

GEORGIAN AND BUKHARIAN JEWS IN VIENNA

Introduction

The Phonogram Archive of the Austrian Academy of Sciences was founded in 1899 and is regarded as the world's oldest research sound archive. Its objective is to produce, collect, preserve, evaluate and give access to scientific sound recordings. The contents of the sound recordings derive from various scientific disciplines without any regional restrictions.

The term scientific sound recording is used to indicate acoustic sources which result from controlled and documented situations. The activities of the Phonogram Archive then include archiving, the technical safeguarding and preservation. Archiving means turning such a recording into a useful source for research by making a careful documentation of the item and its contents. The technical safeguarding is one of the key tasks of an audiovisual archive, and the preservation focuses on the competent treatment and storage of the collected recordings.

The Archive's Collections Result:

- from external research projects conducted by institutes and individual researchers of various disciplines with the technological and methodological support of the Phonogram Archive;
- from projects of staff members run by the archive's curators in selected fields which break new ground thematically and methodologically;
- from audio and video collections which have been acquired by the archive, but which originated without the archive's support
- and from the parallel storage of historical recording series including duplicates of re-recordings of other archives produced in the Phonogram Archive's laboratory or with the archive's help and support.

The project I would now like to introduce to you belongs to the second group of the archive's collections, the projects of staff members. Since we decided to place this project within the programme of the "Gemeinde Wien" projects, we adapted it to former projects already funded by the City of Vienna. In accordance with the aim of the "Gemeinde Wien" projects, selected but current events of a distinct cultural scene were to be documented by audio and video. With the objective of collecting samples of various cultural events in mind, a pool of sources was to be established for studying the multi-cultural, mostly unknown, scene in the urban setting. In this special case we wanted to accompany the community of Bukharian Jews during the year, turning our attention to the sequence of religious feasts. As it turned out, Bukharian and Georgian Jews are organised within the same Sephardic centre in Vienna; having accompanied the Bukharian community for one year, we therefore decided to con-

tinue this project with an additional focus on Georgian Jews.

The main aim of this documentation project was to collect audiovisual sources and make them available for various studies. The principal questions for us were: how does this community live here? How do they deal with their culture so closely related to religion and also to the region where they came from? And how do they experience their integration in the new diaspora?

Why did We Choose Jewish Communities?

Running through the holdings of the Phonogrammarchiv one finds a long tradition of recordings comprising Jewish culture in general, music and speech in particular. Starting with a recording project in 1907 devoted to Sephardic traditions on the Balkans our most famous collection is the Abraham Zvi Idelsohn collection, recordings made in Jerusalem between 1911 and 1913. “Idelsohn’s recording project was borne by the grand vision of a new generation, which turned from the diaspora toward the Yishuv, the in-gathering of Jews from throughout the world in Palestine,” as Philip Bohlman (2005: 18) described it, and he added: “In the Yishuv all was possible – a new language, a new politics, a new literature, and a new music culture – but the foundations for these lay in the gathering of traditions that would establish the threshold between the past and a new beginning.” So the recordings focused on the music of the Oriental Jews, Arabs and some Christian communities; Idelsohn’s main interests were the liturgical traditions of all these religious groups as well as the maqam system of urban Arabic music, as Edwin Seroussi (2005: 52) pointed out. The Idelsohn collection might be explained as a very early stage of a documentation dedicated to Jewish cultural diversity in a multi-ethnic urban environment, namely Jerusalem. Such research ideas were more or less taken up by Helga Thiel in the projects funded by the “Gemeinde Wien” in the early 1990s, concerning “the Jewish community in Vienna” and “the legacy of Abraham Adler”, then chief cantor in Vienna. Current field research projects involving the reconstruction of synagogal chants of Polish Jews and Jewish music in the Ukraine complement the holdings of the archive in respect of Jewish culture. As for the idea behind our most recent field research conducted in an urban environment (Vienna), it was deemed desirable also to investigate to what extent Jews felt themselves to be bearers of Sephardic tradition – in contrast to the Ashkenazim tradition, which has mainly been studied until now.

The Sephardic Centre

It includes three sub-groups, the Georgian, Caucasian or Tat Jews and Bukharian Jews. When these communities settled in Vienna, mainly Ashkenazim were active within the “Israelitische Kultusgemeinde”; therefore the group of Asian-Russian Jews formed the Sephardic association. Up to the early 1980s the Bukharian Jews called their community Sephardic and not Bukharian (Galibov, 2001:133). They hoped to be accepted in the IKG by following the former Sephardic Community in Vienna formed by Sephardim from Turkey. In the case of the Bukharian Jews the term “Sephardic” only refers to their ritual affiliation; it has nothing to do with the Sephardim once living in Spain and displaced in 1492. The main idea of these three Jewish communi-

ties from former Soviet Republics was the establishment of a Sephardic centre with a synagogue of their own and a hall for various cultural events. Starting with the so-called “Russian club”, their very first activity within the IKG (see Galibov, 2001: 126-127), the community was then supported by the organisation “Chabad”, which made possible a new centre for cultural and religious activities as well as the Lauder-Chabad campus, including a school and synagogue.

Brief History

The community of Bukharian Jews in Vienna was founded by chance. Neither their predilection for Austria or Vienna nor the essential help of the Viennese Jews played a major role. Far from it! The crucial factor was that those Jews who were allowed to emigrate to Israel – after long endeavours to receive the exit permission – made their journey via Vienna. Vienna was offered as a transit town. Some of the Bukharian families emigrating to Israel in 1971 were led by religious motives but were then rather disappointed by the modern secularised “promised land”. And it was due to the Yom Kippur war as well that some Bukharian families left Israel after a short stay there: they wanted to return to their homes in Central Asia, Tashkent, Bukhara, Bishkek, Dushanbe etc. However, back in Vienna again they had to realise that they were not allowed to re-enter the Soviet Union and thus asked for asylum. Therefore the core of the community are those who first unintentionally had to choose Vienna as their new home after their failed journey back to the Soviet Union. The community then increased in the 1980s and – with a last immigration wave – after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nowadays the Bukharian Jews are the second biggest and one of the liveliest communities within the “Israelitische Kultusgemeinde”.

In contrast to other migrants, mostly working migrants, from other countries in Vienna, the migration of Bukharians represents family consolidation. The reason is the traditional family structure in Bukhara on the one hand, and the importance of the family among the Jewish population on the other.

Bukharian Tradition, Bukharian Culture

As Peter Pinkhasov says in his article about the history of Bukharian Jews: “Among many Jewish communities in the world there is one that for more than 2,000 years has survived and preserved its religion and national identity in almost total isolation from the rest of world Jewry. Jews of that community have developed their own distinct culture, while at the same time adhering to Jewish principles and hoping some day to return to the Land of Israel. These Jews are called Bukharian Jews.” Jewish communities are said to have come into existence in Central Asia at the time of the Babylonian captivity, when the Jews settled all around the Babylonian Empire and in the Persian region in the cities of Samarkand and Bukhara during the diaspora. As is well known, the land Bukhara, then called Transoxania, was conquered by the Muslims in 709, reaching its cultural zenith at that time. Bernard Lewis speaks about the “Islamic-Jewish culture” of the 9th to 11th century (see Kejda, 1995:20). But times were changing, and with the beginning of the 20th century there was an obvious shift from a present to a hidden (Jewish) culture. This

fact supported the already existing aim of searching for Palestine. When the first Bukharian Jews immigrated to Vienna local Jews stigmatised them for not being “real” religious Jews (which was impossible for the reasons just mentioned); therefore some time was necessary for them to be accepted by the whole Jewish community. Nevertheless, according to Grigori Galibov, one of the first immigrants and very active in organising community events, the Bukharian community in Vienna has from the beginning tried to solve integration problems step by step; at the same time, they have a long history of aiming to preserve their traditions and culture within European – and to them unfamiliar – living conditions. They have always endeavoured both to abide by the Torah and embrace the European way of life. Galibov sees in the development of this community a new “Galut”, a new diaspora, of Central Asian Jews in Central Europe (Galibov, 2001:15).

Cultural activities manifest themselves in language and also musical practices. The ability to use different languages paints an interesting picture of that community. Older generations who did not stay in Israel for long still speak “Tajikit”, an old Persian dialect (Kejda, 1995:165), but the most widespread language is Russian, which at least two generations use; younger people learned German which was seen as essential for gaining ground in the new diaspora. And many of the younger also speak Hebrew (Ivrit, modern Hebrew), either because they have stayed in Israel for a longer period or because they have learned it in Vienna, mostly in the course of attending classes in Jewish religion. Musical practices show a similar picture. Traditional songs in the “Bukharian dialect” (as the community calls it) are only presented on stage; modern songs, popular songs with western influences, mainly in aspects of rhythm and timbre, are well known and loved by the audience, and are also part of performances.

Organisation of Cultural Events

In the course of this rather short field research I found out that two organisations, the “Verein” and the “Kongress” of Bukharian Jews, feel responsible for educational and cultural activities. The Verein is the older institution and sees its goal in supporting the Bukharian community and its traditions, while at the same time being open toward each other, to other Jewish groups as well as to the multi-ethnic Viennese population, offering cultural knowledge for both sides, insiders and outsiders. The Kongress has been active for three years, emerging from the Verein, but focusing on both Jewish and Bukharian (religious) traditions. It seems that now, 30 years after the establishment of the community, the time is ripe to go back to the roots. It is remarkable that mainly younger Bukharians are actively working for the Kongress, organising events which always start with religious exhortations followed by various amusements. Famous Rabbis from Israel or America are invited to give lectures, and artists, mostly from Israel, present their programmes.

I would like to show you three short video clips recorded on the occasion of Shawu’ot and Rosh Hashanah, two important feasts. First you’ll see the performance of a women’s theatre, sketches which were interrupted by traditional songs. The second example also features traditional lyrics, accompanied by the traditional drum,

dojra, and a lute, tar. New Bukharian songs were mostly performed by famous singers, solo but with music coming from a CD via loudspeakers (music minus one), a facet we could observe at nearly every event.

Results

When watching the audience it turned out that the old, traditional performances were calmly applauded, and sometimes people even left the hall; the modern music, however, was applauded with enthusiasm. Should we conclude then that the western influence is about to change or “modernise” the original tradition until it finally dies out? Listening to informal conversations one gets the impression that it is mainly the young generation who undertakes very strong efforts to keep traditions alive. The Kongress offers Bukharian language courses so that at least the lyrics of the old songs can be understood; it also organises meetings with the elders where one learns how to sing those songs. Asking about the perception of their own identity, I was told that members of the Bukharian community consider themselves Jews, but specific ones: Bukharian Jews. This statement emphasises a distinct degree of Bukharianism which reflects the knowledge and relevance of identity, an identity concerning their memory in the change of time and place, which might be called a multiple (patchwork) identity (s. Csáky 2004: 29). The ambiguity of memory is a phenomenon which reflects only one aspect resulting from a study of the audiovisual recordings made during that project. Identity is never static or a personal possession, particularly not in this specific case, which is typical of today’s multi-ethnic urban societies; rather, it is a process. We might better understand the memory of Bukharian Jews if we look at their long and changeful history: from notable members of society to social outcasts, leading restricted lives unable to declare themselves Jews. After their painful experience of migrations and new beginnings they now look back to their roots, recognising them differently from before. What has to be remembered in which way depends on social conditions; sometimes it reflects what might be called the collective consciousness of a society, as Csáky (2004: 29) put it. The process is still under way, and we will continue this project, documenting more events, meetings, and lessons, putting new questions in respect of a new understanding of cultural interaction, and trying to find answers regarding the meaning of music and the emotion of music listening and music making.

Traditions and Culture of Georgian Jews

Jews were one of the first nations besides Georgians who settled on Georgia’s territory and have been inhabiting it since ancient times.

In accordance with historical sources the Jewish population was spread over the whole territory of Georgia but in some regions (Tbilisi, Surami, Samtredia, Oni) they were settled compactly.

On August 6, 1969 eighteen of Georgian Jews sent a letter to the United Nations Organization requiring that the UN influence the Soviet Government to grant them a permission to return to Israel. This was the first document for the Alia movement that the world general public got acquainted with.

In the years 1971-1972 approximately 2000 families left Georgia. The first Geor-

gian Jews arrived in Vienna, which was the intermediate point. Later some of them settled in Israel, some left for America; still others returned to Austria to settle in Vienna.

Jews have been inhabiting Georgia for 26 centuries. The Jewish population in Georgia has assimilated into Georgian culture and Georgian traditions.

How do Georgians Jews live in Austria? What traditions do they maintain and what changes have taken place in their culture?

The number of Georgian Jews in Austria is smaller that of the Bucharan Jews. Approximately 200 families of Georgian Jews live in Austria, each of them having one or two children – according to the Georgian tradition.

In Georgia a lullaby is traditionally sung to children when putting them to bed. The Georgian Jews in Austria follow the same tradition.

Though a few traditions have some changes, for instance if in the past one could go visiting friends without an invitation (as it is possible in now day's Georgia), gradually, in the course of time, everything has acquired an official form; without a preliminary agreement one cannot go and visit one's friends. It is especially difficult for the older generation to comply with this new rule. The following decision has been made to make the communication easier: on Saturdays after dinner elderly women get together in the synagogue in a specially appointed room. The rabbi's wife comes and they read excerpts from the Old Testament. The reading is followed by discussions. Sometimes they discuss other matters as well.

In 2003, in Vienna "A Georgian Women's Forum" (Georgisches Frauen Forum, GFF), was founded with Irma Pan as its president. The basic activity of the forum is inviting experts in different fields who deliver lectures, which are sometimes followed by a concert. For instance, during one of the lectures on the topic "What Are the Borders for" one of the Georgian guests (the lecture was attended by representatives of different nationalities) spontaneously started to sing a Georgian song and then at a request of those present sang a few more Georgian songs.

A party celebrating the 8th pf March was also arranged, to which Jewish, Austrian and Russian quests were invited. Georgian, Russian, and Jewish songs were performed.

Another society of Georgian Jews has also been established. It is "Georgian Jewish Society" (headed by Leo Rizanishvili). Leo Rizanishvili is the owner of a Kosher Restaurant offering Georgian and Jewish dishes.

Children's Musical Education

In Tbilisi musical education was universal, almost compulsory, it mainly concerns playing piano.

In Austria the piano playing is taught at a comparatively later age. Georgian Jews have adopted a different attitude towards the issue. Georgian Jewish children of the third generation (the majority of the are 6-10 years old) are mastering the skills of piano-playing very assiduously, mainly taking private classes (as it is customary in Austria). A small quantity of children go to musical schools. The Rose Gulkarova school (Jehuta Halwi) is popular among the Georgian Jews as well. A colleague of

mine spoke about this school when referring to Bucharan Jews. This phenomenon can be explained on the hand by the fact that in Austria music is not considered obligatory for children and on the other hand by the assimilation. The third generation is comparatively more assimilated, their roots in Austria are stronger and the Georgian Jews consider it within their rights to go back to their old tradition.

It is already several months that Georgian dancing classes have been functioning at Jilkarova school. "The Georgian Women's Forum" invited a dancing-master from Georgia, paying the expenses, so Jewish children are taught Georgian dances.

Holidays

Religious holidays are held in synagogues where special festive halls are assigned for such occasions. It should be noted that apart from the fact that the Bucharan and Georgian Jews arrived from the former Soviet Union and are sharing the synagogue in Vienna, they do not have any other common cultural and social interests. The Bucharan Jews are much more numerous, better-off with stronger connections all over the world. Mrs Lechleitner has already talked about it. Georgian and Bucharan Jews do not share social events; they rarely invite one another to this or that social function.

Birthdays, weddings, Brit-Mila, Bar-mitsva, Rosh-Hashana, the New Year, Passover – these are the chief holidays of the Georgian Jews. What songs are performed at the holidays celebrations? In Georgia Georgian Jews used to listen only to Georgian songs. These songs are listened to in Austria as well together with some Jewish and Austrian songs.

All the holidays, secular as well as religious begin with the Jewish song "Hava Nagila" or the Israeli national anthem, followed by popular Georgian songs. Georgian words in Georgian songs are often replaced by the Jewish and this is the way they perform their favorite Georgian songs.

The Georgian repertoire consists of Georgian urban music (Shalakh, Janaya). Georgian songs are followed by Jewish, Georgian, Russian, and European music, performed alternately. It is necessary that a couple of Jewish songs should be performed during the whole evening. The holiday events are inevitably ended by the Israeli State Anthem. All those present, both guests and hosts, stand in a row and sing the state anthem in the Ivrit. During the Passover holiday, which is a family event, Jewish religious songs are performed. If there is an instrument, e.g. a piano, songs are accompanied by the piano. Songs are sung every evening for eight days when the whole family is present. Well-to-do families often invite bands from Israel or singers from Georgia. On other occasions local singers or bands are invited. The Vienna band "Schalom Band" is rather popular. The band musicians are Georgian, Bucharan, and Russian Jews. They sing Georgian, Russian, Austrian, and European songs in different languages.

Conclusion

The only thing the Georgian Jews have in common with Bucharan Jews is the shared synagogue in Vienna. They have no cultural interconnection of any kind.

The Georgian traditions are still maintained

- a) A dance group
- b) Georgian songs are listened to in homes
- c) Georgian singers are invited to festive occasions

On Holidays the same repertoire is performed as in Georgia. The repertoire is supplemented by the Israeli State Anthem as well as a modernized European repertoire.

All the holidays, both secular and religious begin with a Jewish song or the Israeli State Anthem and are to be ended with the Israeli State Anthem.

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