SongsToOfTheGhettos

The unextinguishable spirit of an oppressed people expressed in song
SONGS OF THE GHETTOS
SUNG BY LOUIS DANTO
words and melodies through the courtesy of the CONGRESS FOR JEWISH CULTURE piano and vocal arrangements by ABE ELLSTEIN

One of the most remarkable aspects of life in the Ghettos was the determination of its inhabitants to permit nothing to interrupt their cultural activities. It is difficult for us to understand how this could be — how lectures, concerts, symposiums, classes could be conducted under the constant shadow of death; how youth groups and children's clubs could be organized, though to everyone it was a foregone conclusion that none of them would survive.

Survivors of the Partisan groups have written of the readings which took place, the poems that were recited and the songs that were sung as they lay hidden in forests, in underground dugouts and in sewers — waiting for the signal for action. Diaries were kept up to the zero hour and many a poet threw down his pen, short minutes before going out to battle.

Much of the poetry which has come to us from the Ghettos lacks the polish of 'pure' literature, yet it stirs us infinitely more because it is truly the outpouring of a soul in anguish. Since early days, Jewish poets have reacted to the persecution and misery about them. Many of their poems have been incorporated in prayer books and have become so much a part of the Orthodox Jew's daily life that he no longer stops to think of them as poems by any one specific poet. These psiyutim (hymns), when read with an understanding of the period in which they were written, give us a clear picture of Jewish life through the ages.

The Ghettos produced a similar gauge. The songs that were sung behind the Ghettos walls, though often crude and lumping in rhythm, are the true reflection of the conditions which gave them birth. Due to the strictures imposed on them, poets were not permitted to mention the Germans by name nor to refer to specific extermination centers. Thus, there were frequently two versions of a song — the one which was sung from a concert platform and the one which was sung privately. Though of known authorship, many of the poems are regarded as folklore.

By far the most widespread of these is "Never Say" by Hirsch Glick. Not only was it sung in all the ghettos, but it is now a permanent feature of many a Seder ritual, and it is sung many a time at a meeting and lecture, bursting forth spontaneously from the threats of the audience.

The restraint and lack of hysteria, the very humor, the eternal hope which breaks through these lines give them a poignancy which many a classic poem fails to achieve. To us, who have not lived under Nazi's thumb, whose very existence has not been a daily miracle, it is difficult to comprehend what motivates a man to rein his emotions as he writes of horrors the civilized world has never known. Yet it is this very simplicity, this control which have earned their place in modern Jewish folklore — truly the layman's psiyut of the twentieth century!

Side 2

1. RIVKELE, THE SABBATH WIFE (Rivkele, di Shabesdiike) After an action in the Bialostok Ghettos, which took place on a Saturday, and applied only to men, the surviving wives were called "Shabbos-dikhe" - Sabbath wives. Though it was later learned that all the men had been exterminated, their wives refused to regard themselves as widows. The author of the poem was himself, a victim of the Bialostok Ghettos.

2. HYMN OF YOUTH (Yugnt Hymn) This poem was dedicated to the Children and Youth Club of the Wilno Ghettos and was sung whenever they assembled.

3. YESTERDAY'S SKY (Farvos is Der Himmel) L. Apeskin, a former teacher in the Province of Wilno, was among the Partisans who planned to break out of the Ghettos and join forces with the Red Army, which was then on the outskirts of Wilno (July 3, 1944). The plan was discovered and in the battle which ensued with the S.S., the poet-partisan fell - a few short days before the Wilno Ghettos was liberated.

4. BENEATH THY WHITE STARS (Unter Deine Weissn Shtern) First sung by Zlotta Kaczergynski, at a performance of the Little Art Theater of the Wilno Ghettos. The composer, Avremi Brudno, later perished in the Kloge concentration camp in Latvia.

5. LITTLE LITHUANIAN TOWN (Litvishe Shtetelte)

6. NEVER SAY ... (Zog Nit Kaimmol) Undoubtedly the most widespread of the songs which have emerged from the ghettos, this poem was inspired by an illated expedition of a group of 30 partisans of the Wilno Ghettos and by news of the uprising in the ghetto of Warsaw. Hirsh Glick, in his early 20's when he wrote the poem, was the recipient of two literature prizes conferred upon him in the Wilno Ghettos. His partisan colleagues adopted "Never Say" as the hymn of their underground movement.

LOUIS DANTO is an exponent of the Italian school of Bel Canto, having studied under Dr. Mirko Pagliu of Rome and New York.

The New York Times, on October 16, 1961, in reviewing the concert he gave in May before said: ... a young tenor named Louis Danto took over Carnegie Recital Hall last night for a debut recital that merits the highest commendation. His voice is in itself a thing of great beauty, clear and true, over an impressively wide range. His open-throated pianissimo at the top of his range were breathtaking last night, and, judging from the program he chose, he is truly proud of