Virtual Tenement Concert

SONGS OF YIDDISH NEW YORK with YIVO

April 24, 2023 | 6:30pm ET

co-presented by
Tenement Museum
and
YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

Eliza Bagg, Singer
Paul Kerekes, Pianist

Song texts and translations edited by Dovid Braun
PROGRAM

Dos goldene land | The Golden Land
Words and Music by Elyokem Tsunzer (1892)

Kesl-gardn | Castle Garden
Words by Morris Rosenfeld — Music by M. Warshawsy

A brivele der mamen | A Letter to Mother
Words and Music by Solomon Small (S. Smulewitz)

Vakht oyf! | Awake!
Words by David Edelstadt

Aptaun un dauntaun | Uptown and Downtown
Words by Solomon Small (S. Smulewitz) — Music by J. Brody

Abi gezunt | So Long as You’re Healthy
Words by Molly Picon — Music by Abraham Ellstein

Hob ikh mir an altn daym | An Old Dime
Folksong Published by Mikhl Gelbart

Vos geven iz geven un nito | What Was, Was and Is No Longer
Words and Music by David Meyerowitz

Ikh vil nit geyn in kheyder | I Don’t Want to Go to Kheyder
Words by Sholem Aleichem — Music by J. Cherniawsky

Coney Island Days
Words from an interview with Irene Weiser, adapted by Alex Weiser
Music by Alex Weiser
Dos goldene land

Words and Music by Elyokem Tsunzer (1892)

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

based on Yiddish Song of the Week

About America I had heard as a child
when people would converse:
“How lucky one lives on Columbus’ ground;
It is truly a Golden Land.”
I arrived and read through this “holy book”.
Tears of sorrow are printed on each page.
In the narrow streets where the masses are crammed —
Many poor and gloomy people; misfortune is seen on their faces —
They stand from morning to night,
Their lips burnt and faint.
This one sacrifices his child for a cent,
That one gets thrown out of his flat because of rent.
Many greenhorns in misery
Collapsing from hunger in the street,
Much poverty and sickness in tandem —
All in the Golden Land.

Song features additional verses
מיט מיו און שמאַרץ
ווערט איבערפֿילט מײַן האַרץ
װען איך גיב אויף קעסל-גאַרדן אַ בֿליַק.
װונק זאָן יבֿן קעסל-גאַרדן אַ דוּרפֿן אַ פֿון גליק.
כ'געדענק עס אויף קלאָר
תֿאָרייק מיט אַקח יאָר
בין אַך שרייט געטעפֿן.
געוֹפֿט אַך געלאַכט,
װון גليك נאָר געטראַכט,
װי גוט איז מיר דעמעלט געמען.
און קעסל-גאַרדן אַ דוּרפֿן געמען טיש טיר
געפֿינט איר דעג גרוב פֿון מײַן גליק.
און דאָך פֿילע קבֿרֿים
אָזעלכע אָן שיעור
געפֿינט אַך ויאָר גיט נאָר אַ בֿליַק.

DAH/VFA

My heart aches, whenever I see Castle Garden, whenever I see people sitting there with dreams of happiness. I recall the time when I, too, sat there with such dreams and hopes. But on the other side of Castle Garden these dreams were buried. There are many such graves, wherever one looks.

But we must admit that, here in America, we have more freedom and security than anywhere else. There is now hope for better relations between Christians and Jews. We must not let the darkness and despair from the Old World last forever. Then, Jews will find happiness and acceptance here, and ignorance and shame will disappear.
My child, my comfort, you are going away:
Remember to be a good son —
With anxious tears and fear
your loyal, dear mother begs you.
You are traveling, my child, my only child,
across distant seas.
Just arrive in good health
and don’t forget your mother.
Oh, travel in health and arrive in good stead.
Please send a letter every week.
Delight your mother’s heart, my child.

A letter to your mother
you shouldn’t delay.
Write right away,
dear child.
Grant her this consolation.
Your mother will read your little letter
and she will recover.
You’ll heal her pain,
hers bitter heart.
You’ll delight her soul.
How long will you remain slaves and wear degrading chains? How long will you produce riches for those who rob you of your bread? How long will you stand with backs bent — humiliated, homeless and weak? It’s daybreak, awake, open your eyes, and see your own strength. Ring the freedom bells everywhere, gather together the suffering slaves, and fight with spirit and with no fear for your sacred rights! And all will live, and love, and flourish, in free, golden May! Brothers, enough kneeling to tyrants, swear that you must be free!
**ENGLISH TRANSLATION**

We workers suffer downtown.
We really ought to make our way uptown.
We have a lot of power in this land.
We just need to go hand in hand.
The sacks of gold need to be decimated.
We workers, we are worth more.
We work with our sweat and blood.
Nothing of what they possess belongs to them.
Pay close attention: we have power.

The wealthy from uptown could yet be downtown
And work in sweatshops, pushing a garment wagon.
And we from the Lower East Side may yet be alright
And, mind you, send Rockefeller an eviction notice.

**ORIGINAL YIDDISH**

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The wealthy from uptown could yet be downtown
And work in sweatshops, pushing a garment wagon.
And we from the Lower East Side may yet be alright
And, mind you, send Rockefeller an eviction notice.
A bit of sun, a bit of rain,
A peaceful place to lay your head …
So long as you're healthy, you can be happy.

A shoe, a stocking, a dress without patches,
Three or four measly coins in your pocket …
So long as you're healthy, you can be happy.

The air is free, equal for all;
The sun shines for everyone
Whether rich or poor.

A little rejoicing, a little laughter,
A drink with friends once in a while …
So long as you're healthy, you can be happy.

Some seek riches,
Some seek exploits —
To conquer the whole wide world.
Some think that all happiness
Depends only on money.

Let them all search,
Let them all scrounge.
But I think to myself that
I have no use for such things,
Since happiness is waiting at my doorstep.
All I have is an old dime, which isn’t even mine. But let’s throw our cares away. Let’s be gay and have a drink without worrying about today or tomorrow, about friends or relatives. If I find a dollar, the treat will be on me. Let’s not be gloomy like old wives — let’s turn our weekdays into joyful Sabbath days.
דערלויבט, לאָזט זיך דינען,
ואַיִּסרוּדָן מײַן האַרץ.
צו רעָּג אִיק פון יונָּעַן,
צו רעָּג אִיק פון שמעארָּן.
אָך לְדוּר פון אָּך קראַנצֶּק.
אָּאָּס הייסט ניט קײַן קראַנצֶּק.
גען רבס פון אָּך עַלְעָּה.
עס טאָגָּה אָּך עָּשָּּנַן.

What Was, Was and Is No Longer

Words and Music by David Meyerowitz

Continued on next page
ENGLISH TRANSLATION
from the Milken Archive

Permit me
to unburden my heart.
Whether I talk sense
or whether I speak from pain,
I suffer from a disease,
which is not called an illness.
They call it old age.
It gnaws and it yearns.

For what was, was, and is no more.
Those years, that hour has already passed.
How quickly youthful joy flies away
and cannot be recaptured.
For what was, was, and is no more...
One's faculties become weak,
one's hair turns gray...
One can mend oneself, dress up,
make oneself pretty;
but one fools no one but oneself,
for what was, was, and is no more...

When I chance to pass by a school,
I shed tears
and think of yesteryear:
How the young little mind
Doesn't understand its happiness,
and when one comes to one's senses,
it is already too late.

For what was, was, and is no more.
Those years, that hour has already passed.
How quickly youthful joy flies away
and cannot be recaptured.
For what was, was, and is no more...
One's faculties become weak,
one's hair turns gray...
One can mend oneself, dress up,
make oneself pretty;
but one fools no one but oneself,
for what was, was, and is no more...
Summer is over and soon autumn with its gusty winds will be here. I don’t want to go to kheyder because the teacher always whips us and the beating hurts my bones. No one wants to study, anyhow. Our thoughts are on the smooth ice and the white snow; we want to skate and have fun, but the kheyder teacher bothers us with the “Ethics of the Fathers.”
Coney Island Days

Words from an interview with Irene Weiser, adapted by Alex Weiser

Music by Alex Weiser

1. CONEY ISLAND

I was very young. We used to go to the beach ourselves. We ran in the water. We came out. We were there all day. There was no limit. We were there without an adult. The adult was Morty, and he didn’t pay any attention. I’d go out with Bea, we went to Nathan’s. They used to give us fifteen cents or a dime to go on the boardwalk, and get something... custard and a ride. I used to go with Marlene, nine times out of ten she dropped her’s on the boardwalk, so I had to share my fifteen cents with her. I had good times. All my family was loving to me.

2. PENNIES

My mother, she had a pot, a commercial pot, and she filled it with pennies, so Bea and I, you know, Bea was a little bit of a devil, I was younger, I only followed whatever she did, so, we bought candies, we went to the movies with that money... Years later I was fully grown, I said, I knew we were doing wrong, that’s stealing. But if I asked my mother she’d say you could have it, but we didn’t ask, we just took. But, you know, Morty was a goody-goody. My brother was an angel. I found out he did it too. I was so shocked, because he was so good, you know? I thought we were very bad.

3. KNISH STORE

We had a knish store. We waited on customers. My uncle Joe stood by the oil. When we came over to get the knishes, he said in Jewish, avek! Avek! He was so nervous that I’d get hurt. We had a room in the back of the store. They had one bathroom. Just a toilet. Maybe a sink, no bathtub. All of us slept in one room, except Morty. There was a hotel attached to the store, for Morty they gave him a tiny room, but for us we all slept in one room.

4. RUSSIAN BATH

You know in Coney Island they had Russian baths. I used to go with my mother to the bath. You know the women would be naked. I was a little child, and when I’d see their bodies I thought it was very funny. My mother had no shame. I always saw her. I went with her.

5. MOTHER

My mother never knew her age. She never celebrated her birthday. She always went to school to speak better English. When she died, she had leukemia, she was still going to school. She was heavy. She used to buy a corset. When she went to get measured, I went with her. My mother used to take me all over. I was like her pet. My mother, she was a saint. She was wonderful.

6. AUNT FANNY

Wherever we lived, Fanny had to have an apartment in the same building. Her and my mother, they didn’t go out without each other. And me. I used to go with them all the time. She liked the mountains, she didn’t like Coney Island. She used to take me every time she went. She stayed in a hotel sometimes, they called it a kakhaleyin, where you cook yourself. And when she saw me she used to jump up and down, she loved me so much. I loved her. My mother was a little jealous. But you know I loved my mother. Nobody could love their mother more than I loved her.

7. ELLIS ISLAND

You know, Bea and I paid. My mother and father, I had their names put down — a record of their names in Ellis Island. We had to pay for that. Yea, Bea and I did it. We did it for them both. And then all my life I said, why can’t I do it for Fanny? She would have loved it. But I felt her children should do it, and I didn’t do it for her. But I’m sorry I didn’t.
ABOUT THE PERFORMERS

ELIZA BAGG is a Los Angeles-based experimental musician, working primarily as a vocalist in the field of contemporary classical music along with producing her own work. She has collaborated across genres with prominent experimental artists ranging from performing in Meredith Monk’s opera Atlas with the Los Angeles Philharmonic to touring regularly as a member of Roomful of Teeth, playing the role of Ape in Michael Gordon’s Acquanetta, singing chamber motets by John Zorn, or working collaboratively with Ted Hearne on his theatrical song cycle Dorothea. Her singing has been called “ethereal” by The New York Times and “gossamer” by The New Yorker. Bagg has performed as a soloist in new music projects with major symphonies including the Chicago Symphony, the New York Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the North Carolina Symphony, and the San Francisco Symphony, and has performed at venues around the world from Walt Disney Hall and Carnegie Hall to the Kitchen and Iceland Airwaves. Bagg’s sweeping, ethereal avant-pop project, Lisel, is grounded in her extensive career as a vocalist of Renaissance, Baroque and minimalist/post-minimalist singing styles. Bagg has received particular recognition for her use of extended vocal techniques and unique vocal sound, which Pitchfork compared to “a lovelorn alien reaching out from the farthest reaches of the galaxy.”

PAUL KEREKES is a composer/pianist from Long Island, NY, who often confronts and blurs the space between composition and performance. As co-founding member of Grand Band – a piano sextet described by the New York Times as a “new-music supergroup” – and Invisible Anatomy – an “otherworldly and uncanny” (Village Voice) composer-performer ensemble/collective that’s “shedding labels” (Yale Alumni Magazine) – most of his projects engage and unify these sometimes-disparate worlds. Paul has also had the privilege of hearing his music performed by many outstanding ensembles, including the American Composers Orchestra, Da Capo Chamber Players, New Morse Code, guitarist Trevor Babb, Thin Edge New Music Collective, Real Loud, andPlay, and Exceptet in such venues as Merkin Hall, (le) poisson rouge, The DiMenna Center, Roulette, Spectrum, and Symphony Space. His compositions and playing have been featured on NPR’s Performance Today, WQXR’s Q2 series, and released on major recording labels such as New Amsterdam Records, Innova, New Focus, and Naxos. He is a recipient of the Morton Gould Young Composer Award from ASCAP, the JFund Award from the American Composer’s Forum, and the Walter Hinrichsen Award from the Academy of Arts and Letters. Paul has also been on the music faculty at Sarah Lawrence College since 2015.
We tell the stories of working-class tenement residents who moved to New York City from other countries and other parts of the country. Their work helped build the city and nation, and their stories help us understand our history. While textbooks often overlook the stories of ordinary people, our tours immerse visitors in the tenement hallways, kitchens and parlors where families carved out new lives. We share primary sources and research that help us explore the stories of tenement families. Public programs, curricula and our Your Story Our Story website continue the conversation, using our stories as points of departure to connect the past to present.

We aim to build an inclusive and expansive American identity and believe that the exploration of our complex history—one with moments of both inclusion and exclusion—helps prepare us to recognize and discuss today’s complex issues with empathy and nuance.

tenement.org

The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research is dedicated to the preservation and study of the history and culture of East European Jewry worldwide. For nearly a century, YIVO has pioneered new forms of Jewish scholarship, research, education, and cultural expression. Our public programs and exhibitions, as well as online and on-site courses, extend our global outreach and enable us to share our vast resources. The YIVO Archives contains more than 24 million original items and YIVO’s Library has over 400,000 volumes—the single largest resource for such study in the world.

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