

Wolf Krakowski: The Last Yiddish Bluesman

By Rachael Kafrissen

Gilgul: Transformation, metamorphosis; version; according to Jewish lore, the being (human or animal) into which the soul of a dead person may pass to continue life and atone for sins committed in a previous incarnation.

Gilgul HaNefesh: Transmigration of the Soul

So opens the stunning, ambitious and unique Yiddish-language album by Wolf Krakowski called "*Transmigrations*." You can tell a truly great album when it comes to you as a complete text which has its own narrative as well as its musical and thematic unity. "*Transmigrations*" is just such an album.

Using twelve Yiddish standards (and two contemporary songs) drawn from the ghetto, the theater, folk tradition, and other sources, Krakowski undertakes to present the cataclysmic transformation of Eastern European, Yiddish-speaking Jewry, from pre-World War II to post-war new Diaspora, in song.

Not only is it the marvelous choice and juxtaposition of songs, but it is the transformation of the music itself which is so astonishing. Listening to "*Transmigrations*," one feels a repair in "*di goldene keyt*" (golden chain) between the generations. If secular Yiddish culture had been allowed to run a "normal" course, this is what Yiddish music, in the late nineties would sound like--informed by and infused with tradition, but invigorated and continually kept relevant by a dialogue between cultures, Jewish and non.

We have seen this kind of dialogue before -- groups like the Klezmatics and Hasidic New Wave have created a klezmer jazz fusion which has consistently been some of the most exciting new Jewish music to come along. Krakowski takes a different route than the jazz-oriented New York klezmer bands, though. And "*Transmigrations*" is not a klezmer album, neo or trad. Krakowski's work is heavily informed by black music, too, but it is from the deep history of the blues that he draws his inspiration.

An album like this had to come from someone like Krakowski, born in the Saalfelden-Farmach Displaced Persons Camp (Austria) in 1947, native Yiddish speaker, product of Toronto's "Junction" neighborhood, bluesman, actor, carpenter, builder of cross-cultural bridges. Unlike some contemporary interpreters of Yiddish song, Mandy Patinkin being a good example, Krakowski has intimate, fluent knowledge of his subject, and that comes through in the music. He is not mining something distant from him for nostalgia, nor is he "recreating."

Krakowski is the real thing, the last Yiddish bluesman, who with this album, links himself to such chroniclers of Jewish life as Mordechai Gebirtig (another poet/carpenter). Krakowski's core is Yiddish, but his years of immersion in the blues have allowed him to make a brilliant connection between the two worlds. What could be a more fortuitous pairing than that of the musical styles of the sadness, longing and "blues" of African Americans, arguably the most oppressed group in the United States for the last 100 years, with the songs of the Jews, among the most oppressed groups in world history?

With that said, "*Transmigrations*," through its wide-ranging song choices and inventive arrangements, presents us with a Diaspora history of Jewish themes in miniature. The imagery is classic and traditional, but within the musical context that Krakowski has created, it gains new and resonant layers of meaning.

The album opens with "*Tsen Brier*" a counting song documenting the brothers in a family and how they are reduced, one by one, until only one is left. The song is not an optimistic one, with its allusion to the disappearance of the Tribes of Israel. We start out at the point where the possibility of new life seems to have been snuffed out. But the powerful electric guitar and beautiful work of the backup singers is a counterpoint to Krakowski's mournful delivery. They signal that this is not an ending but a beginning (literally). Krakowski also constructs a bittersweet tribute to Poland and the complex relationship between the Jews and their sometimes fickle hosts. He uses Mordechai Gebirtig's "*Blayb Gezunt Mir, Kroke*" and Ben Zion Witr's "*Varshe*" to illustrate the paradoxes inherent in Polish-Jewish existence. At times, it was the most welcoming country in Europe, allowing the Jewish communities to flourish there, economically and culturally, and then, at times, among the cruelest.

"Varshe" speaks of the intoxicating mix of Jews to be found in that city; "*Kasidimlekh, nigidemlekh, tsiunistelekh, bundistelekh*" (Khasidim, well-to-do, Zionists, Bundists). Witler acknowledges its destruction, but like the author of laments before him ("If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither, let my tongue stick to my palate" --*Psalms 137*), he promises never to forget that Warsaw, too, will be rebuilt. "My Warsaw, you will once again be/A Jewish city as before." In "*Blayb Gezunt Mir, Kroke*," Gebirtig refers to Krakow's "holy ground," even as he is being driven away by *der vilder soyne* (the savage enemy). On "*Her Nor, Du Sheyn Meydele*," Krakowski takes a break from the overwhelming sadness that threatens to engulf at the end of "*Yeder Ruft Mir Zhamele*." With "*Her Nor, Du Sheyn Meydele*," he breaks for a rollicking duet with Yiddish diva Fraidy Katz (Krakowski's real-life wife). At first, the song seems an odd choice among his others, being relatively upbeat folksong about young lovers ready to abandon everything for each other. But Krakowski and Katz turn it into a playful, adult song. You can imagine it as a dialogue between the artist and his wife, he inviting her to come with him on his travels, but cautioning her at every step of the way; the life of an artist is not an easy one.

"Listen pretty girl/What will you do on such a long journey/. . . What will you eat/Where will you sleep" --to which the *shayn meydele* replies, "I will go through every street and shout,(I will wash clothes/I will eat bread and salt/I can sleep on a bundle of straw." By putting "*Her Nor*" on this album, Krakowski seems to remind us that the ardor, inventiveness and persistence of love survives, even after immense loss. Just as young lovers convince themselves that they can make it against all odds, so much of the remaining Jewish community harkened to the calls of many countries. To South Africa, England, Israel, Canada, and the *Goldene Medine*, the United States. They made it and survived; Krakowski himself is proof of this.

His family, Wolf *in utero*, made an illegal immigration attempt from Poland to Palestine, only to be arrested at the Italian border and sent to a DP camp. But they persevered and made it, first to Sweden and then to Canada. It is on "*Friling*" (Springtime) and "*Alts Geyt Avek Mitn Roykh*" (Everything Goes Up in Smoke) that Krakowski strikes his low-down, grittiest groove, making them the most unforgettable and gut-wrenching on the album. Just as Krakowski learned and absorbed his *Yiddishkeit* at home, he absorbed his feeling for the blues from his interactions with some of its most famous practitioners. He recalls carrying the guitar of Big Joe Williams (of "Baby, Please Don't Go" fame) as a teenager and helping Williams get around, even cooking chicken together -- Williams traveled with his own frying pan. Krakowski says about his time with Williams, "I had a good ear for his Deep South accent and could understand him well where others had difficulty, yet were embarrassed to say so."

This understanding of accents and feel for their importance play a deep role in Krakowski's musicianship. He sings in the Czenstochow accent of his mother and her family, a dialect far removed from the standardized Yiddish taught in classrooms today--even further from the tutored imitations on some other, popular Yiddish recordings--but one which resonates with the idea of *gilgul hanefesh*, a transmigration of language, of culture, of souls. Krakowski's accent speaks to us of another way of life and world almost totally destroyed, yet, miraculously, authentically, showing up on CD today.

The bluesy, soul-piercing guitar work on "*Alts Geyt Avek Mitn Roykh*" and "*Friling*" seem such a natural accompaniment to the songs that it is hard now to imagine them any other way. Both songs are firmly rooted in the historical experience of loss by Eastern European Jewry, especially that of Polish Jews. But we are not lulled into a disassociated identification with anonymous "martyrs." We are not allowed to mythologize the suffering of the war years into one amorphous pain. In "*Alts Geyt Avek Mitn Roykh*," we learn of one man's pain, not just the loss of life ("Everything goes up in smoke. . ./Everything is annihilated/Destroyed"), but it is the pain of love betrayed which emerges as the core of the song's lament: "Once I had a wife and a home/We lived there in happiness and comfort/All I wanted was for her to be mine/. . . But she had other things in mind/She froze me out and deceived me." The loss is made all the more real and visceral by its personalization.

But Krakowski uses more than blues influences on "*Transmigrations*." Accompanied by his crack group of top-notch musicians, he re-imagines himself in the middle of the album as Bob Marley (accompanied by the I-Threes, of course) on the traditional "*Shabes, Shabes*." It is significant that "*Shabes, Shabes*" falls in the middle as Track 5 and "*Zol Shoyn Kumen di Geule*" as the last track, 12. These reminders of the continuing holiness of the world and of God's redeeming power become,

literally, the core and the *musar haskel* (moral) of "*Transmigrations*." The album closes on an ecstatic, gospel-influenced note with "*Zol Shoyn Kumen di Geule*." Here we have Krakowski as Andrae Crouch, leading the choir, pleading and sweating for the coming of *Moshiakh* (Messiah). He has brought the power of the blues and gospel (and many other styles) to add layer upon layer of meaning to each track. And this transformation of classic Yiddish songs, proving their continuing vitality and resonance to us today (in the right hands) mirrors the continuing vitality of Diaspora Jewish communities and the possibilities in new Jewish and Yiddish culture which await us.

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