

Jewish Popular Music in Galicia:

*Karol Rathaus' Recollections
of Chune Wolfsthal*

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ABSTRACT

Eminent Polish composer Karol Rathaus (1895–1954) left behind an essay dedicated to his uncle Chune Wolfsthal (1851–1924). In this text, Rathaus recalls his childhood and adolescent years in (Austria-Hungary's crown land of) Galicia. His memories of Wolfsthal, a famous klezmer and operetta composer active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, provide an opportunity to recollect the now non-existent world of Jewish amateur musicians working in Tarnopol and Lwów before World War II. Those musicians performed in synagogues, at family events and social functions, in cafés and tea gardens. Some of them, including Chune, became involved in the activity of the then emerging Jewish theatre, which was a part-vulgar, part-artistic phenomenon.

Keywords: Karol Rathaus; Chune Wolfsthal; Galicia; Lwów (Lviv); Tarnopol (Ternopil); klezmer (*klezmerim*); Jewish theatre

Composer and academic teacher Karol Rathaus (1895–1954)¹ left behind numerous writings from all periods of his life. These include press articles and reviews, programme notes, lectures, and letters, which collectively add up to the image of a wise and just, educated person, open-minded but reserved about showing his emotions.² One document included in the composer's archive of handwritten and published materials, distinguished by its exceptionally personal tone, is Rathaus' tribute to his uncle, the klezmer-composer Chune Wolfsthal.³ This several-page-long essay, written at age fifty-eight, near the end of his life, offers us a glimpse of Rathaus' childhood and youth spent in Galicia at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The text's protagonist was a multi-instrumentalist without formal qualifications.⁴

1 More on Karol Rathaus in: Jolanta Guzy-Pasiak, 'Karol Rathaus, the Transplanted Composer', *Musicology Today*, 8 (2011), 163–177. Cf. also Martin Schüssler, *Karol Rathaus* (Lausanne, 2000).

2 This is how he was remembered by his students and colleagues from the Music Department of Queens College, New York (now the Aaron Copland School of Music, City University of New York), which he co-created and where he lectured till his last days of life, in 1940–1954. Cf. Donald Pirone, 'Karol Rathaus: amerykański rozdział' ['Karol Rathaus: The US Chapter of His Life'], *Muzyka*, 44 (4), 1999, 35–56.

3 His legacy, the Karol Rathaus Papers, is part of the Special Collections and Archives, Benjamin Rosenthal Library, Queens College, City University of New York [hereafter as KRP]. I am grateful to all the persons at Queens College, CUNY, who assisted me in my library research on KRP, in particular to Profs Donald Pirone, Edward Smaldone, and Lev Deych.

4 Karol Rathaus, *Chune Wolfsthal*, typescript in English, 4 pages, dated 16 May 1953, KRP.

Notably, though Rathaus studied, worked, and had his music premiered in Europe's major cultural hubs, such as Vienna, Berlin, Paris, and London, he did not dedicate separate tributes to any of the great artists he came in contact with, who changed the face of contemporary art and undoubtedly inspired the composer himself. He did not write tributes to the eminent composers who had shaped him as a musician (Franz Schreker,⁵ Arnold Schönberg – with the exception of occasional anniversary tributes), the charismatic conductors who breathed life into his scores (Wilhelm Furtwängler – *Overture for Orchestra*, Op. 22, Berlin Philharmonic 1928; Artur Rodziński – *Symphonic Polonaise*, Op. 52, New York Philharmonic 1943), or the visionary film and theatre directors he collaborated with (e.g. Fedor Ozep – *Der Mörder Dimitri Karamasoff*, 1931; Max Reinhardt, Alexis Granovsky). He certainly owed much to all these artists and he also maintained private contacts with them. However, it was not them but a humble Galician klezmer that Rathaus decided to commemorate with a separate tribute. Rather than recalling the splendid symphonic concerts, operatic spectacles, and recitals by world-class virtuosi, which he had attended ever since he had left Tarnopol (now Ternopil, Ukraine) for Vienna at age eighteen, or the extraordinary productions of famous opera houses (Berlin's Unter der Linden, where his own opera *Fremde Erde* was premiered in 1930, and Covent Garden, where his ballet *Le Lion amoureux* was performed in 1937) – Rathaus writes about Gimpel's Lwów (Lviv) theatre, where Yiddish-language plays were staged (some of them in the open air).

In his semi-private statement, which is the subject of this paper, Rathaus calls his uncle Wolfsthal an angel that bestowed on him the love of music. Wolfsthal was an amateur Jewish musician. Young Karol admired his performances as a child, and Chune's top-class musicianship would have a great bearing on his own choice of career in the future.⁶ Born in Tarnopol, Karol Rathaus belonged to a family that included several generations

5 Franz Schreker (1878–1934), composer, conductor, and teacher at music academies in Vienna and Berlin, had numerous pupils including Karol Rathaus, Ernst Křenek, Alois Hába, and Artur Rodziński.

6 Rathaus studied composition at the Imperial Academy of Music and the Performing Arts in Vienna and the Hochschule für Musik Berlin, as well as history at the University of Vienna, from which he obtained a doctoral degree in 1921.

of musicians. Karol's father Bernard graduated from Lwów's veterinary academy in 1890. He became a vet in order to rescue his family from poverty. Karol's younger brother Rudolf became a diplomat and Polish activist (among others in New York). His elder sister Dora had a piano purchased for her, and it was on that instrument that Karol spontaneously began to play at age six. He soon also developed an interest in music composition. From his earliest years, Karol was resolved to become a musician. This greatly worried his father, who believed this would be a return not only to the family tradition, but also to poverty. Karol was brought up from the start as a Pole, and his school reading complemented his patriotic and national education. At the same time, though, he was exposed to Jewish tradition through, among others, contacts with the musically gifted relatives, the Wolfsthal family, who cultivated various forms of Jewish music.⁷

There are so many years crowded with people and events since I started to live that is to make music. My beginnings were early. Still I remember them and the good angel who stood at the cradle of my musical birth. A man with an emperor Franz Joseph beard, large gray-blue eyes illuminating his lovely face: the big and generous mouth, a strong and well shaped nose and above all the coppola of a musician[']s forehead. Noble, intelligent and high. His hands were large too, but fatherly hands, soft and warm and dry. Tender hands and fingers. The fingers of a musician who could play practically any instrument of the orchestra, particularly well the cello and the violin.⁸

Chune Wolfsthal (1851–1924) is not an anonymous figure, though not much is known about him. Some information, largely imprecise or incorrect, can be found in dictionaries and encyclopaedias dedicated to klezmer music.⁹ Son of a cantor from Tyśmienica (now Tysmenytsia, Ukraine) near Stanisławów (now Ivano-Frankivsk), Chune initially sang in the synagogue choir with his six brothers. He then founded the Wolfsthal

Brothers klezmer band, moved to the three times larger city of Tarnopol, and toured throughout Galicia as well as Austria, Hungary, and Germany. He performed for Jewish audiences (holding, for instance, Hanukkah concerts in synagogues), but also for non-Jews. The Wolfsthal Brothers were one of the most popular and highly regarded bands in the region.¹⁰ From 1890, Chune collaborated with the Yiddish theatre in Lwów as an orchestral musician and composer, writing numerous operettas, few of which have survived to our day. He spent World War I in Vienna, working at that city's Jewish theatre. He then returned to Tarnopol, where he continued to compose. Despite the popularity that his music enjoyed in its day, he died in poverty. His works, mostly unpublished, are difficult to access.

Other members of the Wolfsthal family include some more widely known professional musicians: the violinist Maurycy (1857–1937, working at the Conservatoire of the Galician Music Society, from 1919 – at the Conservatoire of the Polish Music Society, teacher of many outstanding instrumentalists including Apolinary Kątski), Maurycy's pianist son Bronisław (1883–1944, pupil of Theodor Leschetizky, composer active in Lwów and Warsaw, conductor at Warsaw's Grand Theatre and Warsaw Philharmonic),¹¹ and the violinist Józef (1899–1931, orchestra leader at the Staatsoper and teacher at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin).

Rathaus' essay about his uncle paints the image of a now non-existent world that perished during the WWII Holocaust. He depicts the then musical practice: ways of creating and arranging music, instrumental line-ups, popular musical forms, and the titles of old hits, as well as the venues where such music was performed. The text conjures up the atmosphere of old Galician cities and towns. Naturally, Chune and his band had no permanent venue. They played in synagogues, restaurants, pavement cafés, on verandas and on various roofed outdoor stages, as well as in the streets. Rathaus recalls how he would meet Wolfsthal in the mornings. Karol was on his way to school, while Chune was coming back home from an all-night job, carrying his violin in his bosom:

Often in cold, blue, snowy mornings on my way to school, passing the Plac Sobieskiego: I would meet him, Chune Wolfsthal, on his way home. He has been entertaining people all night long and playing dance music with his outfit till the small hours. Now, his

⁷ Jewish musical culture in Galicia has been studied, among others, by Polish scholars: Sylwia Jakubczyk-Ślęczka, Michał Jaczyński, Kinga Fink, and Agnieszka Jeż.

⁸ Rathaus, *Chune Wolfsthal*, 1. Author's original spelling (meaning-affecting spelling errors have been corrected in brackets).

⁹ Some of the most recent extensive papers on the musical Wolfsthal family include: Michał Klubiński, 'Muzyczna rodzina Wolfsthalów między Lwowem, Wiedniem, Berlinem a Warszawą' ['The Musical Wolfsthal Family between Lviv, Vienna, Berlin, and Warsaw'], in *Żydzi w kulturze muzycznej Galicji [Jews in the Musical Culture of Galicia]*, Ewa Nidecka, ed., vol. 1 (Rzeszów, 2021), 135–157, and Yaron Wolfsthal, 'Jewish Musicians of Galicia: The Wolfsthal Family – a Research Update', in *Żydzi w kulturze muzycznej Galicji [Jews in the Musical Culture of Galicia]*, Ewa Nidecka, ed., vol. 2 (Rzeszów, 2023), 15–26.

¹⁰ Walter Zev Feldman, *Klezmer. Music, History, and Memory* (Oxford, 2016), 411.

¹¹ He is mentioned several times by, among others, Michał Piekarski, *Muzyka we Lwowie [Music in Lviv]*, (Warszawa, 2018).

fiddle half hidden under his coat and half entrusted to the warmth of his heart, he would march home, his big galoshes noisily squicking [squeaking] in the metallic crumbings of the snow. I wished him a shy "Good Morning" and my greetings were subdued by feelings of guilt: After a sheltered night and warm breakfast, I was free to go to school, while my beloved uncle had to earn his living "this way". His answer also was shy and also dictated by feelings of circumstance and guilt. He may have suffered not to be able to give me a better example. He knew that his profession, however honorable, did not meet the standards of "society".¹²

When Karol Rathaus (who would never change the form of his first name to German or English when he later lived permanently abroad) was preparing for his secondary school-leaving examinations in 1913, Tarnopol had thirty-five thousand inhabitants, nearly half of whom were Jewish.¹³ Rathaus attended the Polish-language Wincenty Pol First Secondary School operating in an impressive edifice in Trzeciego Maja¹⁴ (Third May, now Hetman Sahaidachny) Street. At that time, autonomous Galicia was the only area where Polish national life could almost freely develop without the partitioning country's censorship. From 1908, Galicia became the centre of the Polish national liberation movement. Third May Street was located near the city's major stately hubs, the Dominican and Sobieski Squares.

As we learn from a 1928 guide to the Tarnopol Province, music was played in the evenings in the restaurants of two hotels: the Putschert (Puczert, in Dominican Square) and the Podolski (housing the elegant Boulevard café, in Adam Mickiewicz, now Taras Shevchenko Street).¹⁵ Both were located near Sobieski Square (now Freedom Square), which suggests that Chune may have played his instrument in one of them.¹⁶ The violin is an epitome of Jewish music. In her text on the metaphysics of the



Figure 1. Tarnopol, ul. Mickiewicza [Mickiewicz Street], M.W. Bard, 1909

violin, Iwona Siedlaczek writes: "There can be no doubt that as an attribute of the Jewish artist, the violin holds a unique if not the first place among the entire arsenal of instruments."¹⁷ Chune 'ceaselessly' performed waltzes, polkas, quadrilles, polonaises, and other dances,¹⁸ thus combining Jewish with Polish and Ukrainian folklore as well as Western music, which was then becoming common practice. As scholars studying various musical traditions have demonstrated, both Jewish and Christian musicians borrowed rhythms and melodies from other cultures.¹⁹ Galicia was, as we know, the most varied crown land within Austria-Hungary as far as nationality and religion are concerned. It was inhabited by Poles, Ruthenians, Germans, Armenians, Jews, Karaites,

12 Rathaus, *Chune Wolfsthal*, 1.

13 The source data comes from censuses carried out in Austria-Hungary in, among others, 1890, 1900, and 1910.

14 Karol Rathaus passed his end-of-school exams with a distinction, as we can read in: *Sprawozdanie Dyrekcji C. K. Wyższego Gimnazjum I. z językiem wykładowym polskim w Tarnopolu za rok szkolny 1912* [Report of the Management of the Imperial-Royal High School No. 1 with Polish as Language of Instruction: School Year 1912] (Tarnopol, 1912).

15 *Przewodnik po województwie tarnopolskiem* [Guide to the Tarnopol Province] (Tarnopol, 1928), 80.

16 Iwona A. Siedlaczek, 'Metafizyka żydowskich skrzypiec w kulturze nie tylko Galicji' ['Metaphysics of the Jewish Violin in Galician Culture and Not Only'], in *Żydzi w kulturze muzycznej Galicji*, vol. 1, 255–278; Joachim Stutschewsky, *Jüdische Spielleute* ('Klezmerim'): *Geschichte, Lebensweise, Musik* (Wiesbaden, 2019).

17 Siedlaczek, 'Metafizyka żydowskich skrzypiec', 257. Cf. Also Kinga Fink 'Lwowskie skrzypkowie pochodzenia żydowskiego w opinii dziennikarzy i krytyków muzycznych w Polsce międzywojennej' ['Lviv-Based Violinists of Jewish Origin in the Eyes of the Press and Music Critics in Interwar Poland'], *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska*, 73 (2018), 139–159.

18 Rathaus, *Chune Wolfsthal*, p. 1.

19 Cf. e.g. Walter Zev Feldman, 'Remembrance of Things Past: Klezmer Musicians of Galicia, 1870–1940', in Michael C. Steinlauf, and Antony Polonsky, eds, *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry Volume 16: Focusing on Jewish Popular Culture and Its Afterlife* (Liverpool, 2003); Sylwia Jakubczyk-Ślęczka, 'Przemiany żydowskich tradycji muzycznych a przemiany żydowskich instytucji muzycznych na przykładzie przedwojennej Galicji' ['Transformations of Jewish Musical Culture and Transformations of Music Institutions, on the Example of Prewar Galicia], *Roczniki Humanistyczne*, 70/12 (2022), 231–250; Tomasz Nowak, 'Kontakty muzyczne społeczności polskiej i żydowskiej oraz wizerunek kultury żydowskiej w popularnym nurcie muzyki polskiej XIX wieku' ['Musical Contacts between the Polish and Jewish Communities vs the Image of Jewish Culture in Polish Nineteenth-Century Popular Music'], *Studia Chopinowskie*, 1 (2020), 62–87.

Moldovans, Hungarians, the Romani, and Lipovans. Such mutual interpenetration of influences therefore comes as no surprise in this region.

Despite his uncommon abilities and industriousness, Chune was unable to secure a high standard of living to his family. Rathaus writes about it in the very opening of his essay, citing the words of his friend, the excellent writer Joseph Roth: 'The musicians in Galicia were poor: they lived from Jewish cheerfulness.'²⁰ The Polish- and German-speaking Joseph Roth (1894–1939), eulogist of Galicia and the Habsburg monarchy (author of, among others, the novel *Radetzky March*), was Karol Rathaus' near-contemporary born in Brody, a graduate of a Protestant secondary school. Another friend, the several-years-older Ukrainian- and Yiddish-speaking Soma Morgenstern (1890–1976), from a pious Hassidic family, was the son of a land steward who, like Rathaus, graduated from a secondary school in Tarnopol. The personalities of these three outstanding artists – Morgenstern, Roth, and Rathaus – were moulded in the same Polish-Ukrainian-Jewish-Austrian-German melting pot. Their paths continued to cross during their studies in Vienna as well as their later periods of residence in Berlin and New York. Surviving correspondence proves that their youth in Galicia left an indelible mark on their lives. In one of his books, Soma Morgenstern describes his sister's wedding, at which the highly regarded Wolfsthal Brothers band also performed:

That famous band was brought from Tarnopol and cost my father a substantial sum of money. There were three brothers: David, Chune, and Hermann. David was the leader. Hermann took turns playing the violin or the cello, and Chune was a violinist, cellist, and composer. [...] The band also included two clarinetists, a flutist, a drummer, and a bass player. [...] They performed, however, not only folk music and not just at weddings. They had a rich repertoire. They gave concerts and also played chamber music.²¹

Though more gifted than many others, Chune was an uneducated musician active in popular entertainment

circles rather than those of high culture. With his band, he performed at weddings and other Jewish festivals, at dances in fashionable Tarnopol restaurants, and at the Jewish theatre in Lwów, for which he also composed operettas. He created popular music accessible for everyone. Rathaus thus describes Wolfsthal's day-to-day work and his extraordinary though unpolished talent:

Chune Wolfsthal never had the chance to study. All he has learned was by practical experience during his military service. Here he learned to play all kind of instruments, to arrange for orchestra, to conduct, even to compose new music. But in practical life, "orchestra" became a very flexible idiom to a Jewish klesmer, who back home from his military career, married and soon was blessed with a family of four children. The gigantic task to feed them and to make a living with his music let him accept all kinds of work: he taught violin solo and in groups, he taught cello, he performed and played dance music, semi-classic and even classical music with his orchestral "outfit". For this outfit which was assembled according to the price, he always used to write a special scoring. So for twenty Kronen he would arrange an orchestra for four people. How to make them sound as fully as possible? Chune would arrange for one violin, one flute, one viola and a bass-fiddle. For forty Kronen, he would add four musicians – shall we say another violin or two or cello and a clarinet. Arrangements? No problem! Chune would sit down and do it. Songs of yesteryear, Jewish liedlach [songs – note J.G.-P.], hits from the newest operettas, waltzes, mazurs – Chune would arrange for any kind of ensemble and perform it the following night.²²

In his school years, Soma Morgenstern was one of Chune Wolfsthal's private cello pupils. According to Morgenstern, Chune also probably taught his own nephew, that is, Soma's friend Karol Rathaus, then a budding composer (however, no other sources mention Chune in this role). Morgenstern's earliest musical experiences included performing in the school choir and orchestra, as well as attending a guest performance by the Tonkünstler symphony orchestra from Vienna. He was, however, particularly fascinated with the spectacles of the Jewish Theatre in Lwów.²³ This was Galicia's first permanent Jewish theatre (whereas in the Russian-annexed Polish territories all performances in Yiddish were forbidden). Founded in 1889 by actor and singer Jakub Ber Gimpel (1840–1906), former operatic chorister at the Skarbek Theatre, the theatre continued to operate until 1939 despite financial problems and lack of proper venue. It originally staged spectacles at the tea garden 'Pod Sroka' (13 Zamkowa Street). Jewish theatrical troupes of that time, for instance in Cracow, also performed in hotels

20 Rathaus, Chune Wolfsthal, p. 1.

21 'Die berühmte Kapelle wurde aus Tarnopol hergeholt und kostete meinen Vater ein gutes Stück Geld. Es waren drei Brüder: David, Chune und Hermann. David war der Führer. Hermann spielte abwechselnd Geige oder Cello, und Chime war Geiger, Cellist und Komponist. [...] In der Kapelle waren noch zwei Klarinettenisten, ein Flötist, ein Trommler und ein Bassist. [...] Sie spielten aber nicht nur bei Hochzeiten und nicht nur Volksmusik - sie hatten ein reiches Repertoire. Sie gaben Konzerte und spielten auch Kammermusik.' Soma Morgenstern, *In einer anderen Zeit: Jugendjahre in Ostgalizien* (Springe, 1995), 184–185.

22 Rathaus, Chune Wolfsthal, p. 2.

23 Jacques Lajarrige, ed., *Soma Morgenstern – Von Galizien ins amerikanische Exil* (Berlin, 2014), 219.

and restaurants, that is, places that were considered rather suspect anyway. This was done so as not to offend pious Jews, who, for religious reasons, initially did not accept performing in or even attending such spectacles. The stage at the foot of Castle (Zamkowa) Hill in Lwów was only provisionally roofed to protect it from rain, whereas the visitors sat on wooden benches or stood, eating and drinking. This is where the spectacles were held for the first eight years, though supposedly Gimpel was lucky and it usually did not rain – hence the phrase *gimpls wejster*, meaning ‘fine weather’.²⁴ The theatre later moved to 11 Jagiellońska Street (Marian Hemar was also born in the tenement located at this address) and the conditions improved. Gimpel’s theatre staged various dance-and-song forms, including lowbrow entertainment catering for crude tastes, but also European theatre classics such as Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice*, Schiller’s *Robbers*, Gogol’s *The Government Inspector*, and Gutzkow’s *Uriel Acosta*, in Yiddish translations.²⁵ In his memories of Lwów, the writer Lew Kaltenbergh recalls the theatre’s unique, perfectly democratic audience and the special atmosphere of the spectacles he himself attended:

There was in Lwów in Jagiellońska Street the strangest of all theatres, a stinking trashy shed – Gimpel’s Jewish theatre, integrally bound to the person of old Gimpel, who was its head, owner, usher, and ticket seller in one [...].

What fascinated me in that ramshackle shed in Jagiellońska Street was not so much the stage as the audience. The stage admittedly often hosted unexpected stars, outstanding guest actors such as Granach, Granowski, Cemach, and Baratov. It was also there that I was lucky to see old Kamińska play.²⁶ [...] The audience, however – not that at gala shows, celebrations and premieres, but the ordinary regulars – was, in the context of my theatrical experience by that time, something absolutely extraordinary. It was, first and foremost, a truly popular theatre, not in any contrived or artificial sense, but a genuine theatre of the plebs [...] The theatre is just that. Books are suitable for reading, plays only for watching – though wait, not only

for that, because the audience may at times take a more-than-active part in shaping the stage action. [...] There was no such audience anywhere else. [...]

It was at that theatre that I learned a little Yiddish, and it was there that the autonomy of the theatrical play appealed to my imagination with a puzzling force – as a piece of art that is not, and need not always be, a mere representation of a literary work.²⁷

Jakub Ber Gimpel paid much attention to the musical settings of his spectacles and to the choice of numbers. Lwów-based musician Alfred Plohn recalled in the 1930s that the theatre staged vaudevilles, folk spectacles, operettas, and music comedies, including Biblical operettas by Horowitz, Lateiner, Chune Wolfsthal, and Goldfaden.²⁸ Apparently Chune Wolfsthal resolved to write music for the Yiddish stage after seeing Gimpel’s production of the operetta *Shulamis* by Abraham Goldfaden (1840–1908), an author who made major contributions to the Jewish theatre. From then on, Chune worked in the operetta genre for many years as a composer and cellist in the theatre’s orchestra. Rathaus thus describes his uncle’s theatrical passion:

Then did it happen that the jiddish theater where Chune and his outfit used to play took hold of him. Director Gimpel from the big city of Lemberg decided to give Chune a chance; the ideas for the jiddish theater started to absorb the mind and the heart of the composer.

Confronted with the task never before tried, Chune Wolfsthal opened up like a stream. A stream of melodies, duos, overtures, tunes, waltzes and polkas, the whole light fare of the new genre: “a jiddish drama with Tanz and Gesang” was brought to the fore, the libretto was fixed, music was set on paper, the score was written, parts were extracted and copied. Music was studied with singers, the whole thing was rehearsed, conducted and finally performed by my uncle Chune Wolfsthal.

I vaguely remember a few titles: *Die Tochter von Jerusalem*, *Bostenoi*, *Die drei Matunes*.

In 1953, nearly half a century after the events, details may already have been effaced out of the artist’s memory. Fortunately, we also have at our disposal an article written by Karol Rathaus in 1925, soon after his uncle’s death, and probably not quoted in the literature to date. In that

²⁴ Sławomir Gowin, ‘Teatr bezpowrotny’ [‘Theater of No Return’], 14 January 2022, *E-teatr*, <https://e-teatr.pl/teatr-bezpowrotny-20873>, accessed 23 Nov. 2023. Cf. also the combined issue of *Pamiętnik Teatralny*, 41/14 (1992), dedicated to the Jewish theatre.

²⁵ Anna Kuligowska-Korzeniewska, ‘Wyzwania nowoczesności’ [‘The Challenges of Modernity’], *Teatr* (12), 2014, <https://teatr-pismo.pl/5002-wyzwania-nowoczesnosci/>, accessed 4 Nov. 2023.

²⁶ Ester Rachel Kamińska (1870–1925), considered as the greatest Yiddish theatre actress, mother of actress Ida Kamińska (1899–1980), who was the first director of Warsaw’s Jewish Theatre.

²⁷ Lew Kaltenbergh, *Ułamki stłuczonego lustra. Dzieciństwo na Kresach. Tamten Lwów* [Pieces of Broken Glass. A Childhood in the Eastern Borderland: Lviv in That Day] (Warszawa, 1991), 175–177.

²⁸ Alfred Plohn, ‘Muzyka we Lwowie a Żydzi’ [‘Jews and Music in Lviv’], *Muzykalia*, 13, 2012, https://demusica.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/plohn_muzykalia_13_judaica_4.pdf, accessed 23 Nov. 2023 [reprinted from *Almanach Żydowski*, August 1936].

tribute, which he does not mention in his later essay ('Ein Musikant Gottes. Chune Wolfsthal zum Gedächtnis',²⁹ printed in Germany's most important Zionist weekly *Jüdische Rundschau*, 1902–1938), Rathaus discusses Wolfsthal's operettas and pays homage to his musical legacy at a somewhat greater length. He also characterises the nascent Yiddish operetta, compares it with its Western models, and comments on the great success of his uncle's music:

In the West, the operetta flourished in big cities for the needs of entertainment. In the East, however, it marked the beginning of Jewish artistic music, since it brought together all the elements of the people's culture. Those strange works might indeed be called 'applied folk music'. By the way, it is astonishing to what extent the primitive libretti have been elevated (frequently to a level close to real art) by the power of the music. Wolfsthal wrote many such operettas, three of which won worldwide success (though only among the Jewish folk). Those were: *The Daughter of Jerusalem*, *Bostenoi*, and *Three Gifts*. Musically [they are] interpreted as classical operettas on the models of Johann Strauss and Suppé [...] There is hardly any place on both hemispheres where these three works have not been staged in Jewish theatres. Even more, there is no Jewish worker, no good Jewish house in the East, where Wolfsthal's tunes are not sung, where they have not become part of the people's flesh and blood [their second nature].³⁰

It was the 'power of the music', combined with libretti that successfully held attention even though they were not themselves works of the highest order (exceptions include *Drei Matunes* to a libretto by eminent writer Isaac Leib Peretz), that impressed those spectacles in the memory of Karol Rathaus – then a progressive composer of Neue Musik in Germany. In the 1920s he still remembered the

theatrical productions he had seen in Galicia, and – with his musical expertise and artistic sensitivity – he had a special sentiment for that form of mass entertainment:

Here and right now let me state, that I do not share the aversion and outright discrimination against the idiom and especially not against jiddisch theatre. The Brody-er singer and the folks pieces with the music by Gordon are in my memory the beginning and the birth of the genuine Jewish *comedia del arte*. In Gimpel[']s theatre as a little boy I lived through the horrors and excitement of shadow and substance of the theatre. Here I learned to laugh and to cry with the *dramatis personae*.³¹

His experience of attending spectacles at Lwów's Yiddish theatre undoubtedly contributed to his later professional preoccupation with theatre and film music, which he wrote especially in the 1920s and 30s. Of special interest in this context is Karl Gutzkow's famous play *Uriel Acosta*, produced by Alexey Granovsky (1880–1937) and performed in Hebrew by the Habima troupe (now the Habima National Theatre of Israel). In 1930 this troupe set out from Moscow on a European tour, scoring successes everywhere they went. The tour culminated in Berlin, where they also staged Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Rathaus wrote music for both these productions. He was deeply involved in preparing the spectacle,³² and was satisfied with the music to such an extent that he also arranged a *Suite from Uriel Acosta* for orchestra. Published twice (in 1930 and 1947), the *Suite* remains one of his most popular and frequently performed pieces. The *Suite* was premiered in 1935 under the baton of Cracow-born Joseph Rosenstock, Rathaus' colleague from the time of his studies with Franz Schreker in Vienna and the later conductor of New York City Opera. The spectacle itself was very well received.³³ Rathaus could indeed feel satisfied with his contribution to the idea of Jewish musical theatre, so important for his uncle. He may also have regretted that Chune did not live to see a high-calibre and ambitious Jewish play being staged by highly professional actors and musicians in one of Europe's main cultural hubs.

Though Rathaus' memories of Chune Wolfsthal reflect the warm relations and emotional closeness between nephew and uncle, their value is more than just sentimental. Rathaus, an eminent and highly regarded, thoroughly educated composer, one of the major figures in European culture between the two world wars, wrote that

29 Karol Rathaus, 'Ein Musikant Gottes. Chune Wolfsthal zum Gedächtnis', *Jüdische Rundschau*, 30/84 (25 Oct. 1925), 708.

30 'Die Operette des Westens ist Großstadtblüte für ein Amusementsbedürfnis, im Osten war sie jedoch Ursprung jüdischer Kunstmusik, indem sie alle Elemente des Volkstums zusammenfaßte. „Angewandte Volksmusik“ könnte man diese sonderbaren Gebilde benennen. Es ist übrigens zum Staunen, bis zu welchem Grade die Primitivität der Libretti erhoben wurde (oft in die Gefilde echter Kunst aufgerafft) durch die Macht der Musik. Wolfsthal schrieb viele solchen Operetten. Jedoch drei Werke waren es, denen ein Welterfolg (allerdings nur beim jüdischen Volke) beschieden war. Sie heißen: „Die Tochter Jerusalem“, „Bostenoi“, und „Drei Matunes“. Diese Werke [sind] musikalisch als klassische Operetten nach dem Muster Johann Strauß und Suppé aufgefaßt [...] Es gibt kaum einen Ort auf beiden Hemisphären, wo diese drei genannten Werke in jüdischen Theatern nicht gespielt würden. Aber mehr noch: es gibt keinen jüdischen Arbeiter, kein gut-jüdisches Haus im Osten, wo Wolfsthals Melodien nicht gesungen werden, wo sie nicht ins Fleisch und Blut des Volkes übergegangen wären.' Rathaus, 'Ein Musikant Gottes', 708.

31 Rathaus, *Chune Wolfsthal*, 2.

32 Schüssler, *Karol Rathaus*, 186.

33 Schüssler, 186–188.

tribute seventy years ago, focusing on artistic events and phenomena that seemed most significant in retrospect. He describes the gifted Jewish musician's career path from the synagogue to countless performances at social functions with his band to finding his own voice in the emerging Jewish theatre – which was a part-vulgar, part-artistic phenomenon. Though the standards of the Yiddish theatre were frequently criticised, Rathaus observes that, like the *commedia dell'arte* in earlier times, that theatre was capable of evolving and producing new, more valuable forms. Chune himself luckily witnessed some of the glorious achievements of that theatre, including the production of Shloyme Zanol Rappoport (An-ski)'s *Dybbuk* by the Vilnius troupe, which transformed the audience's and actors' expectations. In the period when Rathaus himself was associated with the Jewish stage, it evolved from the status of a popular folk theatre to embracing a social message.

Rathaus' brief essay offers us a chance for a better understanding of a world that abruptly came to an end and about which we still know too little. Documentation is scarce for obvious reasons – witnesses and material heritage have been annihilated.³⁴ Chune Wolfsthal's life story may be viewed in this context as an epitome of the fate of many other Jewish musicians³⁵ engaging in similar types of musical practice, as described in Rathaus' tribute. The most important elements (scores, performances, live music) are missing. We are nevertheless given some substantial information concerning the repertoire, instrumental line-ups, venues and contexts, as well as audience reactions.

Since Rathaus was highly knowledgeable about musical culture, he could grasp and follow the tendencies and directions in art – in this case from an adequate time perspective.

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³⁴ Cf. This interesting paper on the reconstructions of Jewish musical tradition: Agnieszka Jeż, 'Pamięć jako teren w badaniach muzyki żydowskiej' ['Memory as a Field in Jewish Music Studies'], *Kultura współczesna*, 3 (2023), 48–59.

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