

Music Completes the Picture

By Philip Berroll

Diane Cypkin's Brighton Beach apartment is awash in memories, from the Yiddish and English playbills on her walls to her carefully maintained albums of photos and documents. Over the years, Cypkin has given a good deal of time and energy to the preservation of the past – that of her family, and of her people – and to bringing it alive for newer generations.

Cypkin, 49, is a professor of literature and communications (“I’m in the talk area,” she jokes) at the Westchester campus of Pace University. She is also a dramatic and musical actress who has worked in both the Yiddish and English-language theatre. And this coming Sunday, she will be delivering a special performance: a concert of songs written by her father, Abraham Cypkin, while he was living under the Nazis in the ghetto of the Lithuanian city of Kovno.

The concert will take place at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., in conjunction with the opening of the museum's new exhibit, “Hidden History of the Kovno Ghetto.” The exhibit, which is scheduled to run for two years, is a collection of artifacts, survivor testimony, and archival material. The largest archive was donated by Tel Aviv resident Abraham Tory, who served as president of the ghetto's Jewish Council. Also in the exhibit are photographs taken by another survivor, George Kaddish.

“When I heard about (the exhibit),” says Cypkin, “I thought, ‘wow!’” But her excitement was tempered by the thought that the program was missing a key element. “It’s true that pictures say a lot, but they’re not alive,” she says. “A picture is still. Music is the soul, it speaks.

“And so I immediately wrote a letter and said, ‘Have you considered incorporating music in the exhibit?’ My letter got to Brett Werb, who’s their musicologist – and he knew my father’s name, because he’d already been doing research into the music that was written in the Kovno ghetto. And I really didn’t have to talk him into (having the concert), because he also felt that music should have a place.”

Cypkin will be accompanied on synthesizer by Ruby Sosnowicz, a Holocaust survivor from Warsaw. “He’s like a one-man orchestra,” says Cypkin. “The synthesizer has the ability to be

any instrument – (in this case) the balalaika and the concertina.” Also on the program is Toshi Reagon (daughter of noted gospel singer Bernice Johnson Reagon), performing her own freedom-themed songs. Museum spokeswoman Shana Penn says that while the museum has occasionally featured musical programs in the past, music such as Cypkin’s is “unusual ... (but) anything preserved from Kovno is quite unusual.”

The story behind the concert begins in the late 1930s, when Abraham Cypkin and his wife, Etta, were living in Kovno, where Abraham owned a factory that produced children’s clothing. The first disruption in their lives was the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1940, which resulted in the Soviet invasion of Lithuania. (“I once asked them,” says Diane Cypkin, “What does it sound like when an army invades?” They told me, “When the Russians came in, they were singing.”) As a capitalist, the elder Cypkin could have been sent to Siberia. But he concealed his identity – “and his workers never told on him,” says his daughter. “They liked him.”

But when Hitler broke the agreement and invaded the Soviet Union in June of 1941, the Cypkins – and the rest of Kovno’s 30,000 Jews – were less fortunate. The Germans herded them into Slobodka, a slum neighborhood, then reduced their numbers through an “action” at the end of October. The Jews were ordered to appear in a public plaza, from which as many as 10,000 – mostly women, children, and the elderly – were taken to their deaths. Diane Cypkin believes that her mother and brother Louis, then an infant, survived because “she was surrounded by my father, and all her brothers, who were allowed to live because they could work. And so [the Germans] probably didn’t see her.”

Etta Cypkin and her son spent the next few years hiding in their ghetto home. “She was afraid,” says her daughter, “not only of the Germans seeing that she had a little boy, but of other women [who might have informed on her].” Abraham, meanwhile, became head of work detail for the Jews, leading various slave labor “brigades” – in part because he spoke fluent German (among numerous other languages), which impressed the Nazi overlords.

It was while on his daily rounds that Abraham was inspired to compose his lyrics. “He would write them,” says his daughter, “then put them to very famous Russian melodies – famous either

just before the war, or concurrent with it. They are marches and waltzes, and exceptionally melodic.”

He shared the songs with his neighbors, who “sang them as they were going to work,” she says, “or while working, to uplift their spirits. Not while a German was standing over them... but to themselves.”

It is easy to see why the songs became popular with the Cypkins’ neighbors: rather than wallowing in despair, they express a defiant spirit of hope for the future. For example, “Tsores und Layd” (“Pain and Sorrow”), set to the tune of a popular Russian revolutionary song, has a somber tone, but closes on a note of determination:

Mortal, soft hands are kneading hard clay.

Suffering shapes these innocent lives.

Enough of this hell – we want to go home.

Our sorrows pierce us like knives...

Hold on, be strong, eternal Jew.

Keep faith and hope for tomorrow.

Some day your slavery will come to an end,

And with it, your sorrow.

(Translated from Yiddish by Rosaline Schwartz)

Other songs are actually humorous, such as “Finsternish” (“Darkness”), which is set to a more Yiddish-sounding melody -- Diane Cypkin believes that her father took it from one of the American Yiddish performers, like Molly Picon, who frequently came to Kovno before the war. The song, she says, depicts a man coming home at night after a German-imposed blackout: “You could blunder into the wrong apartment... and the wrong bed. And it’s nice if it’s a pretty girl that ends up next to you – but he wakes up and sees it’s an old lady.”

Another song, “Maystes,” (“The Meat and Poultry House”) – set to the theme of the first Russian sound film, *The Happy Boys* -- is about workers assigned to the local poultry storehouse, from which they would smuggle pieces of fowl back into the ghetto:

*Listen, my children! Pluck those fowl with pleasure,
Although your hearts are faint.
I have taken your measure,
And know that no one here is a saint...*

*So into the ghetto ducks and geese flew.
Chickens joining the pack.
Giving up meat and fat – a kilo or two.
And if it's three, who can object to that?*

(Translated from Yiddish by Rosaline Schwartz)

Meanwhile, outside the ghetto walls, the tide of the war was turning – which brought a new threat to the Cypkins' survival. Learning that the Nazis planned to destroy the ghetto and send the residents to Dachau and other death camps, the family built a bunker under a woodshed near their house, and moved there along with several friends in the summer of 1944. "They were down there for thirty days," says Diane Cypkin. "They had poison ... if they had been found, they would have killed themselves."

Finally, in August, Etta Cypkin decided to venture above ground. "It's hard to know if a war is over – it's not like anybody blows a whistle," says her daughter. "But it was very quiet, so my mother went outside, and she saw all the destruction around her. And she saw a soldier. Because she had been underground for so long, her eyes were affected, and she couldn't see the (shade) of his green uniform -- the Russians and the Germans both wore green, but slightly different. And he started to speak to her in Russian. And she knew that they were liberated."

The family went west to Freiman, an American-administered displaced persons camp in Munich, where they remained for five years. It was there that Abraham Cypkin met Shimon Kacerginski, an American-based musicologist, who had come to Europe after the war to collect songs for an anthology, *Lider Fun di Getos und Lagern (Songs of the Ghettos and Concentration*

Camps). Kaczerginski and a colleague transcribed Abraham's songs; they are included in the anthology, which was published, in Yiddish, in America.

In 1949, American relatives helped the Cypkins (including Diane, then seven months old) emigrate to the U.S. It was on the voyage across the Atlantic that Abraham Cypkin composed one last set of lyrics, "Mein Haym (My Home)." "It's set to a very famous Russian waltz," says his daughter. "He writes about how he'll never see his home again, and about the things he remembers of his home – Shabbos, his mother, his father – that are nevermore."

The Cypkins settled in Brighton Beach, where Diane still lives with her mother. Abraham Cypkin, who stopped writing and resumed his career in the garment business, died in 1979. But his songs live on through his daughter. Diane has previously performed them in concert; she also made a previous trip to the Holocaust Museum this past September to record several of them on a compact disc, which is scheduled to be released in February.

"It's not just to honor him," she says. "The reason his songs were so well liked is they reflected the feelings of many – many who don't have anyone to say Kaddish for them, or to remember them. He takes a whole ocean of people and their feelings with him. When you listen to his songs, even if you don't understand the words, you get the feeling of what it's all about."

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