

## **Ep12\_BetweenAcrossThrough\_AnnaYiddish**

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[music]

**00:02 Iane Romero:** This is Between, Across, and Through.

[music]

**00:22 IR:** Unheard voices and forgotten stories, all thought lost or destroyed, the tragedy of death, horror, and silence. As World War II raged throughout Europe, Jews were rounded up and killed by the millions. Moments before their deaths, many wrote down songs, poems of hope, revenge, or death in Nazi-occupied Europe. Today, Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill, Director of the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies sits down with Professor Anna Shternshis, from the University of Toronto. We will discuss Yiddish Glory, a project dedicated to preserving Jewish culture from the 1940s, giving voice to the voiceless and reviving "The most historically important Soviet Yiddish songs of World War II." Please join us as we travel between, across, and through.

**01:16 Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill:** Hi, I'm Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill, and I'm speaking with Professor Anna Shternshis. Thank you for joining us. What inspired you to take on this project of Yiddish Glory?

**01:24 Professor Anna Shternshis:** I was thinking about the documents that they found in the Ukrainian National Library that consisted of handwritten Yiddish songs written by people in circumstances that no human being should experience, living under the occupation, suffering in confinements, waiting to be shot in ditches, or not knowing what's going to happen to you in a few days. Those of them who survived Hitler were severely harassed by Stalin, and even if they made it through Stalin's era, they were really not encouraged to talk about this. And yet, they created music. And it seemed it would be really fair to them to bring their voices back to life as voices as opposed to just a piece of academic writing. Songs are never written for oneself only, it was written for the audience. And these people who created this extraordinary music in these circumstances never got their audience. So I felt in a way, it was my job both to tell their story in a rigorous and compelling way, but also bring their music to life. So I needed an artist to make that happen. And working together with artists, we created the product that helped both the academic writing on the project, because music is much better studied as music as opposed to just the text, and also brought this music in front of audiences that academic writing would have never been able to afford me. And so, that's what inspired me to start Yiddish Glory.

[music]

**03:01 PO:** It's such an incredible project. And in terms of the process of creative production, do you have a sense from the materials, whether these people knew whether they were gonna die?

**03:11 PS:** Yes, some people specifically wrote because they knew they were going to die. When the German army invaded the Soviet Union, the army was accompanied by specialized mobile squad units, and their sole purpose was to identify especially dangerous, I would use quotation marks, but we're on air so I'm just going to say I'm using quotation marks, especially dangerous groups of population that had to be killed right away. These groups included communists and Jews.

**03:42 PS:** So the job of those mobile squad units was to go to the places where... Which they invaded, find Jews, round them up, take their valuables, and kill them right away. In some places like Berdychiv, this rounding up happened in one day, Jews were kept in this one place for 10 days then they were all killed. So these places where they were kept for the time when they... Before they were killed were called ghettos. And it has little resemblance to ghettos that were created in Poland, in places like Warsaw and Łódź, which we know more, which were bigger and existed for a longer period of time, the ghettos that existed in Ukraine were very short-lived with some exceptions.

**04:19 PS:** So people who were rounded up in those ghettos, they saw killings right in front of their eyes and they knew they were going to be next. And what's incredible about this material is that they see their parents being killed, they see their neighbors being killed or their friends, and they find a piece of paper and they find a pencil and they write very quickly something about what's going on with them because it was really important for them to let the world know what's happening, and it was really important for them that the world, A, takes revenge, and B, doesn't forget them. And they didn't have time or ability, skills to write an elaborate witness testimony. Sometimes they had time to just write three lines and put it on a piece of paper. They also didn't know if this piece of paper will ever reach the audience. So we have notes like this and some of them say things like, "I will not see tomorrow, don't forget us." And that would say, in Yiddish, "Fargesn aundz nit, fargesn aundz nit, fargesn aundz nit." And "Don't forget us" is repeated three times.

**05:24 PO:** Then as a scholar and as an academic, how do you give a voice or an audience, as you said, to these Yiddish songs?

**05:30 PS:** Well, you see, artistically, these songs are very primitive. So if you give it to... I don't know, to proper musicians of the school of music, they will say, "I want nothing to do with that."

**05:41 PO:** Okay.

**05:42 PS:** 'Cause it's really simple, the melodies are very simple and all that. But once you know the story of the context or the circumstances in which this music was created, once I tell them the date of that song is July 1941 in Berdychiv and explain that by August 1941, everyone was dead in Berdychiv, suddenly those lines change their meaning.

**06:07 PO:** Of course.

**06:08 PS:** So you need an artist to sing it, but you also need a historian to explain why one should listen to that music. And the combination of those two skills created this project because without the music, my story would be just one more academic story of violence, of genocide, of destruction, of trauma and without my story, their music will just be another album of folk music.

**06:35 PO:** Do you have a sense as to which was more important for you, the history of these songs, like bringing them to light or making them relevant to a contemporary audience?

**06:45 PS:** Both were equally important because, you see, the thing is you can give a voice to a

historical document and care so much about authenticity, not changing a single word, staying true to the tune, although there were so few tunes in the archive but even if they existed, oh my god, we should not touch them because those are sacred. But then if you do all that, you'll end up with the audience of 10 people. So for this kind of story, you need both. You need to change this music a little bit so that the audience just gasps and cries. And we had all that. Like, I just came back from [07:19]       , Canada and we performed this program and there were a lot of descendants of survivors or people who know some of that story, and I've never seen the audience fully in tears and cry.

**07:30 PO:** Wow.

**07:32 PS:** And we achieved that with the story, with the words, and also with beautiful arrangement of that music. And the arrangement was made in such a way that the 21st-century sophisticated audience would respond to.

[music]

**08:00 PO:** How did these songs survive in the archive or as just pieces of paper?

**08:05 PS:** Well, it depends what songs. So we talked earlier about the songs created in those short-lived ghettos. This is perhaps the most traumatic story of them all. So, people who wrote them, they wrote them on very small pieces of paper, and obviously, then there was no mailbox where they were. So...

**08:24 PO:** Sure. But was there also paper available?

**08:28 PS:** Some... They were written on the other side of some forms, or they see some German writing on them, or paper that they had from other places, you know that people were rounded up with their possessions, so kids, for example, had notebooks for school. They didn't know, they were not told they were going to be killed. They said, "Take your things and go over there." So they thought maybe they would be deported somewhere, so they took their supplies and stuff like this. So it was a little bit of paper and pencils, but not a lot, of course. So what happened was that they would write that stuff and they would crinkle it and they would throw it over the fence. So people who walked by picked up those notes...

**09:10 PO:** Wow.

**09:11 PS:** And the way that, we don't know exactly how, they mailed them. Some of them were mailed just randomly to a person named Ilya Ehrenburg. He was a famous Soviet journalist, who people knew was of Jewish origin, and they would mail it in the following way. It would say, "Ilya Ehrenburg, Moscow." and somehow it would get there. Ilya Ehrenburg knew that his colleague Moisei Beregovsky, an ethnomusicologist who was affiliated with the Ukraine Academy of Science collecting Jewish music, he would forward these things to him. But honestly, how these notes ended up where they ended up is even more miraculous than the people managed to write the songs.

**09:52 PO:** That seems to be the... One of the critical parts of this entire story.

**09:56 PS:** Absolutely.

**09:56 PO:** Is there a sense as to whether it was one person or multiple people?

**10:00 PS:** Multiple people.

**10:00 PO:** It seems like it could be just some sort of...

**10:03 PS:** Tons of notes...

**10:04 PO:** Interest of a person who keep... Walks to work every day, but it sounds like it's multiple people.

**10:08 PS:** So they came from different sources. One note was picked up by a girl who opened the note and couldn't read Yiddish, but the name was signed in Ukrainian. She recognized that name, it was her neighbor, and she added her own saying, saying, "I don't know what it says, but I know this girl is my neighbour and I know she's there, and maybe it's of interest to you." And that's how this stuff, these particular notes, and a lot of them are crinkled in the archive because they threw, they crinkled them so that Germans would not pick them up. They crinkle them and throw them out as if they would throw out garbage. And people walked by those fences, sometimes they were... Prisoners had some money and they would exchange it for food, or sometimes there was some communication going a little bit. It was very dangerous to communicate with them and also very short-lived but people walked by those fences and that's how this stuff got out. So that's one way.

**11:07 PS:** Another way was, Red Army soldiers serving in the army sometimes wrote Yiddish songs about this. And I have to say this whole army culture was very full of music. Soldiers had very few means of entertaining themselves. Radio was strictly limited. Newspapers weren't for a number of people, not all soldiers were literate too. And... But there was always a little accordion or a guitar and this communal singing was a very big deal. The kind of interesting part about this particular story is that Jewish soldiers and there was over a half a million Jews serving in the Red Army, Jewish soldiers did not usually speak or sing Yiddish in public, and oral history preserved it for us that the last thing they wanted to do is to exhibit their Jewishness in any way, because if they're captured, being Jewish is a death sentence.

**12:00 PS:** And also starting from mid-'40s Soviet ideology was not as friendly to Jews as it was before the war. So anyway, so there was a lot of reason for them to hide who they were. So until we found this archive, we believed that Jews did not do create public culture in Yiddish in the Army. Turns out that they did. Maybe they sang those quietly, and there were some people among them who wrote the songs down and sent them to Beregovsky. How did they know where to send it? Because a Soviet Yiddish newspaper called Eynikayt Unity, was published during the war, and that it had a little note saying this guy, Moisei Beregovsky, is collecting Yiddish music, and so people were sending it to him.

**12:41 PO:** That's all it took? Just a little note in this newspaper and Beregovsky is now the...

**12:46 PS:** Also word of mouth.

**12:47 PO:** Okay.

**12:48 PS:** Of course. Because it's a time and a place where rumors thrive and people would rely on rumors. So that's the second one. Then Beregovsky himself and a group of his colleagues who were evacuated away from war zones, they encountered a lot of Jewish refugees from Poland, from Ukraine, from Romania, people who made Yiddish music. They were recording it then, between 1941 and 1944, when they were there. Then Beregovsky came back from the Soviet area to Ukraine, early 1944. And between 1944 and 1947, he and a group of colleagues went to do fieldwork in Ukraine looking for Jewish survivors. And they recorded about 70 to 80 new songs from those people, and the challenges they had were tremendous. First one was that no one wanted to acknowledge they survived the war the under the German occupation or Romanian occupation because Soviets punished them for that. Because they say if you survived the war, as a Jew, it means you were collaborating with the German Army. And so people were hiding their past like crazy, but he managed to record this music. And then the cabinet where he worked was closed, and he himself was arrested. And all that was confiscated.

**14:02 PO:** And Beregovsky never published because it was confiscated or?

**14:07 PS:** That particular work... So, no, it never got published.

**14:11 PO:** None of this work that he amassed over all of these years.

**14:15 PS:** Over the wartime years.

**14:16 PO:** Yeah.

**14:16 PS:** He... Like, Beregovsky was a famous guy, well, famous in the Yiddish circles.

**14:20 PO:** Sure.

**14:20 PS:** Before the war, he collected tonnes of materials. Like, you know, if you've heard of things like Klezmer music, you know, it's the East European Jewish Music that became more popular in the United States and Canada starting from the 1970s. A lot of the tunes that people performed came from Beregovsky collections. So even if he didn't do his wartime project, and you know, we didn't know about that wartime project until very recently, his achievement is that he preserved culture of East European Jews that was almost entirely murdered during the Holocaust. So that was his big work.

**14:53 PO:** Sure.

**14:53 PS:** But with this particular book... So he collected all these songs, and his goal was to

publish them in a book. The book was all compiled, it was sent to reviewers, reviewers for both academic and ideological content, the reviewer said, "Ideological has problems, but academically, it's also very weak because the artistic level of this text is terrible.

**15:18 PO:** Yes.

**15:18 PS:** If we publish it, people will say Jews in the Soviet Union are not articulate or, you know, sophisticated enough."

**15:25 PO:** Interesting.

**15:26 PS:** So then he got very upset about this. He went to Moscow; he found an ally with a poet whose name is Itzik Feffer. So, Feffer says to him, "Okay, I'll help you," and sent it to another publisher. That publisher said that, "We'll publish it, but you have to insert a little bit more Soviet patriotism and a little bit more optimism because the songs, you know, are very sad."

**15:51 PO:** Of course.

**15:51 PS:** So Beregovsky did all that. And we have all the notes of what he had, and how he changed it and it's important actually, for my story, the book was all ready, and then Beregovsky was arrested. And also, and put to jail in accusation of Jewish nationalism. His cabinet at the Department of the Ukrainian Academy of Science, where he worked, was also shut down. And all the materials that he collected for this work during the war were confiscated. And they were used as evidence of Beregovsky's anti-Soviet activities. What made it anti-Soviet is because he argued that Jews were targeted during World War II. To us today, it seems like if we know anything about World War II, is that Jews were targeted. Well, for the Soviet Union and for Soviet Russia, by the way, that's not a noncontroversial statement because so many people were killed, and Soviet ideology up until the collapse of the Soviet Union really argued that all people who lived in the Soviet Union suffered equally from the war.

**16:56 PS:** And one should not kind of focus on any specific group. And talking about Jewish sufferings contradicted that postulate. So, you know, so they accused him in that, but what really sealed the deal for his fate, and then he was sentenced to six years in the Gulag, in the jail, which was located North of the Polar Circle is that he went to Moscow and talked to Itzik Feffer about publishing this book. Because just one year after the conversation, Feffer himself, was arrested, sent to jail, and he and 11 other people were shot as punishment for the crimes that they committed, supposedly against the Soviet Union.

**17:38 PO:** Is there any kind of parallel between the initial reluctance to publish these kind of simple melodies, and then your kind of contemporary concern about finding an audience or at least hitting the audience the way you would like to?

**17:50 PS:** They had very different reasons for not publishing it. They didn't want to acknowledge a number of things; a, they said it was because the artistic level was low, but actually, the songs talked about issues that would be really taboo in Soviet culture. For example, they mentioned local

collaborators, Soviet citizens, who took the side of the German army, and willingly, sometimes unwillingly, but nevertheless, worked with the occupiers to kill Jews. People use songs to tell that story. That story cannot belong in the Soviet narrative, which says that all Soviet citizens fought against fascists; also, these songs were pessimistic. What did they say? "The future will never happen for us. The world does not care. And we will die without people ever knowing what happened to us." That kind of message could not be published in the Soviet Union because, you know, the ideology said people remained optimistic. They always believed Red Army would win. So although they said the artistic level was low, what was really going on, of course, was this, these kinds of concerns.

**19:00 PO:** Interesting.

**19:00 PS:** These were not our concerns. Our biggest kind of concern of that sort was, there was a lot of praise of Stalin in this music.

[laughter]

**19:07 PS:** And a lot of journalists asked me, "Well, people who sang these songs then, didn't know what Stalin would do, but you do. So why do you bring those songs back to life that way?" And I said that, "I am bringing it back to life this way because cutting out Stalin, would be exactly what Stalin would do," like, you know, preparing this kind of material to like, make it more sophisticated, made it more adjustable. And I also want to say, I believe in sophistication of the audience. The audience can understand historical context in which this music was created. And, you know, that there's also a little too much violence in it. When I teach this text at the University of Toronto, I have to now warn students of the graphic nature of violence, because we're supposed to do this sensitive nature, you know, and once you do all that, you teach what you teach, and you talk about this material.

**20:05 PO:** Some of the songs that Beregovskii collected were also originally found in triangle envelopes. Where were they?

**20:10 PS:** Well, during the war, people who wrote letters were not allowed to use regular envelopes. Partially because of shortage of paper, but mostly because all letters were examined for the content. So the way that people mailed letters, was that they would take the piece of paper that you're holding right now, they would fold it in three ways to create a triangle. The front side of the triangle, this would be where they would write the address, and the inside of the triangle would be the actual letter. So a lot of songs that we talk about, came to Beregovskii in the form of triangle envelopes.

**20:45 PO:** I see.

**20:46 PS:** And, this whole idea of triangle envelope was really important in the Soviet culture of that time, because if a family receives a triangle envelope, it meant, before they even open it, that it came from a living person.



**21:00 PO:** Yes.

**21:00 PS:** Official notifications of death, for example, came in a form of a square, short square paper, or a telegram. So receiving a triangle envelope was a celebration, receiving anything else was a tragedy. So people associate... And there were a lot of songs, and there's plays even, and stories, about triangle envelopes and what they mean as a symbol. So thinking about this material culture, and how that symbolizes what it does, triangle envelopes are very important.

[music]

**21:42 PS:** So, the song called "My Machine Gun," it's number five on the album, did come from the triangle envelope. But it's not exactly 100% triangle envelope, because it came from a volunteer collector whose name was Mendel Mann. During the war, he served in the Red Army, and he collected songs from Red Army soldiers, that they were creating about the war. And he put those songs in triangle envelopes and mailed them to Beregovskii. So it's not like from soldiers themselves but that's from him. So that song is on the album.

**22:19 PO:** And, another song on the album is "Purim Gifts for Hitler."

**22:23 PS:** Yes.

[music]

**22:33 PO:** Why'd you include that one?

**22:34 PS:** Okay, so that is an interesting song because it's a humorous one. And one of the things that was interesting about this collection is about quotable songs, written in those circumstances, were joking songs, were humorous songs. And they laugh at Hitler, they laugh at the German army. And they bring the imagery of a Jewish holiday of Purim, which Jews celebrate in March, that celebrates a story, that there was an evil minister named Haman, who in ancient Persia conspired to kill all the Jews. And then his conspiracy was revealed, and he himself was killed by hanging, and Jews celebrate that they survived. That holiday, just like almost all Jewish holidays, were no longer celebrated in the Soviet Union, because, Soviet Union was an anti-religious state, and they really fought against observance of all religious laws and traditions, including Judaism.

**23:32 PS:** But during the war, this imagery of Purim comes back. Hitler is called "Hitler the Haman," so bringing up... Calling him like the name of that evil minister. And, Hitler was killed by his own suicide, but a lot of his collaborators were killed by hanging later, and the songs predict all that a little more of it, but anyway. Part of the story. But that particular song, "Purim Gifts for Hitler," came to us in a very interesting way. The person who wrote it down, his name was Yaakov Meirson. Yaakov Meirson was a rabbi who lived in Krivoy Rog in Ukraine. And in 1933, long before the war, he was arrested by Stalin's government, and most Soviet jails were located... Like everyone knows Siberia. Although more jails are located actually in a place called Kazakhstan. So Meirson was in that jail when the war began in 1941, in the Soviet Union.

**24:31 PS:** By 1942, he was released and he couldn't be drafted in the army because he was sick, and old, and didn't have any teeth. So he also didn't have any money obviously. So he was begging on the streets of Almaty. And the kids of Polish-Jewish refugees of war in Almaty, were making fun of him. They were throwing things at him like stones and rotten things, and stuff, and laughing because, you know, he was begging, he had no teeth. So he cursed them back and was yelling at them, and because they were Polish-Jewish kids, he yelled at them in Hebrew.

**25:07 PS:** So, one of the kids came back home and said, "Weird beggar, no teeth. We teased him, made fun of him. But he yelled at us back in Hebrew." So, some of the parents went to see this guy, found out who he was, and hired him to teach their kids a little bit of Hebrew literacy, because obviously, they didn't have access to that in Kazakhstan. So as he was teaching them, he wrote down songs that these kids were singing about the war. So one of those songs was this "Purim Gifts for Hitler." He collected all the songs in a little notebook, which he then sent to Beregovskii, which he knew he was collecting the music. And Beregovskii has that notebook. Meirson himself, died in 1946, never knowing what happened, and that song is one of the few ones that survived and ended up in this collection, and that it is "Purim Gifts for Hitler" on the CD.

**26:02 PO:** And it was never a set to music?

**26:04 PS:** No.

**26:04 PO:** But then how did you begin to set it to music?

**26:07 PS:** Yeah, right. So, well, that was interesting. Obviously, I cannot do it myself. But I worked with an artist, his name was Psoy Korolenko, who performs in Russian, in Yiddish, and a number of other languages. Also, deeply familiar with the Soviet culture of 1940s. So I invited him to collaborate with me on this project, and I said to him, "I'm working these sort of songs, it's so weird, so different, from all the Yiddish songs that I know," and I said, "I want to give a talk about them, but then it will be really boring if I just talk about this, so maybe you can sing some of them, at least those that have tunes." And he said, "Well if they don't have tunes, I'll make up a tune." And to me, it sounds like a complete rocket science to make up a tune.

**26:49 PO:** Sure. [laughter]

**26:50 PS:** But he says, "No, no, let's think about this together." So he came to Toronto. And in my living room, with my piano, we sat for two days. And looking at this text, and he would say, "Okay. That it reminds me of this Yiddish song that I know." And so we realized it was a parody. This one is kind of a combination of a sentiment that you find in this Russian language song. And so he used his knowledge of that time, a little bit of my knowledge of the time, although, not as much but mostly his artistic imagination and above all, an idea, what would be relevant and what will be resonated with the 21st-century audience.

**27:30 PS:** So the combination of historical research, artistic imagination of the time, and today's audience brought tunes to some of these songs and they included "Purim Gifts for Hitler," which was set to a more Jewish tune. Now, I do have to say that Beregovskii wrote, he didn't finish this

project, obviously. But he did write that people didn't have time to create new tunes, they were using existing ones. That was very important to us because he said mostly they use the Soviet music, but also a little bit of Yiddish, a little bit of Romanian and stuff like this. At least we had that information and we felt good about using existing tunes because Beregovskii told us that they did.

**28:14 PO:** That makes perfect sense that people were... Is it fair to say they were changing the words to existing songs?

**28:20 PS:** Yeah. Or using tunes that they knew and writing completely new words. Or using words from one song and changing it to tell the new story and using the tune from a different song because they felt like new words wouldn't fit the old tune.

**28:34 PO:** Sure. What about the song Yoshke From Odessa?

[music]

**29:14 PO:** Why is the song so striking?

**29:16 PS:** So "Yoshke From Odessa" was written by a woman, whose name was Berta Flaksman. It's one of the few songs in the collection that was actually published during the war, and that it was collected by a man named Shalom Cooper Schmidt who was evacuated from Moscow from Kiev, we don't know exactly where from. And he was on that train that was taking him and the other evacuees and refugees away from the war zone. On that train, he was recording songs from people who were sitting there. Some of these people just saw atrocities against Jews and ran away. So this is the first eye witness account of the violence that Jews began to experience during the war.

**30:04 PS:** So that particular song tells a story of a man named Yoshke, a popular Jewish name, from Odessa, who goes to the war and goes and fights against the German army. And the words of that song are extremely violent. For example, it says, "Germans, you think you're such good soldiers, but we will kill you like we kill pigs and we'll slice you into pieces and then make belts from you." So it's important that it says, "We'll kill you like pigs." Because in Jewish tradition, it's very important how you kill the animal that you're going to eat, it's called the laws of Shechita, the ritual slaughter.

**30:50 PS:** So when cows or chickens are being killed for consumption, then the butchers who do that they have to follow all sets of laws that include merciful killing, the way it was understood thousands of years ago. So the animals have to be slaughtered in one blow and then there's all this stuff. When animals that are not designed to be eaten such as pigs, that are not kosher and cannot be eaten by Jews are killed, but their skin could be used for belts and for clothes and stuff like this. None of these laws have to be followed, so the rules are completely different.

**31:24 PS:** So butchers who kill animals are supposed to be more humane and merciful. Butchers that kill pigs, they're like real butchers, they don't care about any of that. That's why it's important that the song says, "We will kill you like we kill pigs. We will not care about any of that." And then the next verse says, "Because you killed our nursing infants, you destroyed our cities, you raped our

women, and this is our revenge." The level of violence, the level of graphic violence, the level of anger in this music is striking. We're not used to that.

**32:00 PO:** What do you mean you're not... The audience isn't used to it or does it somehow change the perception of Yiddish soldiers?

**32:05 PS:** Oh, for sure. Well, that is a whole different story. But that song is not an experience of a Yiddish soldier, it's a motivation song. A woman is writing for her loved one who is serving in the army and she says to him, "Don't be a human being, be a butcher. Kill them. Kill them without any mercy." Bringing a song like this to a German-speaking land as we did just a few months ago.

**32:30 PO:** How was the response?

**32:31 PS:** Raised a lot of questions.

**32:32 PO:** You were in Austria?

**32:33 PS:** I was just in Austria, and this music was broadcasted on their national radio ORF when everyone was listening on the way home from work. And the response we got was interesting. A lot of people appreciate the story, and... And they talked about how little they know actually about Holocaust and how little information from their family histories come to that because people who served in the army often don't talk about atrocities, they talk about other things. But of the context of the 21st century, the sheer violence against German soldiers was shocking to people. They didn't understand... Some didn't understand why one should sing music like this today.

**33:21 PS:** And when you do talk about this in the context of German-speaking lands, this question is a valid one. And I think the answer to that is that German and non-German-speaking, we often forget the real impact of the war. We've learned from the war from testimonies adjusted to school children because that's where we learn about the war. PG-13, removing the most graphic violence, not to traumatize people of the knowledge of that. A lot is left [33:54]        imagination. Also, things like just war, war for the good cause. These are things we hear every day on the news.

**34:02 PO:** Sure.

**34:03 PS:** So we don't think often what it does to people, what it's like to be killed and what it's like to be killing, and this kind of story needs to be told even if it makes us uncomfortable. And these people who wrote these songs, it's not that they were trained to kill and it's not that they expect that they would ever be involved in something like this in their life. And they created this music to ensure that we know how terrible it is to live through the war. And in some ways, it's an uncomfortable song, but it has to be there.

**34:42 PS:** Now, of course, it came to us without the tune, so we set it to a famous tune by Mikhail Glinka written in the 19th century. It was very popular in the Soviet Union. It was performed by a Soviet opera singer, a tenor, Sergei Lemeshev, who was also very handsome, considered the sex symbol of the Soviet Union in the 1940s. So, this is a message also that this woman, Berta

Flaksman, imagines her hero's handsome as Lemeshev and as brave as only Yoshke From Odessa can be and creates that song.

**35:15 PO:** You speak so well about the songs impacting the audience and people coming away with an emotional experience. How important is it to pair it with your own historical work in academic lecture?

**35:27 PO:** Well, I think without putting the songs to music, you can't quite grasp their significance. So, I can no longer look at this text just as text and analyze them by close reading. I have to think of the musical context of them. For example, there's one song in this collection written about the destruction of Tulchyn. It's a small town in Ukraine which, before the war, had a Jewish population of 3,000 and after the war, there was only 20 left. And this is a song written about that. It was set to a famous Cossack tune, a really cheerful one. So, the song about the destruction set to the tune that celebrates victory. How does that reconcile?

[chuckle]

**36:09 PO:** Right, right.

**36:10 PS:** So, thinking about what it meant really gave me a deeper perspective or interdisciplinary perspective [chuckle] on this material. So, of course, it changed my academic research. It also, in so many ways, changed my understanding on how one should deliver the results about research and that's something that I think a lot about because... Well, you know it, too. With all our years of hard work, very difficult, very time-consuming fieldwork and research in, and publish this monograph. And the most successful academic monograph is read by, I don't know, 3,000 people...

**36:49 PO:** Sure.

**36:50 PS:** Five thousand people...

**36:50 PO:** Yeah, yeah. At the most.

**36:50 PS:** At the most and we're so happy when that happens. And we believe that this format allows us enough rigour and enough kind of insight to say everything we want to say. But what if there are other ways to tell the story? And what if we don't have to sacrifice rigour, but we do have to sacrifice the length a little bit? But think of a way that will do justice to our sophistication, but also gets people interested and conveys our story better. Maybe this is one of the ways to think about crisis in humanities, for example. We all talk about this all the time. People don't want to study humanities. I think the problem is that we're not doing enough to reach out to students, potential students into our audience. We think that they should come to us. But maybe, the way to transmit our knowledge is to incorporate art, incorporate music, incorporate other ways to tell the story including this particular podcast, who knows?

[chuckle]

**37:54 PO:** That's right.

**37:55 PS:** Even if gets us one more student...

**37:57 PO:** Exactly.

**37:57 PS:** Inhumanities. Our job is done.

**38:00 PO:** That's great. Can I ask you a question about... Just kind of a final question. So, this is a very particular history of Yiddish music, of a particular region and time. Have you thought about what this could say about the larger refugee experience?

**38:19 PS:** Yeah, I think about this all the time. So here's the thing: About 60 million people today are refugees. Among that, one-third are children. The way that they go through this experiences, living through wars, some of our students in our classes talk about escaping wars, witnessing violence, being part of violence, and who also lived through violence and uncertainty. And the way that the society treats these stories today is very similar. In fact, painfully similar to how stories of the refugees who I talk about are treated. They're silenced by the fact that we don't understand their language. Even if we understand the words that they were saying, we don't understand how they tell their story.

**39:06 PS:** They're not educated or sophisticated, sometimes, to tell it in a way that will resonate with us. Emotions come from understanding and there are so many barriers to understanding. Also, we often, as a society, don't trust refugee stories. People say they lived through then they say, "Oh, did they really? Or maybe they faked their documents or maybe they're telling the story to get some financial aid and stuff like this." People distrust refugees every single time. So, they're silenced by all the same circumstances that people who were singing in Yiddish during World War II were silenced.

**39:42 PS:** And stories about creating music during that time tell us, "Wait a second, we want to know where these refugees are. Are they going to create problems? Are they going to become terrorists?" These are all the stuff that we talk about in the news. But is somebody looking at what songs these kids are singing, for example? Even here in Toronto. I asked... A lot of our students are involved in voluntary help of refugees. I ask them every year, "Have you ever talked to them?" And they said, "No." It didn't even occur to them. And sometimes, what you need to do is you need to talk to a person, not just to find out what their immediate physical needs are, but to find out what their story is and what their culture is, and what they're feeling and how they're expressing this feeling.

**40:29 PS:** And my project... Yes, it is about Ukraine, it is about Yiddish speakers, it is about all this. But above all, it's about the most disadvantaged people who never get to express their own voice in the way that makes sense to them, and that story, unfortunately, as universal as it gets.

**40:48 PO:** Thank you so much. That was great.

**40:49 PS:** You're welcome. Thank you.

[music]

**40:52 IR:** That was Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill in conversation with Professor Anna Shternshis from the University of Toronto. All the songs in this episode were used with permission. To learn more about Yiddish Glory, please go to their website, [yiddishglory.com](http://yiddishglory.com). The full album is also available on SoundCloud at [soundcloud.com/yiddishglory](http://soundcloud.com/yiddishglory). This monthly podcast was brought to you by The Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. I am Iane Romero. Thank you for listening to Between, Across, and Through.

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