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In Memoriam: Edith Gerson-Kiwi (1908—1992)

Author(s): Edwin Seroussi

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In Memoriam:  
*Edith Gerson-Kiwi*  
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Edith Gerson-Kiwi was one of the chief pioneers of Israeli musicology. Like her colleague and fellow musicologist, Hanoach Avenary, she arrived in Palestine from Germany in the 1930s under the most unfavorable circumstances, settled in a place geographically remote from the centers of activity of the emerging musicology, and fought a thankless uphill battle to gain recognition for her discipline by the institutions of higher learning in Israel. By the time musicology had been firmly established in Israeli universities, after 1965, she was already a senior scholar. Her energy and relentless motivation were nonetheless important factors in ensuring the institutionalization of musicology in Israel. Gerson-Kiwi is also credited with laying the path, along with Avenary, for the distinctive focus of Israeli musicology upon the study of Near Eastern and Jewish musical traditions. For her students as well as for those less directly influenced by her and her work, many of whom came to form the backbone of musicology in Israel, she indeed represents *dor hameyyasdim*—the ‘founding generation.’

Gerson-Kiwi studied at the Stern Conservatory in Berlin from 1918 until 1925, and at the Leipzig Musikhochschule, where she graduated with a diploma in piano in 1930.<sup>1</sup> She also trained as a harpsichordist in Leipzig and Paris—in the latter city with Wanda Landowska in 1931. She studied musicology in Freiburg, Leipzig and Heidelberg, where she earned a doctorate in 1933 with a dissertation on the sixteenth-century Italian canzonetta. In 1934 she earned a librarian’s diploma at Bologna University.

Like many young Jewish intellectuals in Germany, Gerson-Kiwi felt suffocated by the rising Nazi antisemitism. As did many of her fellow-countrymen, she moved to Palestine in 1935. A decisive landmark in her career was her encounter with Robert Lachmann (1892–1939), the distinguished member of the Berlin school of comparative musicology who also took refuge in Palestine in 1935. She became Lachmann’s assistant at the Archive for Oriental Music, a pioneering institution

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<sup>1</sup>The biographical data here is based partially upon the article by William Y. Elias on Gerson-Kiwi in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (ed. S. Sadie, 1980), Vol. VII, pp. 305–6.

founded at the Hebrew University in 1937. This new exposure completely altered the direction of her scholarly endeavors.<sup>2</sup>

The music of the Near East and of the Jewish immigrants from Islamic countries became the focus of her attention. She gave particular priority to the recording of these traditions. Indeed, in the footsteps of Idelsohn and Lachmann, Gerson-Kiwi created—almost *ex-nihilo* and without any substantial institutional support—one of the most impressive sound collections of Jewish traditions ever assembled prior to the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Her intuition led to her locating the best informants as the various waves of immigrants were arriving in Palestine, both before and after the creation of the State of Israel. Her goal was to record their traditions as soon as possible after their arrival, for she foresaw that the ‘ingathering of the exiles,’ combined with the ‘meltingpot’ policy of the early statehood period, was a direct threat to the survival of the traditions of the immigrants. The Gerson-Kiwi recording collection was transferred during the 1980s to the National Sound Archives (NSA) of the Jewish National and University Library, under her own supervision. I can still remember meeting and exchanging impressions with her on the serpentine steps leading to the second floor of the Library where the NSA is located. She always showed a keen interest in the progress of young scholars, encouraging them to continue along the path she had laid. One should also mention that her collection of musical instruments from around the world is one of the richest in Israel.

Gerson-Kiwi contributed to major music encyclopedias such as *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (“Music of the Middle East—Palestine,” “Music of the Bible”) and the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (“Music—Folk Music”). For many decades she was Israel’s principal liaison to major international music organizations, such as the International Council for Traditional Music (formerly the International Folk Music Council) and the International Musicological Society, where she fostered the initial ties of Israeli musicology to the larger international scene during the formative years of the state. As a visiting lecturer at prestigious universities in Europe and the United States, Gerson-Kiwi was instrumental in the dissemination of the study of oral traditions of the Oriental Jewish commu-

<sup>2</sup>See her article in *Musica Hebraica* 1–2 (1938), pp. 40–42.

<sup>3</sup>Concerning her recognition of Idelsohn and Lachmann as the two forerunners of ethnomusicology in Palestine, see her studies, “Two Anniversaries—Two Pioneers in Jewish Ethnomusicology, in *Orbis Musicae* II/III (1973), pp. 17–28; and “Robert Lachmann: His Achievement and His Legacy,” in *Yuval: Studies of the Jewish Music Research Centre* III (1974), pp. 100–108.

nities, which, until then, were available only through Idelsohn's notations.

Many of Gerson-Kiwi's articles, published in three continents over a span of forty years, were compiled in the book, *Migrations and Mutations of the Music in East and West: Selected Writings* (Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv University, 1980), which also includes a bibliography of her works. It would be pretentious to attempt to examine in this brief obituary the rich palette of subjects treated by Gerson-Kiwi throughout her lifetime. Her research topics included historical studies of music in antiquity, broad overviews of musical techniques shared by several cultures of the Near East (religious chant, vocal polyphony, modality), specific studies of the music of Jewish communities (Kurdistan, Bokhara, The Atlas Mountains in Morocco, Yemen), the Samaritans and the Arabic and Persian world (*taqsim*, *muwashah*, *dastgah*), and the general methodological questions (transcription and analysis). Only a contextual analysis—one which would evaluate her approach to these different topics in the framework of the intellectual history of musicology and ethnomusicology—would do justice to her work. Gerson-Kiwi based her research on the early premises of the Berlin school of comparative musicology, with which she gained familiarity during her work under Lachmann in the late 1930s. The theoretical and methodological postulates of this school remained a 'lamp unto her feet' (*ner leragla*) throughout the rest of her life. Indeed, a thorough appreciation of her lifework is a *desideratum*.

Through a variety of positions as an educator, Professor Gerson-Kiwi exerted a lasting influence upon musicology and musical life in Israel. From 1949 onward she was a lecturer at the College of Music Teachers in Tel Aviv; she taught as well at the Rubin Academy of Music in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. In 1966 she joined the faculty of the new Department of Musicology at Tel Aviv University. At the same time, she continued to appear in public lecture forums and radio broadcasts.

In his dedication to *Orbis Musicae* (the music journal of Tel Aviv University, Volume IX, 1986–87, in honour of Professor Gerson-Kiwi), Professor Herzl Shmueli summarized her impact upon Israeli musicology: "She was the Israeli musicologist who laid the foundations of our present consciousness of the importance and charm of Oriental [viz., non-Western; ES] musical culture, and of the uniqueness and beauty of the songs and music of our Oriental [Jewish] communities."

*Yih'ye zikhra barukh.*

Edwin Seroussi