

APPENDIX A

Moses Milner: *DI HIMLEN BRENNEN*

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The second full-length Yiddish opera of which we know was Moses Milner's *Di himlen brennen* (The Heavens Are Ablaze), which, by all accounts, was completed in 1923 in Russia and produced the same year in Petrograd. The government and/or Bolshevik Communist Party censors, however, forced its cancellation after only three performances (by some accounts two) and then prohibited any further ones, allegedly on the grounds that it represented the forbidden "Jewish nationalism" and that it violated "revolutionary" (read Marxist-Leninist) principles and doctrines, both musically and subject-wise. The idea of a Jew whose forsaking of traditional Judaic learning caused his death was of course contrary to the anti-religious policies of the Party and state; and the absence of workers' concerns, coupled with reimagined Jewish folklore by an urbanized—viz., bourgeois—Jew, smacked of defiance of Bolshevik concepts.

The only manuscript of which we know resides in a library in St. Petersburg, so that devoting a chapter to it here proved impossible—all the more so under the circumstances as of this writing. Hence, whatever has been learned about the opera is reduced to this appendix.

Milner was one of the key figures of the New Jewish National School in music that was born in Russia and was an early member of its institutional arm, the Gesellschaft für jüdische Volksmusik in St. Petersburg, which was formally chartered in 1908. Unlike many of his colleagues in that movement, who emigrated within a few years of the Bolshevik coup in 1917—first to Berlin or Vienna, then to Mandatory Palestine for many, and, with the exception of only a few who remained in Palestine, ultimately to the United States—Milner chose for uncertain and unconfirmed reasons to remain in the new Soviet Union. His most important enduring music consists mainly of miniatures: Yiddish and Hebrew lieder, both artistic arrangements of folk material and entirely original compositions. Three were recorded and issued in the Soviet Union, probably in the late 1920s or early-to-mid 1930s.¹ Some of his songs (as well as other music) were published by state-affiliated organs such as institutes for "proletarian" or "Jewish proletarian" culture. So long as there was no recognizable link to Judaism as a "religion," these publications could present Yiddish titles, sometimes texts, and other information in Hebrew characters. During certain periods, however, and most likely for reasons now obvious to any serious student of the Stalin era, at least a few of his Yiddish or Hebrew songs were published secondarily only in Russian—with no visible indication of any Jewish connection. In addition, a handful of his songs were published outside the Soviet Union—in Berlin, Leipzig, Vienna, and Mandatory Palestine; and then in Israel.

Now that formerly sealed archives have been open after the collapse of the Soviet Union, researchers occasionally find a previously unknown Milner song or instrumental piece in manuscript (only), or even in Soviet-era published sheet music that eluded Western awareness. Such discoveries do not necessarily tell us anything about performance history, if any.

Milner's oeuvre includes a number of solo piano pieces, some of them highly virtuosic, that reflect his early serious piano studies. A number of these works betray admittedly diluted influences of Rachmaninoff, Balakirev, and Anton Rubinstein. Since the end of the Soviet era, additional, all but hidden Milner piano pieces of overt Jewish connection have been discovered. The Jewish elements are secular, viz., usually related to Yiddish folksong. Yet in these, as in better-known circulated pieces of his, one can also frequently detect traces of Hebrew liturgical modalities, synagogal melos, and cantorial clichés as well.

But Milner also wrote a number of large-scale works, including his *Symphony on Jewish Themes*, *Symphonic Suite, By the Rivers of Babylon* for chorus and orchestra, and a piece identified by Mendel Elkin—an actor and theatrical director—*Choreographic Symphony: Queen of Sheba*. In 1949 Gdal Saleski, a cellist as well as an amateur and frequently misinformed chronicler of Jewish composers, claimed to have visited Milner in 1936 in Leningrad. He reported that Milner had been working at the time on an oratorio for vocal soloists, chorus, and orchestra. Whether he ever completed such a work or whether it might be one of those listed here will probably never be known.

In the 1920s and 1930s Milner devoted a good deal of his gifts to writing incidental music for plays. He composed two such scores for Habima Theatre productions: Leivick's *Der golem* and Richard Beer-Hofmann's *Jacob's Dream*; at least seven for the Ukrainian Jewish State Theatre in Kharkov, including one in 1928–29 by the American author and “muckraker” Upton Sinclair and another in 1930–31 by the Yiddish poet and playwright Peretz Markish. He also composed at least one in the attempted but eventually aborted autonomous Jewish region Birobidzhan, for the Jewish State Theatre there (for the Sholem Aleichem play *Di Goldgreber*, as reported in the Soviet Yiddish newspaper *Der Emes*, in 1936) and a few for general Russian theaters. In addition, the New York Yiddish periodical *Der yidische kultur* referred to Milner's having contributed some incidental music to a 1947 Moscow Jewish State Theatre production of a play by the famous but subsequently doomed (by Stalin) Yiddish poet Itzik Feffer (at that time and at least until spring 1948 “in favor” with the Party prior to his embrace of pro-Zionism and a Jewish state), directed by Solomon Mikhoels—probably the greatest serious Yiddish actor of his day and then the de facto spokesman for Soviet Jewry. (Both Feffer and Mikhoels had been placed at the head of Stalin's bogus Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee during the war, and both were later murdered on Stalin's orders as “reactionary nationalists,” “rootless cosmopolitans,” and enemies of the state and the Revolution.)

There are large gaps in our knowledge of Milner's life and work, much of which are shrouded in uncertainty—even mystery. His birth date remains open to approximation (1886?), and, tragically, both his death date (perhaps early 1953) and the cause of his death can probably never be known. It seems that at some point, most likely for no particular “reason,” he was targeted by the Party and/or the state and its secret police, and—like many tens of thousands—was “made to disappear” in the middle of the night, almost certainly to be shot on some unknown date.

We have some evidence, however thin, concerning his activities prior to the mid-1930s. After that, we know almost nothing of his life. A 1948 article in the state-sanctioned Soviet Yiddish newspaper *Eynikayt* (shut down not long afterward) contained favorable mention of him in terms of his music, but nothing of his whereabouts or what he was doing at the time beside composing, in what activities he might have been involved, and so on.²

In search of preliminary information for a graduate thesis, a Russian- and Hebrew-speaking student, Marina Shemesh, visited Moscow, Kiev, and St. Petersburg at the beginning of the twenty-first century. She located a few Russian-language sources unavailable in the United States, and she located and interviewed some Milner family descendants. From those interviews it appears that, until he “disappeared,” Milner continued to write music for Russian and Yiddish theatre. The latter probably involved a type of cabaret rather than actual theatre, at a window of time when the Party and state were pretending, for complicated international propagandist reasons, to lay claim to an absence of antisemitism in the USSR. All this research by Shemesh was a worthy first step, but of course still inconclusive and insufficient for a comprehensive biography of Milner, which, together with a thorough study and analysis of his music, is both deserved and long overdue.

When *Di himlen brenen* received its premiere, in 1923, it was conducted by its composer and directed by Victor Romanovitch Rapaport. We can infer from reviews that the opera had at least three acts.³ The libretto, written by Milner and revised by Mordecai Rivesman, was apparently based loosely on the legend of Asmodeus and Lilith, a Jewish folkloric parable known in the inner recesses of the Pale of Settlement. The basic storyline concerns [Jewish] life in a “Jewish town” at the beginning of the nineteenth century—i.e., a small town heavily populated by unmodernized Hassidic Jews. Jonah, the *rebbe*’s favorite disciple, who is also engaged to his daughter, Bas Sheva, begins a challenging discourse with the *rebbe* about the causes of the centuries-old suffering of the Jews. The sky becomes lit up by fiery flashes (hence, the opera’s title), and the townsfolk see and interpret in the burning skies (heavens) an omen of coming disasters.

The “demon king” Asmodeus intervenes, appearing in the guise of a wandering beggar. He supports, encourages, and advocates on behalf of Jonah, strengthening and galvanizing doubts in his soul about the *rebbe*’s teachings. With the help of witchcraft from the beautiful, seductive Lilith, Asmodeus destroys Jonah’s love for Bas Sheva. Jonah succumbs to Lilith’s seductive calls and, having cast aside the Talmud, perishes after experiencing the first passionate but lethal kiss of the “demon queen.”

The *rebbe* and Jonah are set as foils, with the *rebbe* representing the world of tradition and Jonah representing “new,” modernistic ideas from outside their insular world.

Of the score, Galina Kopytova has written that the poetry of medieval myths and legends were influences on the music.⁴ Reviewers noted the richness of assumed folk melodies that formed the basis of the score: “The composer, an expert in biblical Hebrew melodies,” wrote one reviewer, “and ‘new’ folksongs gave an interesting formulation of Jewish folk motifs to his opera.” Just what was meant by “new folksongs” is obviously unclear, suggesting either that the reviewer simply didn’t understand the genre of “folksong” or that he meant folk-type melodic material.

The opera included numbers titled “Praise to the Rebbe,” “Sabbath Prayer,” “By the Rivers of Babylon (Ps. 137),” and a setting of an excerpt from *Shir hashirim* (the biblical Song of Songs), all of which apparently illustrated Milner’s solid technique for choral writing. Reviewers attributed the “great and undisputed success” of the composer to the choral scenes, especially the “arched chorus” in the third act.

The set, designed by Vladimir Alekseevitch, was described in reviews as a “closed hemisphere, which could “open up and transform into a sky burning with lights.”

In 1923 Mendel Elkin reported in the New York Yiddish periodical *Te’alit* that Milner also titled the opera alternatively as *Ashmoday*, or *Der ketz*, and emphasized that it concerned in general the nineteenth-century conflict between Hassidism and the Haskala. He noted that this was the first Yiddish opera ever produced in St. Petersburg—and probably the first anywhere in Russia. Later, Cantor Moshe Rudinov, who occupied the pulpit at New York’s Reform Temple Emanu-El for many years, reported that Milner’s opera received only two performances before being forbidden by “the authorities,” even from concert versions or performances, because of its association with mysticism.

A 1933 article in a Yiddish journal published in Buenos Aires, *Di pres*, referred to a second opera that Milner was said to have completed the previous year, which was supposed to be produced in Leningrad later in 1933. But it remains uncertain (more likely doubtful) that any such plan came to fruition, or, if so, under what circumstances. The composition of the opera, though not its performance, is mentioned in Zalman Zilberzweig’s *Leksikon fun yidishn te’ater* in an entry by Zalman Zilberblatt. Apparently the libretto was cobbled together by several writers. Its plot concerns a quasi-utopian ideological desiderata of the “Jewish masses” of the Soviet Union “returning” to agriculture—which suggests a vision of the agricultural activities and commitments of the Zionist enterprise in Mandatory Palestine.



APPENDIX A — ENDNOTES

- 1 Milner's first published work, however, was liturgical: a setting for cantor and choir a cappella of a *piyyut* for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, *Un' tane tokef*, which was published by the Gesellschaft für jüdische Volksmusik in 1913 while he was still in his final year as a student at the conservatory. Albert Weisser (*The Modern Renaissance of Jewish Music*; NY 1954) engaged in a fairly detailed analysis of the setting and found it wanting and inspired in nearly equal measures: "Fortunately, though, in this work the 'genius' outweighs the fudge." Other serious authorities, however—for example, the erudite Cantor Max Wohlberg, a longtime professor of cantorial studies at the Cantors Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America—always remarked on the setting's unique sophistication and artistry.
- 2 M. Polansky, "*Shafn musikalische verk farn folk*," Moscow, April, 1948.
- 3 See in Galina Kopytova, "*Opera M. A. Milnera 'Nebesa pylaiut'*," in Leonid Guralnik, ed., *Iz istorii evreiskoi muzyki v Rossii*, Vol. I (St. Petersburg, 2001).
- 4 Ibid.