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Abstract

‘Songs of the Ghetto’: Parable, Paradox, and Paradise in the Making of Modern Jewish History

There are few more sweeping symbols of Jewish modernity and modernism than the Venetian Ghetto. Five hundred years ago, the Ghetto was founded at a pivotal moment in Jewish history, rerouting the exile of diaspora to reimagine return as the rise of early modernism. The ingathering of the Ghetto juxtaposed paradox and paradise, engendering parables of historical struggle between dystopia and utopia, and realizing the biblical paths of exodus and exile. Already at the moment of its own genesis, the Venetian Ghetto became a site for the ‘new song’ that would transform its biblical and historical symbolism into modernity. Jewish liturgical and secular musics flowed together as if channeled by the shores of a new Babylon, making possible the first European Jewish concert musics and forming the literary canon of Jewish narrative genres, cohabited by Sephardic *romances* and Ashkenazic ballads. For modern Jewish history the Ghetto was at once the point of arrival and of departure.

In my contribution to the Fondazione Levi’s commemoration conference, I shall examine the history of one of the modern genres of music that became one of the most powerful narratives of modern Jewish history: ‘songs of the ghetto’. The creation and circulation of songs of the ghetto coalesced around specific moments of Jewish modernity, giving new voice to the synagogue in the Haskala, providing common chorus for the urban communities that spread across Europe as migration moved ‘from the shtetl to the ghetto’. The culture of this new world was that of Herzl’s *Das neue Ghetto*, the future commemorated *avant la lettre*. Notably, the songs of the ghetto were vessels for the collective experience of the Jewish people journey from the past to the future. These were songs that were gathered and published in songbooks and songsters, and that were recomposed as the city music of a modern ghetto. Musical genres, styles, languages, and functions flowed together, remapping the ghetto as a site of modernity.

My presentation itself will unfold as an intellectual history of the songs of the ghetto from Venice to the present, among them the early modern folk and literary ballad of northern Italy, the collections of Yiddish folk song in the long nineteenth century, and the art song of exile forged during the Shoah. With both sound and visual imagery I shall point to specific moments and the repertoires that represented them in the symbolic paradise formed at the confluence of parable and paradise.