

Isa Kremer

by Judith Pinnolis

Born in Beltz, Bessarabia in 21 October 1887, Isa Kremer, possibly the first woman to bring Yiddish song to the concert stage, was known as an international balladist. She started her career writing revolutionary poetry, which was published in an Odessa newspaper. After meeting the fifteen year old Isa, the newspaper's editor, Israel Heifetz, helped send her to Milan to study singing with Polonia Ronzi. By 1902, she had her operatic debut in *La Boheme*. Upon returning to Odessa, Heifetz married her, opening up new opportunities in that cultural center.

She joined a group of intellectuals that included Mark Warshavsky, Sholom Aleichem and Mendel Mocher Sforim, who introduced her to the Hebrew poet Bialik. She credited Bialik with changing her life, by challenging her to give voice to her own people and to sing in Yiddish. Isa told *The Canadian Jewish Chronicle* (14 September 1923), Sforim had written before his death, that by bringing Yiddish folk songs to the notice of the general public, she had done the "greatest service to the Jewish people."

Kremer continued touring with opera companies performing in *Madam Butterfly*, *Eugene Onegin* and *Manon* to great success. Despite this, she found opera wanting, and turned to operetta, going to St. Petersburg. In 1916, she made her concert debut in Moscow. She started collecting folk songs, but wanted to perform them on the concert stage, feeling "Song must be art for the great mass of people." She developed simple Yiddish folksongs into art song with characters that she performed like little plays.

In 1917, she had a daughter, Toussia. Due to the revolution, her husband was jailed while she was on tour in Constantinople. In 1919, after much trial, she was able to get her child and finally her husband out of Russia. During her time in Constantinople, she managed to record for the Orfeon label (roughly between 1918-1920).

The family met up in Poland and made their way to Paris. In 1922, on tour in Poland, Kremer, who was scheduled to sing Jewish songs in Warsaw, was the subject of an anti-Semitic riot. While she already had five distinct offers to come to America, she claimed it was this incident that prompted her to leave Europe. She told her version of events to Jessie Abrams of *The Canadian Jewish Chronicle* in a 1923 interview:

"A series of three concerts had been arranged for me at the Philharmonic, a wonderful concert hall which had been built by a Jew and had then been presented by him to the city of Warsaw. When I arrived in Warsaw, my impresario told me that he had been forbidden to put any Jewish songs on the programme. I wanted to cancel the concerts but he begged me to think of all the expense he had one to. He was not a rich man, so I consented to carry out my contract.

There were many Jews at the concerts and they kept on asking for Jewish songs, but I was helpless. At the third concert, Dr. Lepouner, a famous Polish Jew,

jumped on the platform and asked me why I, a Jewess, was ashamed to sing Jewish songs. At first, I was a little bit frightened. Then I turned to the audience and told them all the truth. There was almost a riot.

The next day, Dr. Lepouner wrote to the newspapers, and wanted to know how such things could be in the free Republic of Poland. So much feeling was stirred up that finally the authorities consented to a fourth concert, in which Jewish songs would also be included. The night before the concert, ten thousand people gathered in front of the hall threatening to kill me, and in the melee that ensued a number of Jews were killed and hurt.

A meeting of prominent Jews was hastily called to the bedside of the Editor of "The Moment", who was very ill. They sent for me and asked me to leave secretly that very night. That was my last view of unhappy Poland. Do you wonder that I find America so wonderful?"

This incident led the family to America, where her reputation preceded her. Her mere arrival in the country was reported widely in the Yiddish press. Represented by Sol Hurok, she made her American debut at Carnegie Hall 29 October 1922 to great acclaim.

Kremer's persona lent glamour, grace and charisma to the stage. She dressed beautifully in high fashion, and sang artistically arranged folksongs in Yiddish, Russian, Italian, Polish, French, German and English. A *Los Angeles Times* review of 19 December 1924 concluded that she is a "searcher for hidden treasure in the realm of art. She sings with her voice, her body, her eyes, and she captivates with her charm."

Her vaudeville debut was held at the Palace Theatre 27 September 1927. Her success was tremendous, and that year she was singing to over 35,000 a week on the Orpheum circuit. Kremer made not only stage appearances, but tried out Hollywood talkies for Vitaphone, in a technology precursor to video tape.

In Berlin, she mixed frequently with intelligentsia, including Zionist leaders. In 1936, Kremer sang Yiddish songs at a Judischer Kulturbund concert, although many German Jews there were opposed to Yiddish.

In the early 1930s Kremer, and her publisher Chappell & Co., were sued by her former accompanist, Vladimir Heifetz, concerning the rights to publication of her song book *The Album of Jewish Folksongs*. Heifetz also sought a restraint against her singing the songs in public, since he claimed to have arranged these songs and owned the copyright. The case was dismissed by New York Supreme Court Justice Cohn, on the grounds that Heifetz failed to prove he had indeed actually arranged the songs.

Unlike many Jewish immigrant performers, she had bypassed Yiddish theater in America. To persuade this star to appear with Seymour Rexite in the production *Song of*

the Ghetto (1930), Olshanetsky and Jacobs wrote “Mein Shtetle Belz” for her. Though she never recorded the song, it was and remains a major Yiddish hit.

In a tour of Argentina in the late 1930s, she met Gregorio Bermann, a psychiatrist. They were together for years, although not married. As World War II raged in Europe, her daughter Toussia Heifetz married in Paris. Isa’s first husband, Israel Heifetz, was arrested and died in a concentration camp. In 1938, Kremer moved to Argentina to be with Bermann. In 1943, Bermann was rounded up as a communist sympathizer; she was blacklisted and went broke.

Over the course of many years, Isa Kremer sang many benefit concerts for Jewish and leftist causes in the United States, Europe and Argentina. An Isa Kremer appearance at one of these concerts made headlines in New York or Los Angeles. The Jewish community called upon her largesse often, as reports in the press of these benefit concerts are numerous over the course of over twenty years.

In 1946, after the war, she realized she had lost all her friends in Europe. She visited Jewish Palestine, and sang there in Yiddish, although once again, many were opposed. She told the crowd, “I sang in Yiddish in Nazi Germany, I’ll sing in Yiddish in Israel,” and she did.

Even at late as 1951, Isa still concertized for loyal fans in European cities, but by 1956 she became ill with stomach cancer and died in Córdoba, Argentina, 7 July 1956. Her papers were donated to the Jewish Center in Buenos Aires, which was partially destroyed by terrorists in 1994. Due to unswerving dedication of Head Librarian Ester Szwarc and hundreds of volunteers, about half the library was saved, including Isa Kremer’s papers.

An Informal Bibliography Used to Research Isa Kremer

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