

Sidi Tal and Yiddish Culture in Czernowitz in the 1940s-1980s

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The history of Czernowitz is inalienable from that of its Jews. The very first known document that mentions Czernowitz in 1408 is a description of the privileges the Jews were given to trade in the city. Since then, the ties between the Jews and the city have only grown. Through centuries of turmoil and acquisitions by different polities, the Jewish population grew from 100 families in 1776 to 14000 people by 1880, and 45000 by 1930. The cultural life of the city's Jews was always vibrant, and,

although by the mid-19th century German became the native language for a significant part of Czernowitz Jews, Yiddish life flourished. Czernowitz was the site of the 1908 Yiddish conference, at which Yiddish was proclaimed a national Jewish language, and it was home to such authors and thinkers as Itsik Manger, Nathan Birnbaum, Eliezer Shteynbarg, Moyshe Altman and many others. In the 1860s, Abraham Goldfaden lived in Czernowitz, where he met the poet and performer Velvl Zbarzher. Listening to Zbarzher's theatrical performance of his songs was one of the experiences that later inspired Goldfaden to establish Yiddish theater in Jassy. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, wandering performers often came to Czernowitz and closely interacted with the local population, as astutely described by Sholem Aleichem in his novel *Wandering Stars*. There is a scene in which the visiting actors go to a wine cellar and try to strike up conversation in Yiddish. The locals admit that they understand Yiddish only after consuming several glasses of wine.

It was such a traveling ensemble that first introduced young Sore Birkenthal, born in Czernowitz on September 8, 1912, to the art of acting. The troupe rehearsed in a building located next door to the

bakery of Sore's father, and Sore often listened to the rehearsals (Loev 2000, 286). She would repeat their jokes and songs and imitate their mannerisms at home and in her father's bakery, entertaining her family and her father's workers. She was noticed by a choirmaster and joined a children's choir, becoming the soloist, as well as taking ballet classes. When she was 14, she was introduced by a relative to the director of the Yiddish theater, Sarah Kanner (*Sidi Tal*, 11), who gave Sore the opportunity to appear in the operetta "Shulamis" (*Sidi Tal*, 7). A while later, she joined the troupe of Pinkus Fridman and started touring with the theater, playing orphans and Hasidic boys, singing, and dancing. Even in those early years, the Jewish and Romanian press praised the young actress, who soon became known as Sidi Tal. By age 16, she was performing in Bucharest with the troupe "Roxie," then in the Jassy theater.

In the early 1930s, while on tour in her hometown, she met Pinkhas Falik, who was working as a producer with the Czernowitz Yiddish theater. Falik invited her to stay in Czernowitz, and she suggested that he move to Bucharest, where she was based at the time (Loev 2002). Soon thereafter, Falik became both Sidi Tal's impresario and her husband. Falik became the manager of the Bucharest Yiddish theater, and it was he who introduced Sidi to the poet and director Yakov Shternberg in 1935. Until then, Sidi Tal had been performing mostly in melodramas and operettas, which had been very profitable but hardly artistically challenging. Sidi risked financial security and chose to work with Shternberg's innovative approach to theater. The synthesis of Shternberg's avant-garde theatrical vision and Sidi Tal's accomplished acting produced startling, successful performances, the first of which was Leyb Malakh's "Der Geler Shotn". With this play, Sidi demonstrated that she was capable of playing serious roles.

Sidi Tal worked under Shternberg's direction for several years, but the growing anti-Semitism in Romania caused her to return to Czernowitz in 1938, following a bombing during her performance that had caused 40 casualties. In 1940, Czernowitz became part of the Soviet Union, and Sidi Tal moved to Kishinev and joined the Kishinev Yiddish theater.

Shternberg became the artistic director and Falik was the associate director. It was difficult for Falik to work as a theater administrator, because he was not a party member; however, several highly successful productions starring Sidi Tal were staged. When the war broke out in the summer of 1941, Falik was able to arrange for the theater's evacuation to Soviet Central Asia. Sidi Tal, Falik, and a few other Kishinev actors arrived in Tashkent, where Falik eventually found a job as the associate director of the Tashkent Philharmonic. Soon thereafter, a Yiddish concert brigade was formed as part of the Philharmonic, with Sidi Tal as the lead performer. This group extensively performed for the troops and for wounded soldiers in military hospitals. After the war, in spring of 1946, the ensemble returned to Czernowitz, by that time known as Chernovtsy.

In Chernovtsy, Sidi Tal and Falik began working for the Chernovtsy Philharmonic. Sidi Tal gave concerts in Yiddish, and Falik was her administrator. The group was under constant surveillance by the KGB, as evidenced by the recently declassified 1948 report to the then Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party, Khrushchev. The report states that two members of Sidi Tal's ensemble conduct pro-Israel conversations, declaring that Soviet Jews would be willing to fight for the Jewish state in Palestine (*Spetspovidomlennya*).

In the late 1940s, the Soviet government began closing all of the Jewish theaters in the USSR, and by 1952, the last one, in Chernovtsy, was shut down. From the entire theater troupe, only a 3-person concert brigade, with Sidi Tal at its head, remained in the Philharmonic. After several years of a virtually total ban on Yiddish culture, the restrictions were slightly relaxed in the summer of 1955, and renewed performances were reported in the Jewish press worldwide: "On August 16, 1955, the Jewish singer and story teller Sidi Tal recited a tale by the same author [Sholem Aleichem] in the Pushkin theater in Moscow" (*American Jewish Year Book*). Yakov Vaynshteyn writes, "It was only thanks to Sidi Tal that Yiddish songs and Yiddish humor continued to be heard on the stages of the regional Philharmonic and district clubs at a time when all the Yiddish theaters in the country were closed."

Sidi Tal worked at the Philharmonic until the late 1970s, singing and performing comical, dramatic, and satiric scenes, monologues, and sketches. She also worked with young non-Jewish actors in the Philharmonic, teaching them movement and staging. Some of her students, such as Sophia Rotaru, later became superstars of the Soviet popular stage. Throughout her career at the Philharmonic, Sidi Tal and her group toured all over the country and traveled to Hungary and Romania. Her repertoire included works of such Czernowitz authors as Eliezer Shteynberg and Motl Saksier. The music to some of the songs she sang was written by Czernowitz composers Leibus Levin and Leonid Zatulovskiy.

Chernovtsy was in a unique position in the Soviet Union with regard to the “Jewish question”. It was the only city in the USSR where the establishment of the State of Israel was officially celebrated in 1948 with the participation of the local party leaders. Chernovtsy was one of very few places from which Jewish immigration was allowed in the 1940s and 1950s. There were significant demographic shifts in the population, as many of the original inhabitants left after World War II, and new Yiddish-speaking migrants arrived from smaller towns in Bukovina and Bessarabia. There was a high concentration of Yiddish writers in the Soviet period, such as Moyshe Altman, Meyer Harats, Khaim Melamud, Yosef Burg, Motl Saksier, Berl Royzen, and others. Many of the residents had relatives abroad, and Yiddish frequently served as the lingua franca for their correspondence. Yiddish periodicals from Poland and Romania made their way to Chernovtsy, and there were more tourists who brought in Yiddish records and books. These circumstances set the city apart from the rest of the Soviet Union.

Despite the special situation in Chernovtsy, in Soviet times, performing in Yiddish was not a simple matter. The government vacillated between the harsh repression of Jewish culture and the support of cultural activities of minority ethnicities. On the one hand, the administration wanted full control over what the public was exposed to, which was more difficult in a language unfamiliar to the censors. On the other

hand, they understood that complete repression of Jewish culture would encourage the Jews to immigrate to places where they would have opportunities for cultural expression and positive ethnic identification. A telling illustration of the above situation can be found in this recently published excerpt from a 1973 transcript of a Central Committee of the Communist Party Politburo meeting, where Brezhnev is quoted as saying, “Why shouldn’t we give [the Jews] a small theater with 500 chairs, a popular Jewish theater, which would work under our censorship, and a repertoire that would be under our supervision. Let Aunt Sonia sing Jewish wedding songs there. I’m not suggesting this, I’m just saying... Once I said [to Anton Gaevoy], there’s a concert by some singer named Sonia in the Philharmonic. I didn’t even realize that her name was Jewish. But at the concert, 100% of the audience was Jews, except Anton and me and our spouses. And this Sonia sang old Yiddish songs and Jewish wedding songs. As soon as she would finish singing a song, the audience would shout ‘Bravo, Sonia!’ If we open a Yiddish theater, it would bring profit into our budget... You can plan on a million [rubles], and they’ll give you a million, even if they don’t earn it” (Morozov).

While engaging in Yiddish culture was frowned upon, it was not outright forbidden, and Jewish performers took advantage of the ambiguity. One of Sidi Tal’s students in Chernovtsy, David Stepanovsky, recalls a concert program of the Philharmonic called “Songs of the Nations of the World,” in which he sang a Yiddish translation of Mackie Messer from the Three-Penny Opera, learned from the Yiddish singer Emil Gorovits. Stepanovsky performed this song at about 20 concerts before the director realized that he wasn’t singing in German. At one of the concerts, the director approached him backstage, right before Stepanovsky was supposed to sing, and asked what language the song was in. Stepanovsky replied, “Yiddish,” and the director said, “Why are you singing in Yiddish? Sidi Tal sings in Yiddish.” It was made clear to Stepanovsky that he would not be allowed to continue singing in that manner, so he performed the Yiddish translation one last time, and quit the Philharmonic.

The Philharmonic exercised its strict control in other ways, as well: Falik had asked Stepanovsky to join Sidi Tal's ensemble, and Stepanovsky and Sidi Tal began rehearsing. However, they were never able to perform together, because the director of the Philharmonic did not want to increase the size of Sidi Tal's ensemble and refused to transfer Stepanovsky. Even though Falik was an excellent administrator and held sway with the authorities, he was unable to help in this case.

Stepanovsky also remembers how, as a student singing at weddings for some extra money, he was once called in by an inspector of culture and asked why he sang in Yiddish. Stepanovsky replied that he only sings the same songs that Sidi Tal sings, which are all permitted songs. He was asked about his hidden agenda, as it was assumed that singers performing in a foreign language were either promoting anti-Soviet ideologies, or, in the case of a Jewish singer, promoting Zionism and the emigration to Palestine. Stepanovsky, however, claims that he was always very careful not to sing any anti-Soviet songs to avoid getting into trouble. His performances only involved repertoire approved by "Glavlit", the censorship organization.

The difficulties encountered by those attempting to perform in Yiddish are further lamented by Sidi Tal's friend and student Efim Merkher. He writes, "I am most saddened by the fact that the damned authorities didn't let this talented woman create and work at her full capacity. The actress was forced to fight for every word of truth, to preserve at least a small crumb of the uniqueness of Jewish culture."

Mikhail Khazin, a friend of Sidi and Falik (as their friends called the couple), writes about Sidi Tal's attitudes towards the Soviet Union. He notes that she was thankful that "the Soviet Union saved us from the Nazis," but she would always add, "That doesn't mean that those you saved are now your property, and you can do whatever you want with them."

Notwithstanding all of the difficulties, Sidi Tal was able not only to delight several generations of Jewish audiences, but also to pass on

the craft of Yiddish performance to the next generation. There were no schools where Yiddish singing or acting were taught in Soviet times, and Yiddish songbooks were not readily available. Thus, younger performers had to learn directly from their elders. In an interview, Stepanovsky talked about how he learned his repertoire from Sidi Tal and from visiting artists who came to perform in Chernovtsy, such as Emil Gorovits and Nechama Lifshitz. He would transcribe music from records and memorize songs at concerts. Other songs in Stepanovsky's repertoire came from his mother, and others he learned from old musicians at weddings. Stepanovsky also often asked Sidi Tal for advice. There were never formal lessons, but if he ever had any questions, she was always willing to answer them and to show him how to interpret something he was having difficulties with. Thus, Sidi Tal trained the next generation not just by passing on her repertoire, but also by passing on elements of her style.

In the conditions of an absence of full-fledged Jewish culture and community life, Jewish artists, including Sidi Tal, performed a special function. They created a niche for those interested in maintaining ties to their ethnic identity. This phenomenon can be illustrated by the favorite story of the Ruzhiner Rebbe, one of the most influential Hasidic figures, who lived in Czernowitz:

When the Baal Shem Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, he would go into a special place in the forest. There he would light a fire and say a special prayer and the miracle would happen and danger would be averted.

Later, when his disciple, the Maggid of Mezritch, needed to intercede with heaven for the same reason, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Reboynu Shel Oylem, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I can still say the prayer." And again, there would be a miracle.

Still later, Rabbi Moyshe-Leib of Sassov, in order to save his people, would go into the forest and say, "I do not know how to light the fire, I

do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient.” It was sufficient and the miracle happened.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to G-d. “I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer, and I can not even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient.”

And it was sufficient.

The role of such performers as Sidi Tal was to tell the story for the audience that did not know how to light the fire or say the blessing. They passed on the story to their listeners, allowing them to experience positive identification with their culture. The actress’s function as cultural mediator was one of the important reasons for her popularity and success.

A good example can be found in the words of composer Oleg Mil’shteyn: “My parents were friends with the famous Jewish actress Sidi Tal. Whenever they went to her concerts, they took me along. I inherited the friendship with Sidi Tal’s family. My first concert on tour took place in Czernowitz, Sidi Tal’s city... I only hope that these impressions will be reflected in new works that will enrich the Jewish musical repertoire.”

On a more personal level, many who knew her write that the essence of Sidi Tal’s talent lay in the naturalness of her stage presence. She moved about the stage so easily and conveyed her emotions so directly that even audience members who did not understand a word of Yiddish knew exactly what was happening on stage. For instance, the comic actors Tarapun’ka and Shtepsel’ (stage names of Yurii Timoshenko and Efim Berezin) write in a memoir about one of Sidi Tal’s concerts that they attended: “From the first phrases of her monologue... Sidi Tal established close contact with her audience. And Tarapun’ka understood immediately that he would not need Shtepsel’s translations, because, [despite not knowing any Yiddish], he understood everything,

to the last gesture. We encountered real art!” (Berezin).

The esteem in which Sidi Tal’ was held can be seen in the loving memories of her fans. In Grigory Kanovich’s book, *Shelest srublennykh derev’ev*, a character who wants to express his amazement at the talent of an actress exclaims the following comparison: “Sidi Tal! Ida Kaminskaia! Sara Bernhardt!” For him, this trio constituted the pantheon of theatrical genius, and in this particular order. Yakov Vaynshteyn writes that “in 1959, there was an anniversary evening in honor of Sholem-Aleichem’s 100th birthday. His daughter, Maria Goldberg, was present at the evening in Kiev. After watching Sidi Tal’s performance of a scene from *Motl Peysi dem Khazns*, she exclaimed, ‘I have seen many little Motls being performed by the world’s greatest actors, but this one, acted out by Sidi Tal, is the best of all. This is exactly how my father had envisioned him.’” Sidi Tal was admired by Leonid Utesov and Arkadii Raikin. She was even jokingly called “Raikin in a skirt.”

Many of Sidi Tal’s fans and friends commented on her “Galician Yiddish.” This is an interesting fact, since listening to recordings of her speech shows quite clearly that her Yiddish was literary Yiddish, and not the Galician dialect. In an interview, Moisei Loev confirmed that Sidi Tal spoke this literary Yiddish her whole life, and he wasn’t sure why others, including such prominent figures as Solomon Mikhoels, called her Yiddish Galician. One possible explanation is that, rather than referring to the phonetic aspects of the dialect, Mikhoels, in his much-cited conversation with Vergelis, was commenting on the intonations: “her language consists not only of words but of sighs, inhaling and exhaling; it has a musicality and intonation that doesn’t exist in any other dialect.”

In 1982, Sidi Tal was invited to perform in a big gala concert in Moscow, dedicated to the anniversary of the Hermitage theater, and the actress was announced as a “guest from Ukraine, performing folk songs”. The words “Jewish” or “Yiddish” were not mentioned. She sang in Yiddish, and although most of the audience did not understand the

language, she was received with great success. This was her last performance.

Because she started performing at such a young age, Sidi was known and beloved by many generations of theatergoers. I myself narrowly missed being the fifth generation in my family to enjoy Sidi Tal's live performances. I was born 12 days after her death on August 17, 1983.

Even after her death, the great actress continued to be at odds with the authorities. The memorial at Sidi Tal's gravesite, a sculpture of her holding a bouquet of flowers, was 60 cm over the allowed height of 2 meters, and Falik, who fought for Sidi during her life and now fought for her gravestone, had to make a great effort to receive permission for its placement. The memorial now stands in the central alley of the new Chernovtsy cemetery.

In the face of cultural repression by the Soviet government, Sidi Tal was able to bring joy to the lives of many people in Chernovtsy and other cities and towns. Through her performances of Yiddish dramatic scenes and songs, her audience was able to find expression for their desire for ethnic identification. Her friendship with younger performers ensured that there would be no missing links in the *goldene keyt* of Yiddish culture, as she passed on her repertoire and style. And for future generations, her flavorful, rich Yiddish is preserved on the records and tapes of her performances.

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