

Yiddish Song Smuggling

by Daniel Kahn

*Vu a grenets, vu a hafn, vu a kretshme, bin ikh do!
Makht a vare, makht a vare! Vayl ikh, reb yidl, for!*

Where a border, where a harbor, where a tavern, I am there!
Make way! Make way! For I, Mr. Jew, am traveling!
—Nathan "Prince" Nazaroff, *Ich Flee*

One of the most important words in the Yiddish languages is *gules*. It comes from the Hebrew *galut*: exile, or more specifically, *the exile*. It stands for the entire epic of the Jewish diaspora—the basic story which has defined and fostered many Jewish identities and cultures. For centuries, Jewishness was something synonymous with dispersion, displacement, migration, homelessness, otherness. Yiddish itself was born out of *gules*. Never having had an official territory of its own, Yiddish carries vocabulary and grammatical traces of the many languages amidst which it has lived. "I speak dozens of languages, but all of them in Yiddish," someone once said. In Yiddish, exile isn't only a state in which one finds oneself, it is a way of being. It is something one is. More specifically, it is something one carries, or *shleps*. *Shlepn gules*. While particular in its reference to Jews, there is much value in seeing it as a universally human condition. In the world today, more people than ever before find themselves—as the writer [Michael Wex](#) puts it—"Shlepping the exile."

As a Jewish American, I wasn't taught much about the culture of my immigrant forebears. I knew that they came from somewhere in "[the Old Country](#)," crossed the mighty Atlantic, and were reborn on the streets of cities like New York, Cleveland, and Detroit. As far as I knew, they left their language—with all of its songs, stories, and memories—at the docks on Ellis Island. I knew that my grandmother could speak Yiddish, but she never uttered a word of it around me. Some ten years after my bar mitzvah, I discovered Klezmer music while busking in the French Quarter in New Orleans. The old Jewish wedding tunes were part of the eclectic repertoire of the street musicians. This encounter led me to a contemporary, international, and progressive world of Yiddish culture that has been small but thriving for the last forty years. I had

found Yiddishland, a kind of virtual country, but one permanently, joyously in *gules*. And through singing and translating Yiddish songs I discovered the key, not only to my own cultural inheritance, but to my relationship with the cultures that surround me today.

To interpret Yiddish songs in a contemporary context is to breathe life into the songs of a Jewish world and a people that has been scattered, shattered, maligned, cheapened by nostalgia, and forgotten. I see it as a kind of song smuggling: taking these old stories, melodies, and ideas over the borders of time, context, and language—and repurposing them for our own lives. As a new immigrant to Yiddishland, I had good teachers. Singer-scholars such as [Michael Alpert](#) and Adrienne Cooper illuminated the ways Yiddish culture persists in its ability to move us, regardless of our backgrounds. They showed me that much of what was considered lost, could be sung back into the world.

Perhaps the most prominent proponent of Yiddish folk song in the American folk revival was the actor-singer-activist-translator Theodore Bikel. After a career that spanned seven decades, Theo passed away this last summer. I had the honor of having him as a friend, mentor, and comrade. Singing in over twenty languages, Theo's universalist humanism—fused with his commitment to a dynamic and defiant Jewishness—was rooted in the songs themselves. As he said, “I sing Jewish songs not because they are better songs than the songs of my neighbor. I sing them because they are mine and unless I sing them, that part of the culture will vanish...” His songs were his cultural passport. He was at once an ambassador and a smuggler. He translated numerous songs into singable English and rendered them accessible to a population for whom they were not intended. He opened them up to the world.

Songs may be among the most durable, resilient, and effective reservoirs of personal and cultural memory and identity. In them, we encounter not only the stories of those individuals who sing them, but the stories of all those who sang them before. Their stories are encoded in the ways the songs change as they migrate through generations and geography. Indeed, these songs describe not only a traditional folk culture as something to be protected and preserved, but in that tradition's constant flux, adaptation, and migration. This living culture, if respected and allowed to breathe and grow, can be an invaluable gift.

For the past couple years, I and a few of my Klezmer comrades have been traveling and singing as [The Brothers Nazaroff](#). We are acolytes and heirs-in-spirit to the little-known Yiddish and Russian troubadour [Nathan "Prince" Nazaroff](#). In 2011, we decided to form a "family band" of Nazaroffs and to focus exclusively on the repertoire of the great lost "Prince." The result of this brotherly union has been released by Smithsonian Folkways in the form of a new album, [The Happy Prince](#). We revel in exactly the kind of

immigrant, diaspora Jewishness many modern Jews have been made to disdain or deny—to be lucky and well-traveled Jews, *mazeldike, gulesdike yidn*.

The Brothers Nazaroff hail from all over the world. I, Daniel Kahn (a.k.a Danik Nazaroff) from Detroit, live in Berlin. My musical partner Psoy Korolenko (Pasha Nazaroff) from Moscow, is currently living in New Jersey. Jake Shulman-Ment (Yankl Nazaroff) resides in New York, France, and sometimes Romania. Our drummer Hampus Melin (Hempl Nazaroff) of Malmö, Sweden, lives in Berlin. With us are also two of our mentors and teachers: [Michael Alpert](#) (Misha Nazaroff) of L.A., living in Scotland, and Bob Cohen (Zaelic Nazaroff) of the Bronx, living in Budapest.

We all harbor a love of Nazaroff's one known Yiddish release, 1954 Folkways 10-inch [Jewish Freilach Songs](#). *Freilach* means "happy." This nine-track album manages to capture not only the performance of the artist, but the energy and spirit of a whole culture. In the twang of Nazaroff's singing and octophone (a kind of tenor mandolin), one hears the sound of Coney Island boardwalks, Odessa streets, bungalows in the Catskills, Polish shtetl barnyards, Broadway buses, and steamship steerages. The Yiddish lyrics speak of cows, Wall Street, vodka, campfires, fishing boats, bicycles, fiddlers, gypsy girls, broken hearts, and dancing. They are as urbane as a tenement, and as rustic as a watermill, as European as Soviet gangster ballads and as American as kosher hot dogs. It was at this cultural crossroads where the Russian Jewish vaudevillian Nathan Nazaroff met legendary Folkways founder, [Moses Asch](#)—himself, the son of the famous Yiddish writer [Sholem Asch](#). *Jewish Freilach Songs* was not the first or the only Jewish-oriented record on Folkways, but it was certainly the rawest, earthiest, and most raucous.

*Vi ikh gey, vi ikh shtey,
 Her ikh nor in eyn geshrey
 Oy bin ikh a mazeldiker, mazeldiker yid.*

From today til I die,
 You will always hear me cry
 Oh, am I a mighty lucky, mighty lucky Jew
 (translation from Nazaroff's 1954 Folkways liner notes)

The playful lyric translations printed on the Folkways insert communicate the spirit of the original Yiddish text. Akin to Theodore Bikel's song translations, but considerably hokier, they capture Prince Nazaroff's buoyant spontaneity and jovial exuberance. Indeed, translation can be the most transgressive form of song smuggling. For that reason, we decided that, when recording [The Brothers Nazaroff: The Happy Prince](#), we would sing many of the songs in English as well. Where the liner notes didn't lend

themselves to be sung, we wrote our own. It's not great poetry. But Nazaroff was no high artist. He was a song worker, a "big time performer," as he is described on an original Folkways promo card. He was a master of the old tradition of the Yiddish *tumler*, a wedding party merry-maker, and *kupletist*, an extemporaneous rhymers. In 1954, at a time when the interest in Yiddish was waning, it is remarkable that he chose to make a record of happy Jewish songs. But the intensity of his *freilach* energy transcends the particular historical moment in which it was produced. The Brothers Nazaroff and I have been playing these songs from the mountains of Quebec to the streets of New York to bars in Paris, Budapest, and Chisinau. The music works everywhere.

We know very few personal details about Nazaroff himself, but we do know that he was an immigrant who lived most of his life in New York City.¹ When Nazaroff came to America's shores, he brought in his songs a way of being, of seeing the world, and a lot of really catchy tunes. He smuggled in his own kind of joy and sorrow. The original EP's liner notes tell us that he came to America from somewhere in "Middle Europe" (most likely Odessa, Ukraine) in 1914, the year of the outbreak of The Great War. Recent information has revealed that he actually migrated to the US from Russia sometime before 1913. It was a time when repressions in Eastern Europe had become unbearable for Jews, forcing many to emigrate. The coming war would only make the situation more unbearable.

Until 1924, *thousands* of Jews died in European pogroms and *millions* emigrated to the New World. After 1924, when the US closed its doors and imposed strict ethnic immigration quotas, *thousands* emigrated and, in the end, *millions* stayed in Europe and died. This is a stark reminder of the cost of closing borders to the "floods" of refugees. Unfortunately, today's times are not exempt from the fear and hate-mongering of anti-immigrant hysteria.

Though I'm a native Detroiter, I have lived for the last ten years in a neighborhood in Berlin, Neukölln, comprised largely of *gulesdik*, or "diasporic" communities. On Karl-Marx-Strasse, my main thoroughfare, Turkish, Arabic, Romanian, Hebrew, Polish, Russian, Kurdish, Farsi, and African French mix fluidly with the German and English which serve as more or less common tongues. As others refer to the current arrival of new people to the cities of Europe as a "crisis" or a "flood," there are many here who

¹ After this text was written, National Public Radio (NPR) aired a story about [The Brothers Nazaroff](#) and the mystery surrounding [Prince Nazaroff](#)'s original release. Listeners did some digging and eventually revealed new information about the Prince's identity. More information on this can be [read here](#).

value this encounter. These people are not a flood, made of water. They are themselves vessels. They are witnesses to contemporary history, with all of its cataclysms, ironies, and troubles. They are shlepping their own exiles and smuggling treasures. Some of the most valuable possessions people *shlep* in their *gules* may weigh nothing at all. They are songs. And singing them, translating them, and breathing life into them, can show us that we're really all foreigners. We're all *gulesdike, mazeldike* Jews.

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