

*Nign*, derived from the Hebrew word *nigen*, means to make music (*nagan* refers to the solo musician, in contrast to *klezmer*) and stands in the Yiddish language for a traditional way of singing and group of melodies handed down over generations, mainly reserved for Hassidic prayers. Colloquially, "An old nign" is used as a proverbially wistful symbol of inevitable suffering. "How does a Jew live?" (Wie lebt a Jid?) was the common greeting of two East European Jews. When a Jew greeted in this way mumbled the words "The old nign...", no further questions were necessary. Things at home or in his native land were once again somewhere between bad and very bad. In short, it was always the same old story.

Some of the tracks on this CD originate in religious songs which were once widely known. "Riboyne shel oylam", a praise of the Lord of the world, even established a genre of its own – the *Dudle*. This name, incidentally, does not only refer to the constantly repeated address to God the Almighty. It is also derived from *dudka*, the shepherd's whistle, and *duder*, the flautist. The "Simkhu na" became the Simkhat-Torah and was sung during the feast of Torah Joy. "Omar adoyshem l'yankoyv", however, reveals vividly the diversity and changeableness of a single song. The monosyllabic dialogue with God, originally created in Lithuania, sporned independent versions of the song in Odessa, Warsaw and Kiev, until it emerged again in Jassy with an altered rhythm as a plain-tive recitative.

Most of the songs in this collection also involve themes or melodies handed down over generations. However, almost without exception, those poets who made an immortal contribution to the Yiddish tradition and folk music departed before their time.

Moyshe Kulbak and Izy Kharik, the two most important representatives of the Yiddish literary circle in Minsk, fell victim to Stalinist persecution in 1937. Mordecai Gebirtig was murdered by German fascists in the Krakow Ghetto in 1942. Leyzer Wolf met his death as a partisan fighter in the Lithuanian forests. Leyb Kvitko, who came from Kiev, was shot dead in 1952 and later officially rehabilitated. His children's poems, which were translated into twenty-two languages, sold millions of copies. Shmerke Kaczerginski, the poet and partisan fighter from Vilna, perished in 1954 in an aeroplane crash. Only Yoysef Kotliar and Itzik Manger (his "Book from Paradise" was also published in German) died a natural death. This account, however dramatic it may sound, can be considered typical of any generation of Eastern European Jews.

Although predominantly dating from the 1920s to the 1940s, the small selection of songs recorded here represents, in effect, more than a century, mainly due to the religious texts used. Whilst the first CD of the trio Jalda Rebling, Hans-Werner Apel and Stefan Maass was symbolised by the "Golden Peacock", the Yiddish miraculous bird which perplexes

and fascinates us because its beauty cannot be looked upon, the present collection of seventeen songs, produced in collaboration with the clarinetist Helmut Eisel, embodies the "golden chain" of Yiddish spiritual life spanning generations throughout the ages. Through this chain the present is linked to martyrs and those now forgotten, to Talmud scholars and masters of cabbala, itinerant preachers and vagrant musicians. The listener who lends an ear to that long-forgotten world will experience memories extending beyond birth. However, the Hassidic symbol of the golden chain also encompasses an alarming and conflicting idea. Should a single new link not be forged, more would be lost than the contribution made by an epoch. Everything dreamt of and created so far would disintegrate into nothing. The golden chain would ultimately break.

When Leyb Kvitko tells us in the title song of Nakhman, who is sent to buy a team of oxen but spends the money entrusted to him on a melody and is whipped by his master as a consequence, one should not simply dismiss this as the story of a fool. Two world-outlooks collide. It is therefore not simply a fable about someone who is being cheated, the musician being tricked out of his gift, thereby paraphrasing the German didactic fable *xLucky Hansx*. Rather, it may be seen as a Yiddish version of Aesop's fable about the cricket and the ant. However, the melody certainly cannot be put to the plough or satisfy the hungry mouths of children. Indeed, this is not its purpose. That Nign, which was borrowed from an old synagogic motive by Kvitko and not coincidentally includes the namesake rabbi Nakhman from Brazlav, claims much less. As a sing-song without words. The tune of the wise man on the torture rack of the world.

Andrej Jendrusch, april 1996

And go to God in heaven

And ask him: May it be so on earth?

Yes, it may indeed be like this,

Yes, it must indeed be like this,

It probably cannot be different on earth.

(Yiddish folk-song)