HIGHBROW, LOWBROW, AND FOLK: THE DIASPORIC POPULISM OF ISA KREMER

In a 1924 advertisement brochure, a range of "most eminent musicians" praised the products of New York piano makers Knabe and Co., and next to Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Camille Saint-Saëns, and Giacomo Puccini, we see a young singer, today forgotten, named Isa Kremer.[11] At the time she was a musical icon but also an ethnic one. In 1926, Zionist ideologue Vladimir Jabotinsky wrote in *The Jewish Tribune* that he was "not quite sure whether it is quite lawful for a Zionist to be so madly patriotic about a city somewhere in the Diaspora—but that is how we [Odessans] feel about Odessa." He entitled this loving tribute, "Odessa, Isa Kremer's City."[12] In fact, Kremer's life was not attached to any city—hers was a truly nomadic life. Born on October 21, 1887, in the tiny village of Beltz, Bessarabia (today's Ukraine, very close to the Polish border), Kremer moved with her parents in 1899 to Odessa, where she grew up but eventually left and never returned. She arrived in Argentina at age fifty-one, in 1938, and died eighteen years later in Córdoba on July 7, 1956. Her prestige and artistic life spanned four decades, but then fell into oblivion just until recently.[13]

According to the notes Isa Kremer left among her papers at the IWO archive in Buenos Aires,[14] her father, a not very successful merchant, sent her to study music in Italy, where in 1904 she began giving concerts to pay for her studies. In 1914 she returned to Odessa to work with a local opera company. The war started, and in 1916, not seeing any future in the opera, she moved to Moscow as a popular singer, and

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[11] The company's website proudly states that Francis Scott Key, composer of "The Star-Spangled Banner," commissioned a Knabe piano for his house in 1838, and Tchaikovsky used one at the inauguration of Carnegie Hall in 1891. https://www.knabepianos.com/history.php (accessed February 18, 2012).

[12] Michael Katz, "'Go Argue with Today's Children': The Jewish Family in Sholem Aleichem and Vladimir Jabotinsky," *European Judaism* 43, no. 1 (May 30, 2010): 63–77, 69 and n14.

[13] Ted Schillinger, *Isa Kremer: the People's Diva* (New York: Women Make Movies, 2000); Sandra McGee Deutsch, *Crossing Borders, Claiming a Nation: a History of Argentine Jewish Women, 1880–1955* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 187–88.

[14] The autobiographical notes were dictated to a certain "M. Iardeni," probably Mordecai Yardeini, author of several books on Yiddish music and musicians; Yardeini was affiliated with the pro-Soviet New York Yiddish newspaper *Morgn-frayhayt*. I thank Zachary Baker for this reference.

there, according to her memoir, she did succeed. When the Russian Revolution began, she moved to Turkey.

Among the earliest documents of her artistic life is a series of press clips from 1920 in Constantinople (today's Istanbul). A "*Grande Soirée en l'honneur de Mme Isa Kremer*" included in its repertoire "the most cherished Russian, Neapolitan, Jewish, and Gypsy songs" (*les plus aimées chansons russes, napolitaines, juives et tzigaines*). That same year at another concert she performed Franz Liszt and David Popper's *Hungarian Rhapsody*, Pablo de Sarasate's *Zigeunerweisen* ("Gypsy airs"), *Chansons Juives et Napolitaines* (composer not indicated), Henryk Wienawski's *Souvenir de Moscou*, Leo Zeitlin's *Eli Sion*, Popper's *Fileuse*, and finally *Hatikvah* ("The Hope," a Zionist anthem since the 1897 First Zionist Congress, then Israel's unofficial anthem since 1948 and official anthem since 2004). This list includes thus Romantic pieces, a nationalist anthem, and not only Jewish but also Neapolitan *chansons* presented as anonymous repertoire.

A chronicler of these concerts revealed the main aesthetic and ideological categories of the global music of the time:

> The Russian *diseuse* Isa Kremer. Possibly the word *diseuse* is not accurately descriptive but what she gave us was an endless series of the most *charming light songs in Russian, Neapolitan, and Hebrew* [my emphasis]. She possesses quite the finest talent in this genre we have ever seen possessed by a woman artiste. Her voice is almost contralto and you can see that she adores what she sings. The programme had, in fulsome adulation, compared her to Occidental artistes of the same kind, but she is undoubtedly far superior to any such artistes in the west. The fact is that *in the west this genre is either confined to the cafe-chantant and vulgarised thereby, or to the drawing room*, where a certain number of little misses with semi-educated voices do occasionally give us some of the old folk songs . . . It is true that we could not understand the Russian words, nor even—so fast did Isa Kremer sing—the Neapolitan. As for the Hebrew, having never studied the Bible in the original, we again have to confess ourselves defeated. But this did not make any difference to our understanding of the art. It was perfectly clear they were full of that *touching folk element which has been preserved integrally in the East*, and that they phrased with charm light emotions and momentary sorrows. In her Neapolitan songs Isa Kremer put into her voice *the warmth and passion of the South* and the hoyden gaiety of Naples street girls. Elsewhere in her songs, you felt her voice laughing in rounds of glee and in others again in felt to an extraordinary sadness. The Russian present gave her a great reception and it was very well deserved. She could teach a great deal to the stage of the West.[15]

[15] *The Orient News* (Constantinople), February 13, 1920.

Seven crucial definitions of music are revealed in this paragraph.

First, the multiple criteria to define national origins in music: Kremer sang a Zionist anthem accompanied by two musicians who were also Jewish, but having been trained in Moscow made her a *Russian* artist. Second, a musical hierarchy: art, folk, and commercial music. Kremer offers an educated, uplifted version of folk, and both training and folk save music from the vulgar "drawing room." Third, *style* hierarchies: she was a *diseuse*—a talker, teller, monologist, or dramatic performer—of *light songs*, not opera arias or more sophisticated works. Fourth, the Orientalist "folk," opposite to the corny, semi-improvised old folk repertoire of ordinary café-chanteuses of "the West," artistically superior because it had "the touching folk element which has been preserved integrally in the East." "Oriental," in this context, means *truer*—preserved from the vulgarization of the West. Fifth, the myth of "the South," the *Australist* version of Orientalism;[16] the "warmth and passion of the South" define her as an *authentic* singer. "East" and "South" share, under this light, a common distance from the "West." Sixth, the ethnocentric convergence of all folk traditions: in other words, that folk music ultimately expresses a transcultural, global tradition. The power of this ideology is noteworthy: Kremer's Russian, Neapolitan, and Hebrew songs reveal the authentic folk art in such an evident way that the musical critic can perceive it, *even without knowing Russian, Neapolitan, or Hebrew*. Seventh, and finally, both *talent* and *authenticity* as key to popular genius. Isa is not only more authentic, but "possesses quite the finest talent" and is "undoubtedly superior" to any comparable "woman artiste."

Kremer's repertoire expressed thus a widespread ideology of popular music as being an authentic and talented take on multiple, potentially global, musical origins. Her career illuminates the possible connections across geographic areas and musical categories. Let us reconstruct it.

From Istanbul she jumped to the most prestigious stages. At a concert at Berlin's Philharmonic Great Hall in 1922, the program began with Chopin's nocturne and waltz and followed with Russian, French, Italian, and Yiddish songs.[17] In October of that year she made her debut at Carnegie Hall in New York City. By 1923 her name was widespread in both the United States and Europe. A Russian-language sheet music published by the trading firm Milan Auman & Co. in Krsko, Slovenia, presents a drawing of her in a Flamenco style and the title "*chansons d'*Isa Kremer."

In 1927 she was back in the United States, but this time, surprisingly, in a different kind of stage and presenting a different artistic persona. Kremer offered at the Palace Orpheum in Milwaukee her "first venture in vaudeville" with a "program of those

[16] José Moya proposes and discusses Australism in "Latin America: The Limitations and Meaning of a Historical Category," *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1–24.

[17] The April 7, 1922, program quoted praise of Isa Kremer's numerous previous concerts, including praise for a concert in Moscow written by the *Russkija Wedomosti* critic Joel Engel, composer and leader of the revalorization of Jewish musical folklore in Eastern Europe.

exquisitely interpreted folksongs of different nations, for which she is celebrated," sharing a bill with acrobats, dancers, and movies—a diversity of performances similar to the one we saw in Manila. She carried prestige with her: "The concert stage has lost one of its most talented singers and the broad boards of vaudeville are the richer for it . . . Strangely, she proved to be a knockout. [. . .] she has IT written large all over her. Monday night she sang in four languages and was applauded to the rafters in each one."

In an interview she inverted the musical hierarchy, valorizing the "real music lovers" and "folks" in the vaudeville audience over the "high-brows" as the ultimate musical judge:

> According to her own telling, she is better known by the "high-brows" than by real music lovers . . . On the vaudeville stage she comes out to sing ballads and folk songs of many countries, in many languages. She says this is her first experience in singing folk songs to "folks," that is to people who don't go to the music places because it's fashionable or the thing to do. "I must win over a vaudeville audience," she said. "Many of them never heard of me. They don't clap when I come on, they wait to hear what I can do."[18]

In another interview ("Artists Who Sings in 12 Tongues Makes Debut in Vaudeville Here") she explained her artistic career as a populist choice: "I wanted to try vaudeville. For there you play to the people who want to be amused. I love Milwaukee, its people, and vaudeville . . . I was in Russia throughout the war. When the Bolsheviks won I was given a government contract. They spared me because they said I was of the people. I am proud that I am of the people." Another chronicler explained how her multilingual repertoire was an appropriate container for interpreting each audience's language: "It's the *coquetery* [*sic*] of her eyes and voice aided by just a touch of foreign accent, that give these English and American songs a color all their own, gives them that something different that strikes the listeners' fancy and willingly makes him forgive some of the other songs that he did not understand."[19] The article explains Isa's "stage" style as a result of her earliest training in opera: "Her early experiences go back to the time when she sang Mimi to Tito Schipa's Rudolfo in *La bohème*." This success in vaudeville led her, later that year, to Broadway.

Isa Kremer toured Europe in 1929 and 1930 and was celebrated by critics from all over the ideological spectrum, including the Italian newspaper *Il Lavoro Fascista* [the Fascist labor] (April 3, 1930), whose review Kremer incorporated into her concert programs: "a woman with a soul so great that all the other peoples can be mirrored into it." In London in 1930, she published a songbook called *Album of Jewish Folk-Songs*, all of them in Yiddish. In 1934 a tour brought her for the first time to distant Buenos Aires, where she performed at the Odeón Theater. The program included the praise of

[18] *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, August, 23, 1927.
[19] *Milwaukee Leader*, August 24, 1927.

a famous admirer, Albert Einstein: "Isa Kremer is the most marvelous interpreter of folk music of all peoples and I greet her as a sign of deep admiration and gratitude."

Kremer moved to Buenos Aires in 1938. There she became fully internationalist. Performing in November 1938 at the Young Men's Hebrew Association concert, her program began with a Yemenite, a Greek, and a Tartar song, then followed with a section of three "cradle songs" ("French, Negro, Jewish"), and by another described as "Jewish children songs." The pianist, the Russian Ivan Basilevsky, performed two solo pieces: a "Polonaise" by Chopin and the 1927 "Malagueña" by Cuban composer Ernesto Lecuona. This piece (a Cuban love song to an archetypical Andalusian woman) and "Mucho te quiero," a *bailecito* (an Argentine traditional folk song), were probably the first pieces in her repertoire we would call Latin American.[20]

In August 1939 the main Argentine radio magazine, *Radiolandia*, interviewed "the famous Russian balladist" before a series of shows on Radio Belgrano in Buenos Aires, where she would sing "*all the folklores of the world*." The published interview, titled "Isa Kremer: The Voice that Sings the Emotion of the People," presented her as an interpreter of the "soul of the people" acclaimed in France, England, and the United States as "one of the most authentic voices of the regional accent." She was authentic enough to make a commentator on her previous shows in 1934 write that Kremer "gave the impression of having born Argentine, from Argentine parents, and having an extraordinary voice for interpreting our folklore." Kremer described Argentine folklore as

> very sad and very beautiful. Maybe the most beautiful of the world . . . it doesn't seem like any other else. Maybe a little bit like Spain's, but the *cante jondo* [flamenco singing] isn't sad, but tragic. Yours is sweet, peaceful, sentimental . . . The sweetness of a *Vidalita* [a folk style from Argentina's Northwestern provinces] is unique among all the singings of the earth. And the *Triste* [another folk style] has the entrancing suggestiveness of religious music.

Kremer praised local folk styles, compared them to Spain's, and then, asked about tango, showed a subtle understanding of it, and of how authenticity works in global entertainment. She had a great collection of tango records,

> and in my travels and stays in Europe I heard it being sung. Tango is in the spirit of Argentines . . . An Argentine is an Argentine in any country, in any city in the world. He's been known for his way of looking at women . . . In the eyes of a *porteño* [inhabitant of Buenos Aires] citizen there is a special gaze; mix of tenderness, gallantry, and superiority. When I feel observed like this on the street, I would never respond to such a gaze for anything in the world . . . The women who don't live in Buenos Aires feel somewhat intimidated . . . Which is attractive! Alas, the Argentine men look this way at every woman that comes

[20] "Isa Kremer" Box, Jewish Research Institute (IWO), Buenos Aires.

> in their way . . . Going back to the tango: please tell the audience that in my show at Radio Belgrano I will sing Argentine tangos. Not at all English-language American tangos, nor German or Italian ones . . . your tangos . . . I swear that if I manage to correctly sing a *porteño* tango in Buenos Aires, I'll have the right to sing it anywhere else.[21]

The pictures show her at the Radio Belgrano studio, accompanied at the piano by *maestro* Rodolfo Sachs, another European exile.[22] In June of that same year, she performed in a show titled "The Soul of the Song of All Peoples" (*El alma de la canción de todos los pueblos*). Kremer's first years in Buenos Aires were marked by benefit concerts related to World War II, including the *Junta de la Victoria*, an anti-fascist organization that drew upon previous socialist, communist, and suffragist movements and included women from all ethnic and social origins.[23] As her repertoire grew, it incorporated songs from the Americas and from Soviet Russia.

How did Kremer organize such a diverse repertoire? In 1941 at the National School of Music in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and in a July 1942 program in Buenos Aires, Kremer divided the twenty-two songs thematically into eight categories: Labor, Lullabies, Love, Women, Children, Soldiers, Blacks, and Chassidim, poetic themes presented as universal. She performed on October 6, 1942, in Montevideo, at the concert hall of the national public broadcasting system (S.O.D.R.E., the official and largest broadcasting station in the country, whose music library and record collection was directed by the German musicologist Curt Lange, who will play a decisive role in our history.) That night Kremer, accompanied by Dr. Pablo Manelsky at the piano, sang twenty-four multinational songs, and the program includes her explanation of each of them.

The first part presented eight songs: "Wide River" (very likely, "The River is Wide"), an American spiritual, the type of song "by which black people arrive at religious ecstasy." Then "Piccaniny," an American lullaby, a "product of the infinite tenderness of black mothers toward their children"; "Volga," a song which conveys "sailing images of the famous river that has dragged so much pain . . . We have loved your old songs, Volga; wouldn't you like to listen to our new Soviet songs now?"; "Moscowa," a love song to the bright future of the capital; "Chittarata," an ironic and melancholic Italian song about the witty smile of a peasant woman; "La Marcha de los Pioneros" ("March of the Pioneers"), a Soviet children's song dedicated to the fatherland; and "¡No Señor!" ("No Sir!"), the Spanish version of a sentimental English song.

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[21] "Isa Kremer: la voz que canta la emoción del pueblo," *Radiolandia*, Agosto 1939.

[22] "Sachs . . . went to Argentina in 1933 as Austrian and became citizen of Argentina in 1941; there he developed a career as musician, composer of popular songs and film music, pianist, accompanist, music director; in autumn 1944 cofounded in Buenos Aires the night cabaret 'Mosquito;' later on worked in trading business as importer; in 1953 opened a restaurant with a friend in Barcelona; died in September 1956 in Barcelona; buried in Buenos Aires." Klaus Völker, *Ich verreise auf einige Zeit*, c1999, p. 54, quoted at the Library of Congress Name Authority catalogue, http://id.loc.gov/authorities/names/no00340l0.html (accessed February 25, 2012).

[23] McGee Deutsch, *Crossing Borders*, 185–89.

The second part was about love and began with three "Oriental songs": "Yafim haleiloth," a Yemenite love song set in the desert; "Bibikey Kiz," a Tartar song sung by a man while his fiancée dances, "because Tartar men never dance and Tartar women never sing"; and "Egia Mola," a patriotic Greek song. The following four were "Dance Songs": the English "The second minuet," about grandparents who meet each other dancing a minuet; the Bavarian "Philys," in which a young woman refuses to obey her mother's order to enter a convent; the French "En dansant," a love song set in a picnic; and the Russian "Molodka," about the conflict between an old peasant and his young wife.

The third part was about war and still included popular love songs: "Si mañana viene la guerra" ("If the War Comes Tomorrow"), a Soviet song about the necessity of being ready today to fight tomorrow; "Madelon," a popular French military song; the American "Inky Dinky," in which an American attempts to talk with a French woman but just knows two words: "*parlez vous?*"; "Morena salada," a "song of the Spanish soldier, full of emotion and poetic feeling"; the Jewish song "Der Prisiv," in which a Jewish man "defends his Soviet fatherland where there are no more pogroms or persecutions"; two Soviet songs: "Pájaros libres" ("Free Birds"), which praises the invincible Soviet youth ready to die for its fatherland, and "Marineros rojos," the hymn of the Red Navy; the American "Little Sparrow," in which an unmarried seamstress sings about her distrust of men; and finally the French revolutionary anthem "La marsellaise," which "doesn't belong only to France anymore. It is the universal song of freedom, of anybody who loves the life and wishes the resurrection of all the enslaved peoples." Soviet, African American, Spanish, Jacobin, Jewish, Yemenite—the ambition of singing "the Song of All the People" was almost literal.[24]

In Argentina Kremer married doctor Gregorio Bermann, the communist and active anti-fascist organizer who a few years before had created the Argentine medical brigade that served the Republican armies in Spain during the Civil War. This could explain the incorporation into her programs of Spanish translations by Rafael Alberti, the famous Spanish poet, Republican, and Communist, who arrived in Argentine exile the same year as Kremer. His are the Spanish versions of "Little Sparrow," "Wide River," "Le petit navire," "A vieglied," "Bibikey Kitz," and many other Greek, Tartar, American, Yiddish, and Russian songs.

Toward the end of the war she toured New York and London with recitals of folk song, which included a piece by Manuel de Falla (the "Ritual Fire Dance" from his 1915 ballet *Love the Magician*), another Spanish Republican exiled in Argentina in 1939, who had moved from Buenos Aires to Córdoba soon after his arrival and died

[24] Kremer's own archive included a collection of folk songbooks: *French-Canadian Folk-Songs* (London and New York, 1927); *Smokey Mountain Ballads*, by The Carter Family (New York, 1934); *New Songs the Soviets Sing*; a publication by the Ukranian National Chorus; and scores of Russian, Gipsy, Caucasian, Soviet, and French songs, among others, printed by publishing houses in New York, London, Warsaw, Moscow, Buenos Aires, and Paris. "Isa Kremer—Partituras Música Folklórica," IWO.

there in late 1946. Kremer kept performing her folk repertoire until at least 1951, when she toured Tel Aviv and Paris. She died in Córdoba, Argentina, in 1956.

Kremer's musical practice challenges our national and hierarchical preconceptions in music history. It clearly defies the binary approaches to Latin American culture, such as art/popular, highbrow/lowbrow, European/native, hegemonic/subaltern, and cosmopolitan/folkloric. In the United States, critics celebrated her populist step from the art scene to vaudeville, while in Argentina her repertoire was praised as a global folklorist project, comparable to Carl Sandburg's *American Songbag*, or to Andés Chazarreta's performance of Santiagueño culture for Buenos Aires audiences.[25] Kremer's journey indicates the emergence in the 1920s and 1930s of shifting musical cartographies and hierarchies.

Her journey also suggests that gernes defined with tags such as Cuban, folk, Argentine, tangos, vidalitas and others reveal a Latin American circulation that not required an encompassing "Latin American" category. Finally, her claim of performing *the music of the people* across linguistic and geographic borders suggests that musicians in the 1930s were embracing a *transnational populist* rhetoric that would be essential to musical Latin Americanism as well.

[25] Ricardo Jonatas Kaliman, "Dos actitudes ilustradas hacia la música popular: para una historia social de la industria del folklore musical argentino," *Revista Argentina de Musicología* 17 (December 2016): 37–56.