INTERVIEW

Anti-fascist Yiddish Song: Shneer and Eisenberg on Lin Jaldati

Erin Faigin

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Jewlia Eisenberg (http://www.charminghostess.com/about.html) is a composer, cantor, extended-technique vocalist, and founding member of the musical group Charming Hostess. Her work explores the emotional, erotic, and spiritual terrains that voice can transcend. David Shneer (http://www.colorado.edu/jewishstudies/faculty-and-staff/faculty/david-shneer) is the Louis P. Singer Endowed Chair in Jewish History, Professor of History, Religious Studies, and Jewish Studies and 2015-2016 College Scholar at the University of Colorado, Boulder. His research interests include Yiddish culture, Russian Jewish history, diaspora studies, and Judaism and sexuality. Jewlia and David are collaborating on a project, incubated at the LA-based Yiddishkayt (http://yiddishkayt.org/), based on the life and work of Lin Jaldati (http://www.davidshneer.com/lin-jaldati-art-is-my-weapon.html). Erin Faigin, a History student at UC Berkeley, sat down with them to learn more.
E: I'm here to talk to you guys about your project called “Art is My Weapon (http://yiddishkayt.org/art-is-my-weapon/).” Where does the title come from?

D: It comes from a Czech newspaper article from 1949. The headline was “Two Artists for Whom Art is Their Weapon,” and the photograph was the woman we are performing about, Lin Jaldati, who is this small petite woman, standing next to Paul Robeson, who is easily a foot taller than she is. The article was about the shift from Yiddish being a Jewish national language to instead being a language that was part of an international scene of downtrodden peoples expressing their sorrows through music. So Yiddish and the music she was singing was being compared to the African American music that Paul Robeson was singing.

J: And the connection between the two kinds of music, it’s not just about expressing sorrows but about revolutionary possibilities, right?

D: Yes, out of the depths comes some kind of revolutionary impulse. So that’s just the title. As I was researching Lin Jaldati, I thought at first that I was writing a book about a woman on stage but I realized it’s really about the body and performance. And I felt by just writing a book, I was not really inhabiting the universe that I wanted to be imagining, because what makes her so interesting is that her experiences are all live. It’s about her in a room with people and I wanted to find a way to recreate that. So I pitched to Jewlia the idea of doing a project together that I initially envisioned as Jewlia doing the singing and me doing a sort of talk around her music. And then this summer when we both participated in the Helix (http://yiddishkayt.org/helix-project/) Project I was transformed by how singing made me feel different about what I was studying, so much so that I wanted to inhabit her performance in some way and actually produce music too. So I began singing. We both sing.

E: How did you even find out about Lin Jaldati?

D: It took place in 2008, in Berlin, in an artist’s loft. The Jewish Renewal Cantor of Berlin, Jalda Rebling, invited me and my husband over for a dinner taking place in her wife’s loft. So we have two queer couples coming together for Shabbos dinner. I didn’t know the cantor. My husband, who had been flirting with Renewal Judaism, met her first. I casually asked her as we were sitting down to dinner, “How did you decide to become a cantor?” And she says, “Well I was the star of East German Yiddish theater.” And I said, “Well, I’ve never heard of that. Please tell me what that is!” She then proceeded to tell me the story of her mother, Lin Jaldati, who brought Yiddish to Communist East Germany.
E: Tell me more about the role of Yiddish here.

D: Lin Jaldati was not a native Yiddish speaker. I think that's important. She was Dutch. She had Yiddish in her grandparent’s generation, like I do. She comes to Yiddish because she finds Dutch Jewry boring and she finds these Yiddish-speaking immigrants living in Amsterdam in the interwar period—so late ‘20s through the 1930s—she finds what’s going on there more interesting and more exciting. And it exposed her to the wider world which Dutch society in general and Jewry in particular was not interested in, and she was. So she starts hanging out with Yiddish speakers, and she actually has a torrid love affair with one of them.

J: Torrid.

D: So she learns Yiddish and Yiddish song and Yiddish dances in order to connect with this community and to take on a radical persona in the ‘30s. She learns Yiddish in order to become a radical. I don’t think it’s dissimilar from Paul Robeson singing in Yiddish. Multilingualism was a key part of the left. What drew her to Yiddish song was its lefty-Jewishness. There was a sense that as a Dutch Jew she wasn’t really “authentically” Jewish, and authenticity was something she yearned for and thought she could find in Yiddish. The East German State wasn’t particularly interested in Yiddish until she brings it there. She moves with her non-Jewish socialist husband, in 1952, to East Germany. To put it crudely, she needed work. So she started to bring Yiddish music into East German anti-fascist culture. And East Germany became very excited about this. Ideologically it makes sense to include downtrodden Jewish music within a broader anti-fascist movement and it was also a great way to deflect any charges of state-sponsored anti-Semitism. Especially in this early Cold War period, most of the world is looking at East Germany as a deeply anti-Semitic place.

J: A state-sponsored Yiddish diva, who is really gonna go for that? Only communist East Germany.

D: In the Soviet Union, Yiddish was actually being squelched at this exact same time period. I interviewed her daughter Jalda, and she told me that her mother moved in 1952 to Berlin and she gave state-sponsored Yiddish concerts to a rooms full of East German party apparatchiks. What the hell is going on? In Moscow, they’re shooting Yiddish poets. What gives? Jalda gives this very wry response, “David, Berlin is very far from Moscow.” Which wasn’t particularly helpful. Amazingly, the first time Lin sings Yiddish in public is in a communist, not Jewish context.

J: Yiddish as a kind of ...

D: Weapon.
J: Weapon, or vocation? She gains more economic power because of it, which is an unusual path, but for some people, like Rudy Rocker, a Yiddish anarchist who was British and not Jewish, or those Bundists—people who learned Yiddish because they couldn’t do their work without it—it advanced their careers in certain ways. It starts out as something that seems exciting and romantic and moves to become something quite practical.

D: Right, in the late ‘30s she’s poor, but she ends up making her living performing. Yiddish Art Evenings, they were called.

J: I’m not hearing a conflation between Yiddish culture and Jewish culture ... I’m sure this was something Jalda thought about because she had a Jewish spiritual life, but do we hear, outside of discussion of being a camp survivor, Lin talk about what a Jewish culture might be?

D: She certainly writes about it. I guess the question is did she see herself as a participant in it? Or just a performer of it? Is she a subject or an object? And that’s not clear. I don’t think she saw herself as part of that which she was performing.
J: How would we know the difference? Jüdisch and Yiddish would be the same to her, no?

D: In German, it’s with an i. It’s the same distinction as in English.

J: So she does talk about a Jewish culture?

D: Yeah, but rarely. She doesn’t talk so much about *jüdische Kultur*, she talks much more often about *jiddische Kultur*. Which I think for her is a radical performance, more than it is an identity. But she corresponded with East Germany’s “Red Rabbi,” Martin Riesenberger. She sang in synagogues, on occasion. She was not a member of the Jewish community, which in East Germany you paid taxes to join. In East Germany, dues-paying members were few. The Jewish population of East Germany was much larger than those that paid dues.

J: Some of the Yiddish canon that she sings has at its root this anti-authoritarian aspect, which I think would be fair to argue is a strong strain in Yiddish culture, period. And it’s pregnant with revolutionary possibility, a resistance to statist identity. On one level if you have enough songs about these slices of life that you might call folk life but I’ll just call daily life, or women’s daily lives—so if you’re singing a song about hungry children, and then a song about your love life, and then a song about people’s relationships to a traveling cantor—if you have enough of these songs that come together then you are articulating something like an anti-fascist song.

When you have enough songs about people’s daily lives that are outside state governance, isn’t it anti-statist to sing a love song? You’re starting to look at the pattern of resistance that exists by people living daily lives.

D: Hard daily lives.

J: And it doesn’t have to be about poverty. Like the song about the *khazn* (cantor). It’s about a bunch of working-class people who decide on their own who does their religious interpretation for them. It’s an interesting negotiation of power and ritual life.

A lot of the time Lin presents these songs in male drag. Perhaps this is a less inflammatory mode of performance than before the war, when she sang in drag as a Jew. As an observant Jew, as a shtetl Jew, as a poor Jew, as an Eastern Jew. Of course, she was none of those things, so her use of traditional Jewish aesthetics can look like appropriation as much as promotion. You can have simultaneous revolutionary and reactionary possibilities in the same performance … Let’s say this is before the war, and she’s getting up there in a group of assimilated or mixed Dutch Jews; after the war in the context of DPs; or much after the war in the context of an East German nightclub. In all of those contexts, presenting Yiddish music of daily life is a way to insist on that life, and the value of that life…. What
does it mean for the people watching? The minstrel scene was attractive to people then, as it was here. And it was racialized like it was here. So, it's hard to ignore that. And it must have also been true in Germany. She would have been seen it that way too.

**E: David, what did you gain from the collaboration with Jewlia? What does it mean to bridge the gap between scholarship and performance?**

D: One of the reasons that I wanted to collaborate with a musician is because Jewlia’s perspective on the same material was refreshing, quite different from my own, and I have learned a lot about the way you approach music as just music, as opposed to say, a historical document, which is originally what attracted me to it. For example, things like the quality of the voice. I listen to Lin’s voice and I think, “it’s old, it’s aging.” You helped me think about how a woman’s voice in particular changes over time and gains new registers.

J: Yeah, it changes in terms of color and timbre. Her life story remains suspenseful and exciting, even as she ages or as we discover new things about her story.

D: Today I just told Jewlia that she lived with her Nazi father-in-law when she moved to East Germany ... an Auschwitz camp survivor living with a Nazi father-in-law.

J: To see what an effect these tangential relationships have on Jaldati, not only with her father-in-law but also with Paul Robeson and Hanns Eisler—it’s powerful. One path touching a lot of important paths. It’s a way of thinking about how we measure artistic legacy. Which is something that is hard to measure and is something that is often ill-measured for women, so maybe that’s something that I’ve thought about as well. It’s hard to tell how good she is, for example, from her last record. It’s campy. It’s still charming, but it’s campy. She has quite a long career, from the ‘30s to the ‘80s.

**E: She really sang Yiddish music from the 1930s to the ‘80s?**

D: Yeah, the Nazis come to power in ‘33, she gives her first concert in ‘34, she dies in ‘88, and the Berlin Wall falls in ‘89. So her life story is a kaleidoscopic microscope through which I am looking at twentieth-century world history. Fascism, World War II, communism, Cold War—the history of the global left through her. There is a very active alternative universe, whose story—at least in mainstream history in the United States—is hardly ever told. The story that her life reveals is absent from any US history that I was taught, that is generally taught.
Early in her career, Jaldati sings with Dutch composer Rudolf Escher and Eberhard Rebling. via (http://claude.torres1.perso.sfr.fr/Pays-Bas/Westerbork/Discographie.html)

**E:** You’ve just talked a lot about the global, the national. How does the personal fit in here?

**J:** I feel like we’ve touched on this, but could still go deeper. What it means to talk about being embodied. What it means in music, what it means for her work. And how we look at her work as a woman and survivor and how all of this stuff is mapped onto the body and how we can understand it.

**D:** I think that’s right. My entrée into that question is that she’s a survivor of Auschwitz and so she had a tattoo, and she was on stage in short sleeves, so the audience saw her life on her body. The fact of that tattoo marked her as someone who had survived Auschwitz. On a record you can’t see that; you need the body to have that layer of communication with the audience.
E: When we look at Lin Jaldati, her audience is as important as her performance sometimes. Who she’s performing for is as interesting as what she’s performing.

J: It’s true. Some of the audiences are amazing: Indonesia, North Korea.

D: Indonesian rice farmers.

E: Yeah, I read she performed in China like a year before the cultural revolution.

D: They had a close relationship with Indonesia because they used to be a Dutch colony, and especially Eberhard her husband, he had been several times to Indonesia when it was still Dutch East Indies. They visited in 1965, they were celebrated, they gave concerts. Three weeks after they leave, the 1965 coup happens, when half a million people were killed. All of their friends were killed. And they knew, they were in North Korea at the time. They could perform in these places. China still saw itself as part of global communism. It was the cultural revolution that said this is a colonial relationship we have with the West. They weren’t invited after 1966; before then China was building relationships between communist countries, and after ’66 it was rejecting the imperial relationship.

E: Jewlia, how does this project relate to your other work?

J: One thing is working out this issue of fascist songs and what they mean. Something I’m interested in is how does music that might not articulate itself as political be mobilized politically? How can we understand it politically? This dovetails with these Yiddish folksongs,
which by the way are all new to me, even the most basic, “Tumbalalaika.” We can position Lin as someone who is important for anti-fascist song. So once we accept that, how do we understand this canon? This brings me to the idea of embodiment, and female embodiment, and what it has to with music and presentation. The aging body, a Jewish body, a marked body, all of these things are also stuff that I’m thinking about for other projects too. And then ... you know I tend to do projects that involve difficult woman with complicated left politics. I’m interested in how people negotiate their relationship to the state.

**E: David, how does this relate to your scholarship?**

**D:** I like telling good stories. This story, in the same way that all of my projects did, fell into my lap. I was interested in broadening my research area out of Russia and the Soviet Union, I’m not a big fan of Putin’s Moscow. The last time I was there was 2008 and I vowed that I needed to establish a different research trajectory. I’m not trained in German History, I don’t know anything about German History except what I’ve learned related to this project.

**E:** One last question: What’s your favorite song [that] you’ve come across?

**J:** Well, it’s always easier to like songs that other people are performing because you can just listen and enjoy them. So the song that I like most that David is singing right now is called “Miller’s Tears” (“Dem milners trern”) The song that I like the most that I’m singing right now is a Hanns Eisler tune called “Ballad of Bourgeois Charity.”

**D:** My favorite is “Es brent” (“It is burning”).

**J:** Classic. Too sad. What’s sadder than “Miller’s Tears,” I don’t know.

**D:** “Un oykh mit zey geyt oys der yid” (“And along with [the years], so too expires this Jew”) That’s the last line of “Miller’s Tears.”

**E:** It’s pretty sad.

**D:** But what I like about “Es brent” is that in this song is the “Charge!”

**J:** It’s the wake-up. The stand-up. Hands up!

**D:** The point of the song is that the shtetl is burning. Jews, you’re just standing around watching your shtetl burn, do something to put the fire out. Don’t hang out with useless hands, use them to pick up the water and
put out the fire.


NOTES
1. The Helix Project is a travel-based cultural immersion experience. The Helix Project journeys throughout Eastern Europe exploring pre-war Jewish culture. This past summer, Jewlia Eisenberg joined the Helix Project as an artistic participant and David Shneer came along as the scholar-in-residence.

2. Jewlia and David are referring to the fact that, in Yiddish, the word "yidish" refers both to the language and to "Jewish," while in German, the words for "Jewish" and "Yiddish" are distinct, as in English ("Jüdisch" and "Jiddisch"). In Yiddish this allows for a blending between the concepts of Yiddish and Jewish culture.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Faigin

Erin Faigin is a PhD student in History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison