

Remembering Kremer

by Lois Barr

"Memory is always problematic, usually deceptive, sometimes treacherous."
Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*

Memory, both collective and individual, is highly valued in Jewish life. Yet significant parts of the Jewish collective past are lost through the deliberate choice to excise or ignore parts of the story that are no longer pleasing or useful. History is reinvented. Assaults from without, acts of terrorism, genocide, and vandalism destroy important documents, art, and artifacts. Perhaps equally treacherous, the forces of nature work against the task of remembering. Archival material decomposes. Important eyewitnesses forget, and survivors' stories remain untold before they die. Recreating the story of diva and folk-singer Isa Kremer demonstrates palpably all of the difficulties in documenting the past.

In the August 16, 1996 issue of *Evreiskii Mir* (Jewish World), a newspaper of the New York Russian-Jewish community, writer C. Abarchik rhapsodizes about Isa Kremer, the "Queen of Odessa." According to Abarchik's story, Isa, a Bessarabian diva, sang for Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt in a private concert at the Teheran Conference, on Churchill's birthday, November 30, 1943. Isa's performance reportedly outshone those of her fellow artists, Maurice Chevalier and Marlene Dietrich. Unfortunately, the *Evreiskii Mir* account overlooks the fact that Chevalier remained in occupied France, making him an unlikely choice to entertain Allied leaders. Moreover, Churchill's memories of that day, told in great detail in *Closing the Ring*, provide no mention of Isa, Maurice, or Marlene.

Whether or not the birthday concert took place, Abarchik revives the life and legend of an important balladeer and a cultural icon of her age. Isa's status as a star and charismatic personality permitted her to live her life on a world wage in times of bitter conflict. She witnessed and survived major historical conflagrations: the Russian Revolution, the fall of the Ottoman Empire, anti-Semitism in Russia, Poland, and Germany, and the Peronist dictatorship in Argentina. When she died in Cordoba, Argentina on July 7, 1956, she had criss-crossed the globe numerous times, lived on three continents, sung before czars, sultans, generals, and princes. Singing in twenty-four languages and speaking many of them fluently, she considered herself a citizen of the world. Now her story lies on the threshold of oblivion.

Isa was born on October 21, 1887 in the Pale of Jewish Settlement in Beltz, Bessarabia, which according to the Russian Jewish Encyclopedia of 1913 had a total population of 18,478 (with 10,348 Jews) in 1897. In vignettes of her "Life History" published in the Yiddish press, Isa tells how she discovered her love for music at age five. She convinced her playmates to venture far from home. In a poorer section of town they heard klezmer musicians playing at a wedding. Captivated by the music, Isa resisted when her mother came to retrieve her.

Despite a bourgeois upbringing, Isa was acutely aware of the poverty in her town. Inspired, no doubt, by Russian poets such as Nikolay Nekrasov (1821-1877), whose poems dramatize with great compassion the harsh living conditions of the peasants and workers, she wrote revolutionary poetry which she sent to Odessa, some 175 miles south of Beltz. Israel Heifetz, wealthy editor, publisher, and owner of theaters, published Isa's poems in one of his newspapers, *Odesskie Novosti* (Odessa News). According to Toussia Pines, Isa's daughter, the poems were printed upon placards for student demonstrations.

Heifetz wanted to meet the author and was stunned to meet a teenager in a middy blouse and braids. Charmed by her voice and her beauty, he underwrote her opera studies in Milan. Isa returned to Russia after a triumphant debut as Mimi in *La Boheme* co-starring Tito Schipa. She married Israel Heifetz, who was twenty-seven years her senior.

With Odessa as her home base, she continued her singing career. Very much a part of the circle of intellectuals and artists which included Mendele Mocher Sforim, Sholom Aleichem, Mark Warshavsky, and Chaim Nachman Bialik, Isa was urged to devote her talents to folk music, which so many artists, Jews and non-Jews alike, avidly collected. Bialik especially encouraged Isa to sing in Yiddish.

For Isa and Israel Heifetz the year 1917 was a year of tension and hope, their daughter Toussia was born. Isa spoke of it in ominous terms: "I made my beginning and success during those strange, subtle years, whose mirth and black brooding colored the spirit of my songs and singing. Today I look back and see that, with the applause I had, I was the singer of the twilight before the revolution." The revolution she and her husband had helped to foment as supporters of Alexander Kerensky unleashed a series of events which would uproot and ultimately separate them.

Isa was on tour in Turkey when the Bolsheviks occupied their house as a garrison, confiscated their real estate, and imprisoned Heifetz. In 1919 Isa arranged to have her daughter, the governess, and her parents smuggled out of Odessa, Heifetz remained in prison until Isa could bribe officials to release him. As the sole support of her immigrant family, Isa concertized in capitals around the world throughout the twenties. (Later Isa and Israel were divorced. He remained in Paris and was taken by the Nazis to a Belgian concentration camp where he died.)

Sol Hurok brought Isa to the United States for a triumphant debut at Carnegie Hall on October 29, 1922. Isa soon became a United States citizen and brought her daughter, parents, and brother from Europe. Her home was a refuge for impoverished immigrants and a salon for stars like Mischa Elman, George Jessel, Gregor Piatagorsky, Eddie Cantor, Gilbert Roland, and Jascha Heifetz. In Hollywood in the late 1920s Isa collaborated in the early talkies for Vitaphone, singing art songs in French, Italian, English, and German.

In 1930, in her only appearance at the Yiddish Theatre of Second Avenue, she starred in the Olshanetsky and Jacobs musical *Mein Shtetele Belz*, commemorating Isa's birthplace.

Although the musical has not received much attention in histories of the Yiddish stage, the title song is one of the best known and most recorded of American Yiddish songs. (According to her co-star, veteran Second Avenue actor Seymour Rexite, Jan Peerce was to have played opposite Isa, but Arturo Toscanini chose him as lead tenor for live broadcasts of opera from Radio City.)

Ever a wandering star, Isa returned to Argentina during her second Latin American tour (1938-1939). She married Dr. Gregorio Bermann (1894-1972), the only Argentine-born child of Jewish immigrants from Cracow. An eminent psychiatrist and professor of neurology, Bermann introduced Freudian analysis to Argentina and was to play a key role in the Foundation of the World Health Organization. When they met, he had just returned from the Spanish Civil War, where he had organized a medical brigade for the Republicans.

Bermann's politics targeted him for problems throughout his career. Under the de facto government of General Pedro Ramirez he was imprisoned in December 1943 in Buenos Aires, and remained there until February 1944. Fearing that he would be shipped off to prison in Patagonia, Isa, along with Gregorio's daughter, Dr. Sylvia Bermann, appealed to everyone they knew. After Isa's entreaty in a rising political figure, Minister of Labor Juan Peron, Bermann was released.

The forties and fifties were years of extreme economic hardship and constant harassment for Isa and Gregorio because of his reputation as a communist. He was fired from his university post and Isa was blacklisted. In an undated letter to him Isa wrote: "I am breaking my head and cannot sleep at night trying to figure out where to get some money to send home." And on November 28, 1949 she wrote from Sao Paulo that she could only afford to return home on the ship "Del None" if her concert was a success.

Despite the pro-Axis sympathies of many within Argentina's government, Isa worked on behalf of the victims of the Holocaust, workers in Argentina, and the nascent state of Israel. After World War II she returned to Israel to sing and made a comeback performance at Carnegie Hall, also produced by Sol Hurok.

Isa died of stomach cancer in Cordoba, Argentina on July 7, 1956. Up until a few weeks before her death, she continued to work as cultural director of Cordoba's Institute for Soviet-Argentine Cultural Relations. Although her death was featured on the pages of the *Forward* and the *Morning Journal*, and despite Gregorio Hermann's efforts to create a peace foundation in her memory, Isa's life and work have been largely forgotten.

Yiddish music was Isa's greatest legacy. A pioneer, she performed Yiddish songs at a time when only men, mainly cantors, did so. As actor and singer Seymour Rexite says, "Isa was the first [woman] to bring Yiddish songs to the concert stage." From *shtetls* and remote villages. Isa collected folks songs which tell of a way of life that scholars such as David Roskies argue is often represented today by "fake culture." In his 1995 book *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*, he characterizes this fake culture as "Yiddish theater melodies without their lyrics, a few vulgarisms in the mother tongue, a religion stripped of its stones and superstitions, and a reinvented folklore that tries to pass for the real thing."

Isa sometimes took great risks when she included Yiddish songs in her repertoire. An article in the Polish press from 1922 entitled "*Izafobja*" tells of an anti-Semitic group that organized violent demonstrations against her. Opposed to a Jew performing at the Warsaw Symphony (which was, the article pointed out, built in great part by money donated by Jews), the Stowarzyszenie Patrijow threatened Isa's life after she announced she would give a special concert for the Jews of Warsaw.

Fourteen years later, Jews opposed her desire to include her Yiddish songs at the Berlin Judischer Kulturbund. The Kulturbund was a Jewish cultural organization founded when Hitler rose to power to segregate Jewish artists and audiences from "Aryan" ones. The Reich Ministry of Propaganda and Enlightenment monitored the repertoire and personnel and Gestapo guards spied on every performance. According to folklorist and fellow Kulturbund performer Mascha Benya, Isa insisted on including her Yiddish songs although the German Jewish audience had little desire to hear them.

Nor was her Yiddish repertoire welcomed in Israel, where her friend Chaim Weizmann subscribed to the view that Hebrew, not Yiddish, should be the language of Israel. Isa reportedly told him, "I sang in Yiddish in Nazi Germany, I'll sing in Yiddish in Israel."

Conversely, a concert in London, "The Jewish Life in Song," was so successful that she had to repeat it four times. Isa then published the collection of songs she had gathered as the Chappell Songbook (1931) and dedicated it to her mother, "who taught me to love the language of my people and helped me to reconstruct many of the forgotten melodies and words."

Isa's story is inextricably bound to many of the controversies and conflicts of the first half of this century, because of her involvement with so many of the important thinkers and artists of that period. She served as a bridge between two rich and complex heritages: Yiddish culture of the *Haskalah* — often called the "Jewish Enlightenment," which began in Germany in the eighteenth century and spread to Poland and Russia — and avant garde intellectuals and artists, both Jewish and gentile, who traveled the world as refugees of political upheaval.

Albert Einstein, in whose home she performed in Berlin, saluted Isa as "the most marvelous interpreter of folk music of all peoples." Artists of genius were inspired to create for her. From the ranks of her fellow Russian émigrés, Leon Bakst (1866-1924) and George Posheidaiev designed costumes and sets for her concerts, and Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) composed music for her.

Isa represents the war-torn generation of immigrants, uprooted by pogroms, civil wars, and World Wars I and II; yet her outlook was never sorrowful. For Isa — singer, composer, and consummate artist — home was wherever she was with friends and family and wherever she could perform her beloved ballads. Her songs told of struggle and persecution; African-American spirituals were part of her repertoire. She sang for the women who were left at the altar or whose lovers abandoned them to come to the Golden Land. She treasured the songs of the Chassidic Jews whose ecstatic celebration of the Sabbath is conveyed in their music. Isa's music recovers the everyday lives of people who did not survive the cataclysmic events through which she lived.

Her inner spark gave her the courage to do difficult things in perilous times. It also allowed her to see the spark of humanity in each person. Fellow artists and public alike were attracted by her warmth and light. When exiled Spanish Republican poet Rafael Alberti honored her memory with a poem, he spoke of her as a sister who would spread out a tablecloth to invite the world into her home.

How this star has faded from memory reflects and parallels the story of important institutions in the building of the North and South American Jewish communities, Isa Kremer died in the 1950s when artists and intellectuals in the United States still experienced the chilling effect of the McCarthy investigations. Similarly, in Argentina the Jewish community shunned its own leftist groups. Gregorio Bermann left Isa's archives to the leftist organization, ICUF (*Idische Cultur Farband*), which split with the Jewish communal umbrella group, the Argentine Israelite Mutual Aid Association (AMIA), over Zionism. It is still not clear how Isa's archives were moved to the YIVO (IWO in Buenos Aires) housed in the AMIA building on Pasteur Street.

On July 18, 1994 terrorists bombed the AMIA and IWO library where Isa's sheet music, fan letters, scrapbooks, and publicity pictures were kept. Ninety-seven people were killed and the six-story building was torn apart. Among the YIVO's collection were books that had been saved from the bombs of the Germans in the original YIVO library in Wilno, Poland. Through the efforts of the head librarian, Ester Szwarc, and 800 student volunteers who worked in a human chain in the rubble and the cold for three months, about half of the library's holdings, including Isa's archives, were saved.

A team of women documentary filmmakers is recovering Isa's extraordinary life story. Key eyewitnesses have died and documents have been lost or destroyed. Stories have been embellished or forgotten. The headstone from Isa's grave was removed during Argentina's military *Proceso* (1976 - 1982). Remembering Isa Kremer is a difficult but valuable process, one which reclaims a part of the collective past.

Lois Barr is assistant professor of Spanish at Lake Forest College and the author of *Isaac Unbound: Patriarchal Traditions in the Latin American Jewish Novel* (Center for Latin American Studies of Arizona State University, 1995). She is working on a documentary video, *Isa: The Life and Music of Isa Kremer*, with collaborators Maya Friedler and Seima Gordon, executive producers; Nina Feinberg, film director; and Linda Garland, producer. Barr has also served as a research consultant for Ellen Gould, playwright and actor, whose new musical, *The Glass House*, is inspired by the life of Isa Kremer.