



Jewish Music Forever

Recorded Sound Archives preserves
Judaic music

By Simone Ellin | Photo by David Stuck

Larry Chernikoff has a passion for preserving Judaic sound recordings from the early 20th century.

Baltimore native Larry Chernikoff isn't especially interested in music. What does interest him greatly is preserving Jewish heritage. A collector of kosher dinner and silverware services from steamships, Chernikoff, 60, has now dedicated himself to the collection of Jewish music recordings.

It started last year when Chernikoff, a Ranchleigh resident, was helping his mother move from her Baltimore home to a smaller living space.

"I found all these Yiddish cantorial records that had once belonged to my father. No one wanted them," he said.

Chernikoff called the Jewish Museum of Maryland but was told that unless the records had a Maryland connection, the museum couldn't accept them. But a museum staff member recommended he contact Florida Atlantic University (FAU) Libraries in Boca Raton, Fla., to see if the records might be appropriate for its Recorded Sound Archives. A major part of the archives' mission is to build a collection of Judaic sound recordings from the early 20th century.

Chernikoff, who lives in Boca Raton during the winter months, made the call and was greatly pleased

when the archives accepted his father's collection.

He was so taken with the importance of the library's Jewish music preservation project that Chernikoff, a retired federal government employee, decided to become a volunteer with the archives. When in Boca Raton, Chernikoff volunteers with the archives doing data entry twice a week.

"When you retire, you have to keep your mind busy," he said. "My long-term goal is to help preserve this history for future generations."

The FAU Libraries' Recorded Sound Archives (formerly the Judaic Music Rescue Project and the Judaic Sound Archives) was founded by Nathan Tinanoff, a Baltimore native who has lived in Florida for many years.

"When I came to the library, there was already a small operation, but none of the records were organized," explained the archives' current director, Dr. Maxine Schackman, who began as a volunteer during Tinanoff's tenure. "Nate was an ex-IBMer and very organized, so he catalogued everything."

The collection grew exponentially in 2002, when the library received

more than 4,000 recordings from the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Mass. The book center was founded in 1980 by Aaron Lansky and has since become notorious partly through Lansky's 2005 book, "Outwitting History: The Amazing Adventures of a Man Who Rescued a Million Yiddish Books."

"We had a relationship with Alan Lansky, so we called him and asked, 'By chance do you have any recordings,'" recalled Schackman. "He said, 'Do we have any recordings? We've been collecting them for 22 years and have no use for them. We haven't had the heart to get rid of them. If you can come to Amherst and get them, they're yours.'"

Since then, the archive has come to include cantorial and liturgical music, Yiddish-language and Israeli songs, works by well-known Jewish performers and composers and recordings that offer insight into American Jewish life.

In 2005, the Judaica Sound Archives launched its own website, and project staff and volunteers began the long process of digitizing the archives' discs (78 rpm, 45 rpm and 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm), tapes (cassette, eight-track and reel-to-reel)

and CDs.

Currently, said Schackman, the archives has the largest online collection of Jewish music in the world. The online collection of 13,000 songs represents only 8 to 10 percent of the entire collection.

In 2006, the archives received a donation of more than 21,000 jazz recordings; in 2009, another collector donated nearly 60,000 vintage 78 rpm recordings. In order to reflect the broadening of the library's offerings, the archives' name was again changed — this time to Recorded Sound Archives. But Schackman stressed the organization's primary purpose is still the preservation of Jewish music.

"We have not purchased one single recording. We have hundreds of thousands, and they have all been donated. This history unites us all. We need to preserve these records for the future so our kids will know about their heritage," said Schackman. JT

For more information about Recorded Sound Archives at FAU Libraries, visit fau.edu/library.

Simone Ellin is JT senior features reporter
sellin@jewishtimes.com