

THE YIDDISHISTS

OUR SERIES DELVES INTO THE TREASURES OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST YIDDISH ARCHIVE AT YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH



Record and sleeve for *Yiddish Folk Songs* (1968), sung by Ruth Rubin and part of YIVO's Ruth Rubin Legacy. The site includes Rubin's field recordings, lectures, concerts, radio interviews, videos, manuscripts and other published material

created for them, this time women were creating their own songs, about their own life and the life around them... in their own vernacular, Yiddish', she wrote in her doctoral dissertation, 'Jewish Woman and Her Folksong'.

At her recitals, she often carried a brown plastic binder entitled 'Woman', which she referred to for notes on the subject. Her 'Woman' programme frequently included the song 'Hot zikh mir di zip tsezipt' (My sieve was all worn out). On one recorded version of the song she is accompanied by American folk singer Pete Seeger on the banjo.

'Hot zikh mir di zip tsezipt' takes its melody from a 'sher' (klezmer square dance) tune quoted in Rumshinsky's 'Bulgar', a composition by Yiddish theatre composer Joseph Rumshinsky. Rubin learned the song from her mother, Rachel Grover-Spivack, who only remembered one verse in her Bessarabian Yiddish dialect. In what she called 'a true folk process', Rubin admitted to having written the second and third verses herself. The song begins:

*Hot zikh mir di zip tsezipt
Un hot zikh mir tsebrokhn.
Hot zikh mir di shikh tserisn,
Tants ikh in di hoyle zokn!*

(My sieve was worn out,
And altogether broken.
My shoes were torn,
So, I'm dancing in my stockings!)

Rubin captured the voice and memory of generations who had grown up in a flourishing Yiddish-speaking environment that they had seen annihilated by Nazi destruction and then strangled by Stalinist repression. She wrote: 'When people say, "I'm interested in your music", I answer, "Well, you know it really isn't mine, it belongs to the people... My interpretation is the only thing I can call mine."' ■

See: yivo.org. The Ruth Rubin Legacy online exhibition is at exhibitions.yivo.org/ruthrubin. Lorin Sklamberg is YIVO's sound archivist and a Grammy award-winning artist; Eléonore Biezunski is YIVO's associate sound archivist and a performer of Yiddish music.

RUTH RUBIN: FOLKLORIST

YIVO's latest addition is a vast online collection of Yiddish folk songs gathered by folklorist Ruth Rubin. Lorin Sklamberg and Eléonore Biezunski uncover the story behind these remarkable recordings

The folk saying "Tsu zingen un tsu zogn" [To sing and to say]...derives from the time when the Jewish "Spielmänner" (minstrels of the Middle Ages) would recite their bardic tales set to a chant. In the Yiddish vernacular, it [the saying] has come to mean a person who has a lot to complain about', wrote the Yiddish song collector and performer Ruth Rubin in one of the many notebooks in which she documented her work.

The notebook is one among two dozen such documents that form part of The Ruth Rubin Legacy, a major new online exhibition of the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, which includes field recordings by Rubin of over 2,500 Yiddish songs as well as photographs, concert recordings, manuscripts of her lectures and radio interviews.

Rubin was born Rivke Rosenblatt in 1906 in Khotin, Bessarabia. By the age of six she was living in Montreal – she remembered vividly the visit of Sholem Aleichem to her Yiddish Sunday school, shortly before his death.

Rubin spoke Yiddish, English and French and attended the city's Yiddish and public schools. When she was 18, she moved to New York, attending night school while

working as a secretary by day. In 1929 she published *Lider*, a book of original Yiddish poems.

In the mid-1930s, she began studying and collecting Yiddish folk songs, following in the footsteps of British folk music pioneer Cecil Sharp. She also began recording as a vocalist for Asch Records.

Around the same time, she purchased a Wilcox Gay portable disc recorder and, in 1947, began documenting Yiddish singers primarily in New York City and Montreal.

She also began presenting lecture-recitals at libraries, community centres and retirement homes in North American cities. She encouraged local presenters to alert audience members that, after her presentation, she would interview and record the Yiddish song repertoires of anyone interested in singing for her. In this way she documented some of the most remarkable traditional Jewish singers of the 20th century, including the Montrealer Harry Ary and Vilna partisan Shmerke Kaczerginsky.

Many of Rubin's recitals focused on Jewish women's experience. 'Little has been written on the history of Jewish women... Where, in previous periods, Jewish songs by women had been generally