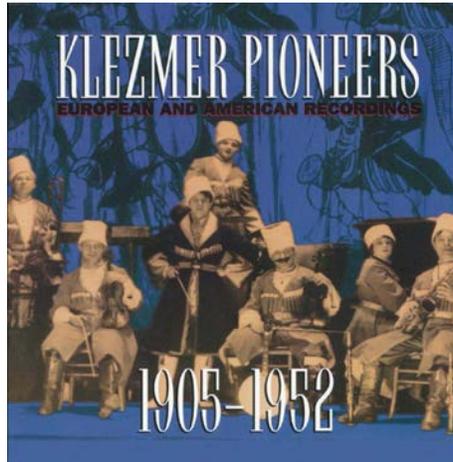


# “Fon der Choope (From the Wedding)”--Abe Elenkrig's Yidishe Orchestra (April 4, 1913)

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Essay by Dr. Hankus Netsky (guest post)\*



*"Klezmer Pioneers," 1993*

By the time Abe Elenkrig recorded “Fun der khupe” (transliterated on the disc itself as “Fon Der Choope”) in 1913, Columbia Records had already been going full steam ahead in the direction of marketing music to American ethnic immigrants for at least five years, regularly recording selections in Spanish, Italian, German, Polish, Russian and Quebecois French and distributing more exotic foreign language recordings in locales as distant as Shanghai and Tokyo. Given that Hebrew-language cantorial recordings had been in the Columbia catalog since 1902, it wasn’t really much of a leap when they hired Abe Elenkrig to put together the very first American Jewish dance music ensemble recording sessions. By that time, the Lower East Side was teeming with Jewish immigrants looking for a better future in a new land. Indeed, immigrants from the Eastern European Jewish Pale of settlement had begun to outnumber those who had arrived in earlier Jewish waves of immigration by the late 1880s. The “greenhorns” were ripe for such recordings, which served both as reminders of the rich ethnic culture they had left behind and as a way of keeping the traditions of their ancestral homelands and home towns alive in the New World.

Born in Ukraine in 1878, trumpeter Abe Elenkrieg was the perfect individual to take on the task of giving these people what they longed for, after all he himself was one of them. By 1913, he was well established in New York, both as a barber and as a musician who knew the Jewish dance repertoire and how it was supposed to sound. Emanating from a family of klezmerim (Jewish professional folk instrumentalists) that also included Ralph Elenkrieg, a trombonist and barber who lived in Philadelphia, he knew exactly whom he should ask to play with him on the recording. He recorded “Fun der khupe” (“From the Wedding Canopy”) for Columbia on April 4, 1913 in New York City using an ensemble composed of trumpet, violin, trombone, piano, tuba (not listed on the session register) and drums (a typical Jewish wedding ensemble instrumentation of the time). His

“Yiddishe Orchestra (translated on the disk as the “Hebrew Bulgarian Orchestra,” probably because of the popularity among Jewish immigrants of the Romanian dance known as the “bulgar” at the time) went on to lay down 13 more equally compelling, old-world style wedding tunes for Columbia that same day. Not to miss any opportunity to market recordings to other ethnic groups that also appreciated Old World Jewish-style playing, several of the tracks Elenkrig recorded that day were also issued on Columbia's Romanian and Serbo-Croatian ethnic labels.

As for the melody of “Fun Der Khupe,” it was a fairly well known one among Jewish wedding musicians, even well before the 1913 session, having been included in several Jewish wedding music folios from that same era. On subsequent recordings (most prominently the 1917 Columbia recording by the Abe Schwartz Orchestra) it was titled “Di Zilberne Khasene” (“The Silver Wedding”) and recordings in the 1970s and 1980s by the Klezmerim of Berkeley, California, and the Klezmer Conservatory Band of Boston have helped the tune stay in circulation as a staple of current klezmer repertoire.

By 1915, Abe Elenkrig had left Columbia for Victor Records, a company that had already achieved great success with the ethnic market in the early years of the twentieth century and had wooed away a fair number of popular Jewish musicians who had initially been part of the Columbia roster, including superstar cantor Yossele Rosenblatt. On December 2, 1915, he recorded ten sides for Victor, partnering with Meyer Kanewsky, an entrepreneurial-minded Jewish singer and conductor who in his own right, recorded music under four different names: Rev. Meyer Kanewsky on his cantorial recordings; M. Mironenko when he sang in Ukrainian; M. Gutmann when he recorded Yiddish folk and theatre songs, and M. Kanewsky-Katz when he recorded in Russian.

But it wasn't easy for klezmerim of Abe Elenkrig's generation to adapt to the demands of New York's post 1920's music scene. By that time, in order to make any kind of decent living, musicians needed to master multiple New World genres and styles including early jazz, light classical overtures, tango, and current hits from Broadway shows. Even top-level klezmer virtuosi such as Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras never fully managed to adjust to the new reality. After restrictive laws ended Jewish immigration in 1924, working in more stylistically flexible ensembles became a necessity and, although he continued to work as barber for quite a while and went on to live to the age of 87, Elenkrig worked very little as a professional trumpeter or bandleader after making his early recordings.

Indeed, even within the Jewish community, musical tastes had shifted dramatically by the late 1930s. By then, assimilation had fully taken effect among the second generation of immigrant families, and within the remaining religious community, Jewish educators were determined to craft a new modern Jewish identity. Moreover, by the late 1940s, the decimation of the Eastern European Jewish community in the Holocaust and the subsequent creation of the state of Israel made it seem as if the only choice in the future would be to abandon the musical culture of the East European Jewish past.

It wasn't until the late 1970s that recordings such as Elenkrig's "Fun Der Khupe" began to show up again, this time on the radar screens of a new generation of Jewish musicians. Following in the steps of a large scale roots revival that had elevated such genres as rural blues, Appalachian ballad singing, bluegrass, Irish "ceili" music, Quebecois fiddling and Balkan dance tunes to virtual mainstream status (at least among folk music cognoscenti), Jewish musicians in their twenties began a search for their own ethnic musical heritage that landed them squarely in the midst of piles of green-label Columbia Record 78s.

In the world of the Klezmer resurgence, musicians who had died in obscurity such as Abe Elenkrig became icons. The new "klezmerim" would listen through the multiple scratches to try to copy every nuance, every gesture, every ornament and every rhythmic irregularity correctly. These were, after all, their musical roots, their own unique heritage, the sounds of the world of the great grandparents they had never met. When musician, historian, and record-producer Henry Sapoznik decided to include "Fun Der Khupe" on the Rounder Records compilation disc "Klezmer Pioneers" (Rounder 1089) in 1993 (the first such compilation to employ advanced sound restoration techniques), a new generation could finally appreciate the magic of that first klezmer recording session.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.