokhova, then librarian at YIVO New York, were extremely fruitful. Yet, no substantial developments followed.

We preserved in our databases a draft of Prof. Adler's introduction to the catalogue in which he had invested a tremendous amount of energy, time and enthusiasm. This introduction, probably written around 1998/9, is available lightly edited and with some updates in brackets, for the sake of the historical record. It is an outdated document because so much has happened and has been published since then in relation to the Kyiv collection and much is happening even as these lines are being written down. However, the notable interest in the Kyiv collection outside the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Ukraine has generated diverse (re)actions that deserve to be paired with Adler's document. An email from 1996 by our distinguished colleague Prof. Izaly Zemtsovsky provided another angle to the story of the "discovery" of the Kyiv collection. At the same time, a 2018 post by Michael Alpert related to the same chain of events is added for the sake of including another version of the story of the Kyiv collection circulating more recently.

Finally, yet no less critically, Adler, Zemtsovsky, and Alpert as well as Hickerson in his report of his trip to Kyiv all mention a pivotal figure in the curating, cataloguing and study of the Kyiv collection. Introduced as "Mme. Mila Goisman-Sholohova" by Adler, and "Mila Liudmila Sholokhova-Goizman, a young musicologist from Kiev" by Zemtsovsky, "a student writing a dissertation about the collection" by Hickerson and hailed by Alpert as having "the CENTRAL [role]...in preserving and making public all of the Vernadsky recordings," Sholokhova has also been kindly instrumental in guiding this writer in the intricacies of the Kyiv collection. A translation of Sholokhova's seminal 2001 article published in Russian was prepared on behalf of Prof. Adler's project and later on appeared in an official translation [online](#).

Towards the future

In the fall of 2000, as I succeeded Prof. Adler as Director of the JMRC, one of my first decisions was to halt the "Kiev project" in light of its futility facing the unavailability of the original archival materials (sound and written). It was not an easy decision, and certainly not an act of disrespect for the treasures of the Kyiv collection and the work of my predecessor, but one that was guided by a realistic assessment of the situation. At the same time, the availability of microfilmed copies of the five volumes of Beregovski's mostly unpublished five-volume collection, brought to Israel from the Soviet Union as early as 1972 (!) by the late Prof. Joachim Braun, opened the door for other projects related to the Kyiv collection. These include the scholarly publication of new

editions of two volumes, no. 2 (Yiddish songs) and no. 4 (Hassidic niggunim). None other than the late Prof. Eda Beregovskaia enthusiastically endorsed these projects during her unforgettable visit to Jerusalem in 2009. Prof. Beregovskaia generously provided the JMRC with a complete copy of the manuscript of her father's five-volume anthology.

The editing of vol. 4 was assigned to Yaacov Mazor, the most prominent scholar of Hassidic music at the JMRC. His work was completed, but in the process it took a very different and unexpected turn. For this reason, it has remained unpublished as will be explained in our forthcoming introduction to vol. 4 due to appear in the framework of this section of our website. Vol. 2 is being presently translated, edited and commented by Dr. Michael Lukin.

At the same time, we engaged in a collaborative Ukrainian/Israeli project in the framework of the scientific cooperation between both countries together with the ethnomusicologist Dr. Olha Kolomyets from the Ivan Franko University in L'viv. The initial project deals with a specific research question regarding the musical and social context in which the Hassidic *nign* evolved in Right Bank Ukraine and East Galicia. This project partially depends on further access to the Kyiv collections.

The JMRC will continue to play a role in the integration of the Kyiv collection within the growing global network of Jewish music resources. Open-source access to JMRC resources and knowledge related to or deriving from the Kyiv collections will be made available in this website. Besides the aforementioned documents related to the history of the JMRC relation to the Kyiv collection, we share as mentioned above the PDF version of the impressive catalogue conceived and directed by Prof. Israel Adler with the collaboration of a distinguished team of libraries and programmers whose name appears in the title pages of this document.

Since the eventful early contacts of private international scholars and institutions with the Kyiv collection following the independence of Ukraine in 1991, much has happened. The Vernadsky Library has released as of now twelve CDs with many of the recordings that could be saved. Recently it has graciously provided [free access to listeners](#) to listen to these precious recordings online. One expects that more recordings will emerge in the future. The recordings are accompanied by metadata that allows for the proper contextualization of the recordings. At the same time, parts of the documentary collection have emerged legally in the website of the [Klezmer Institute](#) as an open digital humanities platform. Hopefully coordinated efforts will allow the full access, assessment and use of one of the most celebrated historical collections of Jewish music.