

TANGELE: The history of Yiddish tango

By Lloica Czackis

When I first heard of the existence of tango songs in Yiddish, I was neither particularly into tango nor into singing Yiddish songs, although in many ways these were already part of my cultural heritage. I was training to become an opera singer at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London, and I was also very interested in the art song repertoire. During a trip home to Buenos Aires in December 1997 I visited the IWO Institute (sister to the YIVO Institute in the United States), hoping to find new material to include in my concert programmes, perhaps some Argentine Jewish songs. But, most unexpectedly, I was handed a set of songs from Eastern European ghettos and concentration camps during the Second World War, written to the rhythm of tango. Here tango, the quintessence of dance and sensuality, was not only associated with a quite different language but transformed into a symbol of life and endurance during the utmost misery. I felt I had to do some research, and wrote a dissertation about the tango in the Holocaust for my college degree. Four years later, I finally had an opportunity to perform this music (a project granted a Millennium Award by the Jewish Music Institute). Gustavo Beytelmann - a well-known tango pianist and composer who wrote the music for iconic films such as *Los Gauchos Judíos* ('The Jewish Gauchos') and now lives in Paris - agreed to make the musical arrangements, and to play them with me and Juan Lucas Aisemberg on viola at The Spitz, London, in November 2002.

By then I had found other Yiddish tangos that originated in the different and happier circumstances of the Yiddish musical created and performed in New York and Buenos Aires during the 1930s and '40s. The term for the genre had to be *Tangele*, combining the word *tango* with the endearing Yiddish diminutive *-le*, and so meaning 'little/dear tango'. Without being able to unravel a complete sentence in Yiddish I had coined a new Yiddish word...

But what does Yiddish tango actually mean? Why is it that this music, although it derives from such contrasting worlds, sounds so naturally bound together? How does the pulse of Yiddish tango beat? It turns out that the tango and Jewish folk music have essential points in common. They yield and wail with a similar vocabulary. There are similarities in

instrumentation, such as the conspicuous use of the violin, and also in that inexplicable *benkshaft* (yearning) that colours the air.

The origin of tango

Tango's origins are still discussed, but it is generally accepted that it developed in the Buenos Aires of the 1880s from earlier and similar Latin American dances. Argentina was an enormous stretch of land, with a countryside largely unpopulated after the massive slaughter of most of its native population in the 1879 Campaign of the Desert, led by the then War Minister, General Julio A. Roca. In response to Argentina's call for labour, settlers arrived in large convoys in the country's largest harbour, Buenos Aires, creating a cultural palette instilled with the tints of Italian, Spanish, French and Jewish immigrants as well as those from the Afro-Argentine community.

Many immigrants gravitated towards the harbour's houses of ill repute where, with a few drinks and companionship, found distractions to ease their sense of rootlessness and disfranchisement as strangers in a strange land. From this cultural brew emerged a new music that became the tango. Thus tango expresses more than frustrated love; it speaks of fatality, of painful destinies; of an unlikely ideal world. In the words of the tango scholar María Susana Azzi:

When facing critical situations in life, especially death - always present in tango - men and women release tensions through their fears and anxiety, and overcome desperation by performing rituals that could almost be considered religious: the *milonga* (a tango rhythm) is one of them (*¡Tango!: the dance, the song, the story*, edited by Simon Collier; London: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

Originally the tango as a dance represented the relationship between the prostitute and her pimp, and was therefore regarded as obscene. Only in 1912, when universal suffrage finally legitimised lower-class cultural expressions, was it absorbed into the wider society. The dance remained intact, whereas the music became less abrasive. This is the period called *Guardia Vieja*, or Old Stream, and lasted from the 1910s - coinciding with the arrival of tango in Europe - to around 1940.

***Tango canción*: the introduction of lyrics**

Initially these pieces of music had no words, and were often highly improvised. Then, in 1917, it became fashionable to write lyrics for the tango, leading to the birth of a star still

celebrated today, the singer Carlos Gardel. Tangos with words were called *Tango canción* or, quite simply, 'tango song'.

Over the years the tango became part of daily life as a symbol of physical and spiritual solidarity. Its words were the voice of the people. Many intellectuals wrote poems for tangos, giving the genre a more romantic, nostalgic and less threatening air, a sweet remembrance of youth in an idyllic society that never existed. Others provided a more pessimistic and perhaps realistic view, such as Enrique Santos Discépolo in the lyrics of the famous tango song *Cambalache* ('Junk Shop') of 1935.

The arrival of Jews in Argentina

As music of mixed culture, the tango scene featured performers from many different backgrounds, including Jews. Jews are thought to have arrived in Argentina together with the first Spanish explorers in the early seventeenth century, although they didn't participate openly in society until the following century. They were of Sephardi and German origin and worked as agents for British banking and trading companies. In 1852 they established the Jewish Congregation of Buenos Aires. An 1887 city census indicated the presence of 336 Jews in Buenos Aires, and it is estimated that there were about 1,500 Jews in the whole country.

It was at the end of that century that Jews started to become a significant presence on the shores of the Río de la Plata. As part of its new policy of inviting immigrants to occupy its lands, the Julio A. Roca government (1880-86) made two attempts to attract Jews, particularly the Eastern European Jews that had begun to stream into the United States as a consequence of the 1881 pogroms in the Russian empire. The first was a special mission in 1882 to establish contact with Russian and Ukrainian rabbis; but hearing no news of the Argentinian representative, who had fallen ill, they decided to head to the United States instead. The second attempt; in 1889, led to negotiations with the Jewish philanthropist Baron Hirsh in Paris, which resulted in the foundation of the Jewish Colonisation Association in 1891. Jewish immigration -both independent and sponsored by colonization associations -increased greatly, especially between 1900 and 1940. During this period over 250,000 Jews entered the country, making Argentina the second largest recipient of Jewish settlers in the Western hemisphere and Buenos Aires the largest Jewish community after New York.

Those who headed to the countryside became *gauchos judíos*, or Jewish farmers. Those who stayed in Buenos Aires were usually traders or labourers. As they began to settle down, thanks

to the development of the gramophone, all kinds of music started to make its way into their lives, from the operatic arias of Caruso to the tangos of Gardel.

Jewish tango musicians in Buenos Aires

By the 1930s, the height of tango's popularity, the Jewish community in Buenos Aires enjoyed a vibrant life that included three Yiddish newspapers and numerous cultural centres. It was also a key destination for eminent American and East European touring theatre companies. Jewish violinists arriving from Poland, Russia and Rumania often headed to the tango scene, as their instrument was already emerging as typical of the style. This was not only a source of income but a means of adapting to society, since other occupations kept the immigrants apart from gentiles. Many a Jewish mother who had arrived in the new land filled with dreams of her son as the new Jascha Heifetz was deeply disappointed to see him taking a job in a tango orchestra or, worse, in cabaret, with all the additional dangers of assimilation. The temptation was hard to resist, however, as he could earn a living that was hardly achievable in the dreary jobs that most immigrants tended to take. Over the years many of these musicians became prominent figures in the world of tango, some of them still remembered today. Others moved on to performing in or conducting symphony orchestras -to the relief of their mothers!

In the 1930 and '40s Jewish musicians were well adapted to Argentinian society, although it is true that they tended to conceal their cultural identity. Jews and gentiles were able to share the same musical space, which gave room for mutual enrichment. This in itself is remarkable, given that these were times of rising fascist ideals in Argentina. Nevertheless, in the world of tango Jews were noteworthy as performers, authors, publishers and lyricists.

Yiddish tangos in Argentina

Several Jewish writers created tangos with Spanish lyrics, which came to form part of the general repertoire, but it was inevitable that tangos would also emerge in Yiddish. Between the 1930s and the 1960s Buenos Aires was one of the world capitals of Yiddish theatre, attracting the greatest international stars such as Molly Picon and Jacob Kalish, Luba Kadison and Joseph Buloff, Maurice Schwartz, Herman Yabokloff, Dzigan, Ida Kaminska, Jan Peerce and Sara Gorby. They performed in the provinces as well as the capital, to audiences so hungry for Yiddish theatre that plays would not run for more than a week. Theatre was a crucial part of the immigrants' lives: the Yiddish Society of Amateur Actors was founded in 1902 and the IFT, the Idisher Folks Teater (Yiddish Folk Theatre), which still exists, opened

in 1932. In 1939, there were five professional theatres devoted to Yiddish plays, although numbers declined to two in 1949 and only one, the Mitre, in 1960.

Jewish singers performed new Yiddish songs with tender or humorous lyrics and music, and often with a burlesque tone as well, the most famous of them being Jeviel Katz, Max Perlman and Max Zalkind. In 1942 two immigrants from Bialystok, Abraham Szewach and Jeremia Ciganeri, wrote Yiddish tangos that were performed in revues in theatres such as the Mitre, where Ciganeri was the orchestra conductor. Back in Poland, they had written songs such as *Bialystok mayn heym* ('Bialystok my home') - which, according to Szewach's daughter Elisa, became the city's anthem- and *Bialystoker geselakh* ('Little Bialystok streets'). In my November 2002 concert in London, I had the privilege of giving the European premiere of their four Yiddish tangos (published in 1942 by the Buenos Aires Editorial Fermata, run by another legendary Jewish figure, the poet Ben Molar).

Tango in Europe

Recordings of tango made in Argentina helped bring the musicians to Europe, around the 1910s, during the *Guardia Vieja*, taking ballrooms and cabarets in Paris, Berlin and London by storm. Together with jazz it offered cheap and unsophisticated relief from the recent traumas of war and inflation, rousing the people to dance their way to the rhythm of light-hearted melodies into the Golden Twenties. This was the time of cabaret in Berlin and Paris, the first years of atonal music and abstraction in painting, and peoples' needs were easily met by the exotic tango. By 1914 the tango well rooted: the London Savoy Hotel held tango dinner parties; in Paris, high-society ladies enjoyed private dance lessons with Argentinian teachers, and the colour of their dresses was a fashionable shade of orange, the tango colour.

Meanwhile, back in the Buenos Aires cabarets and theatres frequented by the rich, the tango, having been blessed by the Parisians, finally gave its musicians a professional status. This was the period when Roberto Firpo conducted the most celebrated *Orquesta Tipica* (typical tango band). As the music enjoyed growing popularity, it soon reached Eastern Europe. Famous Argentinian tangos were translated into local languages, so that even in the 1920s the popular song *El Choclo* was being sung in Russian in Odessa, and *Adios muchachos* had a Polish version in Warsaw.

Some of the numerous musicians performing tango in pre-war Europe were also Jews, either Argentinians who had joined a touring *Orquesta Tipica* or Europeans. Amongst the Argentinians were the conductor Bernardo Alemany (who also performed in the USA) and

members of ensembles led by J. B. d'Ambrogio and Eduardo Bianco¹, such as the ensemble Bachicha, including the bandoneonist² José Schumajer and the singer Juan Carlos Cohan. Their European counterparts included the Italian brothers Ettore and Guisepe Colombo, who played the *bandoneón* in the sextet Brodman-Alfaro (Alfaro being the pseudonym of the French-Jewish cellist Jean Levesque), a popular ensemble in the Paris of the 1920s. Another French-Jewish musician was the pianist and composer Marcel Lattes, born in Nice in 1886, and whom Carlos Gardel revered as *el celebrado maestro*.

At the same time European composers, some of whom were also Jews, started to write new tangos. The renowned Rumanian cimbalom player Joseph Moskowitz (1879-1953), whose repertoire included the: classics, ragtime and worldwide folk dances, recorded his song *Argentine Dance (Tango Argentino)* in 1916, when he had already emigrated to America. A Polish Jewish composer who enjoyed great success in Germany -although he is almost forgotten today -was Paul Godwin (*née* Pinchas Goldfein). From 1923 to 1933, the Deutsche Grammophon label sold 9 million copies of over 2,500 titles recorded by Godwin. A key to Godwin's success was his ability to please a market that was thirsty for different styles, so it was not surprising that he came up with titles such as *Kitsch-Tango* and *Der Michel wird nicht kluger durch den Krieg* ('The war didn't make Michael more intelligent').

But in 1933 the situation for Jewish musicians working in Berlin became unsustainable, so Godwin settled in Holland, and was soon confined in the Amsterdam ghetto after the German occupation of the Netherlands. During this time the Hollandsche Schouwburg (Dutch Theatre) was renamed the Joodsche Schouwburg (Jewish Theatre) and was restricted to Jewish performers and audiences. In 1942 the theatre became an assembly point for Jews being sent to Westerbork transit camp, and thence to Auschwitz. The history of the Schouwburg is recalled by the Viennese Jewish actress Silvia Grohs-Martin, who performed there with Godwin, in *Silvie* (New York: Welcome Rain, 2000):

I had a love affair with every inch of this theatre. The walls, the seats, the footlights, and the drafty backstage. Adoring fans nightly packed the theatre, Jews and non-Jews alike (the latter

¹ Eduardo Bianco (1892-1959) was one of the most popular Argentinian tango musicians who conquered Europe. Born in Buenos Aires, he played the *bandoneón* with many local ensembles until his departure to France in 1923. He conducted numerous *Orquestas Típicas* such as the famous ensemble Bachicha, and performed in Madrid, Paris, Marseille, Biarritz, Leningrad, New York, Boston and the Middle East. His tangos gained great international acclaim, *Plegaria* ('Plea') being his major success. Bearing the dedication 'to his majesty the King Alfonso XIII', this tango was written in 1929 and recorded the same year in Barcelona by Celia Gómez. Without disguising his sympathy with fascist ideals, Bianco proceeded to dedicate another tango, *Evocación* ('Evocation'), 'to his Excellency Benito Mussolini', in 1931. When the popular *Plegaria* reached Nazi camps - Bianco had played it himself for Hider and Goebbels in 1939 -the Germans adopted it as a hymn that they imposed upon the orchestras in the camps.

² The *bandoneón*, today an emblem of tango, is an instrument that belongs to the accordion family, invented in Germany by Heinrich Band. It is thought to have arrived Buenos Aires in 1865, joining tango ensembles by 1890.

wearing yellow armbands to blend in), and watched everything from cabaret numbers to Greek tragedy.

Although Godwin was deported to an extermination camp, he survived and returned to Holland, where he joined the Holländischen Streichquartett in 1947; this was the beginning of a new career as a classical musician, playing Mozart, Schubert, Shostakovich and Hindemith instead of the popular tunes of the day. The crowning moment of his career was when he played with Yehudi Menuhin.

Another Polish Jewish musician who performed tangos was Henryk Gold, a pioneer in the history of Polish jazz and dance music, and one of the most prolific songwriters in Poland during the inter-war years. Gold was born in 1898 in Warsaw into a very musical family. His brother, Artur Gold (1903-43), was also an orchestra leader and composer of note, writing many of the popular tangos of the 1920s and '30s. Immediately after the First World War, when Poland regained its independence, jazz began to sweep across Europe from west to east. In 1925, Henryk and his brother Artur formed the Gold Orchestra, an 8-piece jazz band, to play at the Cafe Bodega in Warsaw. Their immediate success led to a recording contract with the Syrena company, producing records that included not only jazz tunes but also the tangos and waltzes which were required of any orchestra during the period.

In early 1939, Gold and his orchestra were invited to be part of the Polish delegation to the World's Fair in New York, which led to an auspicious turn of events, as Gold was forced to stay temporarily in America at the outbreak of the Second World War. He eventually moved to Paris, but his brother Artur did not share his good fortune; he perished in Treblinka in 1943.

In 1926 Artur Gold had founded a new chamber orchestra with Henryk and his friend Jerzy Petersburski (1895-1979), playing in fashionable Warsaw cabarets. Petersburski (*né* Jerzy Melodysta) was also a popular composer of light music who studied at the Warsaw Conservatory and in Vienna, and later played and recorded with famous singers and instrumentalists such as Eugeniusz Bodo, Chor Dana, Jerzy Czaplicki, Mieczyslaw Fogg and Ludwok Sempolinski. His large catalogue includes numerous waltzes, tangos and foxtrots, but none would become as famous as his *Tango Milonga* (1929). Petersburski's band played in Vienna, where *Tango Milonga* was sold to the Wiener Boheme Verlag, and given German words by Fritz Lohner-Beda as *Oh, Donna Clara!*, which would be its trampoline to international fame. A few weeks later, Pierre Meyer and Miss Florence sang *Oh Donna Clara* in the finale of the *Paris qui remue* revue at the Paris Casino. From there the song travelled to America, receiving its premiere by none other than Al Jolson.

Tango during the Holocaust

By the time of the Second World War the tango was unquestionably one of the most popular ballroom dances in Europe. In ghettos and concentration camps, therefore, we find such music both as part of the enforced repertoire of the *Lagerkapellen* and as a means of self-expression by Jewish inmates.

Camps and detention centres such as Auschwitz, Terezin, Mauthausen, Dachau and Buchenwald formed orchestras, called *Lagerkapellen*, where amateur players performed with established professionals. The random arrival of instrumentalists led to far-from-traditional ensembles, with gllitars, accordions and tambourines, and often lacking some of the usual instruments. Their repertoire varied from classical and twelve-tone music to jazz and saloon tunes, including tangos.

The concept of the *danse macabre* was hardly a Nazi invention, as it has been present in the spirit of tango from the start. (The first film ever devoted to the tango - José Agustín Ferreira's silent movie of 1917, which explored the mythic world of Buenos Aires songs, suburbs and characters - was called *El tango de la muerte*.) Yet the Nazis recognized the twofold nature of tango, and (to quote Collier's book *Tango!* again):

approved of it because it engendered no spirit of rebellion, unlike the Afro-American jazz that they so abhorred and interdicted... jazz was seen to encourage disobedience, to engender a collective delirium and a feeling of abandon; the tango was seen to provide an escape, a willing preoccupation with the dance as an oblivion of the self rather than as an incentive to disobedience.

Not only did they allow the tango, they forced *Lagerkapellen* to play this music, particularly during executions. Because of this practice, any music played by an inmate orchestra during exterminations acquired the generic name of Death Tango. In *The Janowska Road* (London: Lowe and Brydone, 1996) Leon Weliczter Wells offers an eyewitness account:

Outside the gate music starts to play. Yes, we have an orchestra made up of sixteen men, all inmates. This orchestra, which has some known personalities in the music world in it, always plays when we are going to and from work or when the Germans take a group out to be shot. We know that for many, if not all, of us the music will someday play the Death Tango, as we call it on such occasions.

The spirit of this ruthless form of entertainment is captured in what is probably the most famous single poem to emerge from the Holocaust. In May 1947 the Bucharest magazine *Contemporanul* published *Tangoul Mortii* ('Tango of Death'), by Paul Antschel under his

pseudonym Paul Celan. According to John Feltsiner in *Paul Celan - Poet, Survivor, Jew* (London and New York: Yale University Press, 1995), Celan may have written it as an evocation of what he read in the pamphlet about *The Lublin Extermination Camp (Maidanek)*, prepared by Konstantin Simonov and published by the Soviets in 1944.

Yiddish Holocaust tango songs

Meanwhile, new songs were emerging from the ghettos and camps in the popular rhythms of the time, including tango, and in the language that was familiar to most of the inmates, Yiddish. A number of them were also in Hebrew, Russian, Polish, French, Rumanian, Hungarian and even German. These songs are a remarkable testament to the creative ability of a people to demonstrate their endurance, ingenuity and resourcefulness under the most inhuman conditions. They also served to rally and organize people for survival and struggle against the tyrants. Through all the songs there flows the will to live, to preserve dignity and the cherished traditional customs of learning and teaching. They describe the crowded quarters, the scarcity of food, the irritations and degradations heaped upon the Jews. Many of these pieces are collected in the famous book *Lider fun di getos und lagern* (Songs from Ghettos and Concentration Camps), published in New York in 1948. During the war the Nazis had ordered Shmerke Kaczerginsky to select books from the YIVO, the Institute of Jewish Research, which was established in Vilna (Lithuania) with branches in New York and Buenos Aires. His task was to hand over his selection from the archives for shipment to Germany, but he managed to conceal and save a very large number of original works and manuscripts until after the war. After escaping the Vilna ghetto, he joined the partisans and continued to gather songs from many sources, including his own poems, which were then incorporated into this work.

His poem *Friling* ('Springtime'), which he wrote after the death of his wife, was set to a soulful tango melody by the composer Abraham Brodno; it has become one of the most loved Yiddish songs, and touchingly performed by Adrienne Cooper and Zalmen Mlotek in their recording *Ghetto Tango*. Kaczerginsky's book, a constant source of information for musicians and scholars around the world, contains 250 texts and 100 tunes from 30 ghettos, camps and forests (where the Jewish partisans had their encampments). It consists of an anthology of songs gathered by Zami Feder, entitled *Katselider* (Concentration Camp Songs), a notebook of songs by Lusik Gerber, a number of songs collected by the American-Yiddish poet H. Leivick (1888-1962), and Kaczerginsky's own compositions.

The songs can be grouped into different categories: lullabies; work songs; satirical songs and ballads; prayer songs, songs of pain and anguish, shame and humiliation; songs of ghetto life; songs of heroism, hatred for the enemy, faith and hope, struggle and joy in victory. Almost entirely absent are the songs of normal times, love and marriage, children, joy in work and study, humour and merriment. Yiddish tangos appeared in ghettos such as Vilna, Kovno, Lodz, Bialystok, Shauliai and even in Auschwitz. Although they differ fundamentally from traditional Argentine tangos, they still retain the flavour of tango, the essential angst described by Enrique Santos Discépolo as *a sad thought that is also danced*.

Yiddish tango in America

In the United States tango was especially related to the icon of the Latin lover, the romantic stereotype represented by Rudolf Valentino in films of the 1920s. The tango is danced in silent films such as *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), *Blood and Sand* (1922) as well as *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The mood suited to perfection the light-hearted Yiddish musicals that were emerging in New York before and during the war, and the cosmopolitan composers and lyricists incorporated the tango into their plays.

One of the most popular figures of the time was Molly Picon, who enjoyed a great reputation as an actress in the Yiddish theatre and in films and often as a lyricist as well. During the 1920s she often travelled to Eastern Europe with her husband, theatre director Jacob Kalich, performing in Vilna and Rumania, before returning to her native Manhattan.

In 1934 Picon wrote the lyrics to the song *Oygn* ('Eyes') for her to perform in Kalich's production *Eyn mol in lebn* ('Once in a lifetime') at the Public Theatre in New York, and Abraham Ellstein set it as a tango. The same year, Alexander Olshanetsky and Chaim Tauber created the musical *Der katerintshik* ('The organ grinder'), including another celebrated Yiddish tango, *Ikh hob dikh tsufil lib* ('I love you too much'); over the years this song has been performed by Luba Kadison, the Barry Sisters, the Klezmer Conservatory Band, Santana and many others.

Conclusion

The tango results from a merging of different cultures whose origins can no longer be traced. No one can claim true authorship. Its mixed nature explains why it has been continuously embraced and transformed during its extraordinary voyage around the world. Yiddish tangos

are only an episode of this chronicle, an example of the Jews' tendency to adapt to the ethos of their adoptive countries and also, more generally, the mutual acceptance and fruitful interaction between peoples.

For Jews, the tango, always a catalyst for self-expression, was used to convey such diverse experiences as love and romance, social concern and the horror of the Holocaust. In the 1970s, they faced a new tyranny during the savage Argentinian civil persecution. This had strong echoes for Jews, and writers naturally drew parallels between past and present. To quote the Argentinian philosophers Santiago Kovadloff and Saúl Sosnowski in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica's* entry on 'Latin America':

In the countries of Latin America, which have experienced a repression unprecedented in their history, survival - perhaps the basic motif of all Jewish literature - has obviously played a major role. And it is under identical circumstances that some Jewish motifs have become precision instruments in interpreting a reality that centuries of persecution and exile have imprinted in the cultural tradition of the historic Jew.

Perhaps that is where the pulse of Yiddish tango lies....

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