

“On the Road Stands a Tree” – the Revolving of a Song

An Educational Activity for Students

Based on Songs Written Before and During the Holocaust

The educational staff of Yad LaYeled museum at the Ghetto Fighters' Museum has initiated and is carrying out a unique activity that deals with the songs that were written in Eastern Europe before and during the Holocaust. The songs that were written before the war and sung by the Jews of Eastern Europe dealt with all the aspects of the Jewish world. They dealt with the difficulties of daily life, with the poverty, but also presented a humorous dimension that was based on Biblical stories and fables, thus emphasizing their longing for Eretz Israel. Most of the songs were written in Yiddish.

The songs that were written during the Holocaust were in part the adaptation of songs from the period preceding the Holocaust and in part new compositions. They were written under terrible living conditions in an atmosphere of mourning, despair and constant fear, and so they have different characteristics. Many of the Holocaust songs are relatively short, and most of them lack a refrain. We can assume that the composers of the songs intended to write simple, direct and catchy songs that would be sung close to the time of their composition. The content of the songs varies: songs of identification with something, of loneliness, terror, sorrow and grief, lullabies, songs of heroism and even songs of encouragement. Naturally the sad motifs in the songs are what stand out, but in many of them there are motifs of encouragement and hope.

The activity is based on a selection of songs that were collected in the CD “Beneath the Starry Sky”, produced by the Ghetto Fighters' Museum.

Purpose of the Activity – To introduce students everywhere to the world of the culture and folk music of the Jews of Eastern Europe in the days before and during the Holocaust

The Focal Point of the Activity – Listening to the songs, discussion of the accompanying lyrics and learning from them, dealing with their contents and learning about the fate of their composers

The activity is intended for middle school and high school students and includes:

1. Listening to songs from the Jewish world that was and from the Holocaust
2. Learning the historical background and discussing the contents of the songs
3. Creative activity ensuing from the songs

The activity is also suitable for classes participating in the Partnership 2000 program of the Jewish Agency, which have partner classes abroad. These classes can carry out the learning in coordination with their overseas partners and share their experiences from the activity with each other.

The lyrics of the songs appear in Hebrew and English, and enable the students to understand their contents.

The Songs Dealt with in the Workshop

Songs from the Jewish World that Was

1. *Oyfn Veg Shteyt a Boym* – by Itzik Manger and P. Laskovsky
2. Sad Wind – a poem by Yitzhak Katzenelson sung to a folk melody

This section will deal with the world of Jewish youth in the period between the two world wars, with life between the Jewish community and the pioneering youth movements.

As an example of a workshop activity we will here present the song “On the Road Stands a Tree”.

The original song is one of the “Hibat Zion” (love of Zion) songs that were sung by the Jews of Eastern Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century, a song of longing for Zion, which tells of a Jew on his way to Eretz Israel who stops beside the tree for the afternoon prayer. The composer of this song is unknown.

On the basis of this song, Itzik Manger wrote his song “On the Road Stands a Tree”. The song tells of a boy who wants to fly like a bird to the tree standing alone in the frost. The boy wants to sing the tree a happy song to comfort it, but his mother pleads with him to wear warm clothes, lest he catch cold: a sweater, galoshes, an undershirt, a fur coat, a scarf, a vest... All these clothes make it hard for him to fly, and he foregoes it...

This seems to be an allegory for Eretz Israel, which for years stood waste, and the young Jew who wanted to fly to it and make it remained remained in the Diaspora because of materialistic issues that overcame spiritual ones.

The following version of the song was written by Shmuel Fisher in Eretz Israel during the War of Independence. The tree became a tree that rose in the Arava, and was cut down by an unknown hand. The boy continues to plant both trees and hope.

Another version of a song about a tree was written by Natan Alterman in the “Seventh Column” section in the Davar newspaper. The song is called “Al Em Haderech” (melody by Naomi Shemer). It is a lullaby sung by a mother to her son in an illegal immigrant ship wending its way to Israel. It refers to the original song about the Jew who stops beside the tree for the afternoon prayer, but Alterman continues to tell the story of that tree’s transformations. The tree became a torture pole to which the beaten Jew was fastened, and afterwards the tree was felled and became the mast of the ship making its way to Israel. When the gates of Israel are opened and the ship reaches a safe harbor, the tree will become a prayer column, but also an altar.

Songs from the Holocaust

1. In the Slobodka Yeshiva – by Axelrod and Goldfaden
2. Ponary – by Katcherginsky and Wolkowyski (Alexander Tamir)
3. Our Little Village is Aflame – by Mordechai Gebirtig
4. Song of the Jewish Partisans – by Hirsh Glik to a folk melody
5. The Youth Anthem – by Katcherginsky and Rubin

This section will deal with the destruction of European Jewry as it is expressed in the first three songs. We will emphasize the importance of Jewish organization into the partisan units that fought in the forests and the role of the Zionist youth movements in leading the ghetto uprisings.

The workshop will be facilitated by Tali Shner, the director of Yad LaYeled at the Ghetto Fighters' Museum and Ruthie Shiba, the facilitator of the music workshop at Yad LaYeled.

Duration of the workshop: 45 minutes