

# Klezmer Fiddler Cookie Segelstein:

## *New Stylings from the Old Country, Part One*

By Stacy Phillips



Marlene "Cookie" Segelstein was a long time fixture in the viola sections of Connecticut orchestras. About fifteen years ago she shifted gears and began to seriously study klezmer and related Jewish music styles. She and her band, Veretski Pass, are about to move from Southern New England to the San Francisco area, so I decided to interview her before she left town. We talked about the meaning of klezmer music, its history and violin style, and ranged from her music projects to how her experience as both an orchestral and klezmer band player has affected her view of violin pedagogy. Josh Horowitz (JH), cimbalom and accordion player in Veretski Pass sometimes joined in. Comments enclosed by { } are explanatory comments by Stacy Phillips.

*Stacy Phillips (SP): Is klezmer becoming more influenced by classical-style violin?*

*Cookie Segelstein (CS):* Yes and no, because of different backgrounds of the players. Jewish sensibility has been more towards the polished than the other folk styles in the area [of East Europe]. If it was a family of musicians and they could afford it, they would send the child for lessons. So there always was an art music sensibility to Jewish music as far back as we can go, the late 1800s. The good bands were pros, often mixed Jews and Gypsies, and were able to play Jewish style, Gypsy style, Ukrainian, Polish, etc., as the gig required.

I think that the Jewish style was less flashy, more internal, more about sound and emotional quality. If the music was played too fast at a ritual the people might say the band was "playing like Gypsies"; not surprising, as the bands were often mixed Jewish and Rom musicians.

There was a folk quality but the people I grew up with {in Kansas City, MO}, refugees and Holocaust survivors from that area of Eastern Europe, liked the polished quality.

My father liked the fiddler in his home town because he could also play Ukrainian and Hungarian tunes and a waltz, *czardas* as well as classical pieces. This was in Nizhniye Veretski at the base of Veretski Pass of the Carpathian Mountains. That pass, an important route for the Austro-Hungarian peoples, is now part of northwest Ukraine, near Poland and Hungary. There was a mix of Ukrainians, Poles, Hungarians, Germans, Russian, Hutzuls, Ruthenians, and Gypsies.

*SP: That's the mix of music, too.*

*CS:* In our band, Veretski Pass, we relish the many styles of all of those ethnicities, and use their styles and melodies in a mix with our own.



*Veretski Pass: Stuart Brotman, Cookie Segelstein, Joshua Horowitz*

*“It’s like an accent. If you have a good ear, your ear will inform your hands what to do.”*

There were folk musicians in the town bands along with others with some formal music education — usually that would be the lead fiddler.

*SP: The fiddlers who were recorded were probably the ones with training, which skews the evidence some. What are your sources for information about the old styles?*

*CS: I’ve had a lot of sources and I believe all and none. You never know. I interviewed my father and uncle, other family branches. Also researchers like Joshua Horowitz, Henry Sapoznik, Zev Feldman, and Joel Rubin and started piecing things together. The old klezmer violin recordings I’ve heard, I don’t think are solely representative.*

*SP: Was there a disconnect in the klezmer violin tradition because of the Holocaust in East Europe and we’re trying to piece it together again?*

*CS: Absolutely. The connection to the Old Country was too painful after that. There was such a desire to assimilate [in America]. Some of the old klezmer musicians were hired for ritual functions as would a plumber be, but were not recognized as artists. My parents had a small collection of Jewish music and a Ukrainian record. Mostly they listened to Connie Francis and Frank Sinatra.*

In Europe, Jewish music stopped for about sixty years. Many of the styles are just gone. We were cut off from sources by World War II. Even before that it was not considered a good profession. If a child wanted to study violin they would be sent to a teacher, not to apprentice with klezmerim, unless it was a family of hereditary klezmerim.

*SP: Describe something about klezmer violin to a fiddler who might know nothing about the style.*

*CS: There’s a deeper relationship between bow and string, meaning more bow pressure than, for instance, traditional American*

*styles, or even some Gypsy playing.*

When I teach klezmer violin I have exercises for varying the pressure to elicit vocal kinds of sound. You are facilitating dance but you are also imitating a voice. I am a tone-aholic.

*SP: How can fiddlers who are used to short fast strokes improve their control and tone on long bows?*

*CS: When I’ve worked with American traditional fiddlers, the idea of using the whole bow from frog to tip is new. They need a slower, deeper {more pressure} stroke. So in a class I’ll start with that and they can examine the different tone qualities available to each part of the bow. Then there’s where between the bridge and fingerboard the bow is placed.*

If you play the G string over the fingerboard you can make the violin sound almost like a Navajo flute. Towards the bridge is more Gypsy style — what in classical music is called *ponticello*, a glassy sound.

Experiment with pressure and speed over the whole bow stroke. A slower, deeper stroke is what I think of as part of the Jewish music violin sound. I think it gives the string more of a vocal quality. Even when the tone “cracks,” it cracks with a vocal quality.

*SP: Did any of the old guys hold their violins like some southern U.S. fiddlers?*

*CS: In most of the photos I’ve seen they’re held in classical style, although some are holding their fiddles lower and slightly sideways. This is more comfortable for chord playing. There was a *kontra* if they played with Gypsies. That’s a viola with three strings [and a flat bridge] just for playing chords. That’s also held to the side. *Kontra* survives in Romanian and Hungarian folk music, but some old-timers say it used to be considered a Jewish style of accompaniment.*

SP: Like Irish and American traditional fiddling, are there different geographic styles of klezmer violin?

CS: Definitely. You'll hear different types of ornaments. In Jewish violin from Romanian Transylvania you'll hear a fingered trill and some turns that are similar to Hungarian ornaments. In Moldavia you'll hear a vibratoed trill {sometimes called a Gypsy trill}. To do that, if I do a second finger vibrato, I'll "lock" movement of the third finger to the second and you almost can't tell if it's a trill or vibrato. It's a mixture. Most of the time the trill is closer than a half step higher. In other areas, depending on the local style you'll hear a whole step trill. So I'm not flicking a finger, I'm rocking my hand. I measured it, it's about six shakes per second.

There are other areas where you hear almost no ornaments, maybe some sliding and bow pressure to imitate voice. For me that seems universal. Instead of a hard beginning of every note, it's more of a "whoosh." Almost as if the bow were moving before it hits the string, and comes in for a smooth landing. The notes in some phrases will then have a swell in the middle.

SP: How about the *krekhsts*?

CS: A *krekhsts* is a sob-like catch-in-the-throat sound made by stopping the bow a split second as a neutral finger stops the vibration of the note. So if you are playing, for instance, an E natural on the D string (first finger), you would stop the sound with your fourth finger tapping the string. It's like a ghost tone in jazz.

I think that is a recently applied thing. That's a controversial thing to say because most people will say that's a Jewish ornament. The klezmer sensibility has to do with tempo, slower than Gypsy style, a non-pyrotechnical approach, scooping from below up to notes.

Nowadays people all over the world think that if they are doing a *krekhsts* they are playing klezmer. I don't think it's from Jewish origins at all and not universally played by klezmer musicians.

SP: Let's talk about your path to becoming a klezmer fiddler.

CS: I was handed a violin when I was five and forced to play for my parents' friends who were Holocaust survivors. I took lessons from the son of another survivor, a family friend. I didn't want to play. I couldn't do what I wanted when there was company. They would sing me a tune {from their Old Country home} that I would have to learn by ear. I'd play it and they would cry. It was horrible for me.

Meanwhile I was faking reading music in the school orchestra. I was an ear player in a music reader's world. I switched to viola in high school and my teacher busted me when I was seventeen. I played a piece that had a mistake in the notation and I had learned it from a recording and wasn't playing the mistake. Then he really trained me.

SP: At some point you must have started to like it because you wound up majoring in it in college.

CS: I loved the sound of the viola and playing harmony. I liked playing, but not for my parents and friends. But there was some

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kind of effect because when I was an undergraduate in Kansas City, I got involved with a band that played for international folk dances — Balkan, Romanian, Serbian, Russian, Greek — about twelve people in the band, a reading band. That was fun for me.

Because I could play by ear I also did strolling violin gigs with my teacher. I would watch his fingers and play what he did a split second later, playing the Great American Song Book repertoire.

Then I got a master's degree in viola from Yale and joined the New Haven Symphony [assistant principal] and Orchestra New England [principal], married, and had kids. I felt a responsibility to teach my children about the family history.

I decided to learn more about Jewish music. I didn't put two and two together and thought that klezmer was different from what I grew up with. I went to KlezKamp {a long-running camp that teaches Jewish music both instrumental and vocal and where Cookie went from being a student to being an instructor}. When I took what I learned to my father, he didn't recognize the style, which tells me that it's all regional, as well as recreated.

SP: How did the change from playing all classical music to mostly klezmer happen?

CS: I started playing with people in New Haven — Jake Weinstein [an accordion player] and Adrienne Greenbaum [flautist in the New Haven Symphony] — and one gig led to requests for more. During the '90s, when the economy was good, I had three to five

gigs a weekend. At KlezKamp I met Sy Kushner, Ken Maltz, and Henry Sapoznik and played with them and some with the Klezmer Conservatory Band. I subbed with the Klezmatiks and recorded a Sex and the City segment with them. Henry's band was playing by ear. The others were reading gigs. I still play occasionally with them.

At KlezKamp, for the first time, I experienced a community of klezmer music. That was the big experience for me. That's besides learning how to play the music. I used to be embarrassed by my family's circle of friends. Now I could treasure what I got from them.

*SP: Is Veretski Pass the first band you've been in that is centered on your playing?*

*CS:* Actually, it's really a meeting of the minds, as it's a democratic band. We all share a musical sensibility, and trust each other 100%. If any of us has an idea, we all try it, and decide together if we think it works.

We've just finished our new project, *The Klezmer Shul*. We got a grant to write an instrumental synagogue service with no text, to avoid any divisive elements. We recorded a live performance and we're probably going to release that.

*JH:* It was an inspired performance, taking a lot of chances and some flaws.

*SP: Talk about the Veretski Pass band.*

*CS:* It formed after doing a week-long teaching workshop followed by an underrehearsed concert in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with [accordion and cimbalom player] Josh Horowitz. It was so exciting. Josh said that I should make a record. He brought in Stu Brotman [bassist]. I felt immediate musical sympathy with those guys.

Their musical knowledge is amazing. I feel like a kid. When I play a *doina* they can explain the modes that I'm playing. If I think about the theory, I get a stomach ache.

We made the *Veretski Pass* CD in 2003. We decided not to worry too much about being "authentic" but to play what we liked, cutting and pasting, composing parts where we didn't like something, but everything could be played for dancing.

We are mostly a concert group but love teaching and playing for dancing. We've done university residencies, European tours, mostly Germany, Poland, Austria, and Switzerland.

*SP: What's it like to play Jewish music in that part of the world?*

*CS:* My mother spent her teenage years in Auschwitz. The first time I was in Germany, I didn't know what to expect. I met people I really liked. There were moments of "Get me out of here!" Then there were lovely people at our workshops. But you can still buy a good luck charm of a Jew holding a coin in Krakow.

*SP: Any general advice to fiddlers who want to learn klezmer?*

*CS:* I would recommend listening to native speakers of Yiddish. There are certain tonal gestures that will inform someone learning the music.

*SP: Like learning Gaelic to be a better Irish-style fiddler.*

*CS:* Exactly. There are certain fall-offs in the Yiddish language. You have to look for vocal and instrumental recordings. It's like an accent. If you have a good ear, your ear will inform your hands what to do. Timing things like how to phrase consecutive eighth notes and whether three notes are an even triplet or two sixteenths and an eighth.

In the style that Veretski Pass plays, the melody often pushes ahead of the bass. That keeps the dancers from wanting to slow down. That kind of listening is necessary.

*SP: There are many non-Jewish klezmer bands in Europe. How are they?*

*CS:* You don't have to be Jewish to play the music. They are very good. There is some virtuosic playing. Jewish music is going down the same road as Celtic and bluegrass.

[Part two of this interview will appear in the Winter 2010/11 issue, along with transcriptions of the klezmer tunes "Tshernovitzer Sher" and "Linejumper Hora."]

For more information, please visit [www.veretskipass.com](http://www.veretskipass.com)

[Stacy Phillips is an internationally known fiddler and Grammy award-winning Dobro player. He has performed with Mark O'Connor, Eileen Ivers, Peter Rowan, Bela Fleck, David Bromberg, and many others. On fiddle, he specializes in old time, bluegrass, and klezmer styles. He is completely self-taught on his instruments. Phillips has recorded three solo albums and has published over 25 books and DVDs. He edits the online magazine "Fiddle Sessions" ([www.fiddlesessions.com](http://www.fiddlesessions.com)). For more on Stacy's performances and books please visit [www.stacyphillips.com](http://www.stacyphillips.com).]

#### *What Cookie plays:*

- 19th Century Bohemian violin, marked Giovanni Paolo Maggini
- Tortoise shell frog bow, circa 1960, by bowmaker Roger Gerome
- CodaBow Diamond GX Carbon Fiber Bow (which I use if I am playing outside or will be playing a lot of chords)

#### *Discography*

##### *CDs:*

*Veretski Pass*, Golden Horn Productions, GHP 020  
*TrafiK*, Veretski Pass, Golden Horn Productions, GHP 032-2  
*Budowitz Live*, Golden Horn Productions, GHP 029-2  
*German Goldenshteyn: A Living Tradition*, LTD 1803  
*The Protocols*, Hank Sapoznik and the Youngers of Zion

Music Books (published by Cookie Segelstein and available from the Veretski Pass website):

*The Music of Veretski Pass*, Cookie Segelstein (play-along music to accompany *Veretski Pass* CD, GHP-020)  
*Kale Bazetsns and Doinas*, Cookie Segelstein and Joshua Horowitz  
*Protocols – Music of The Youngers of Zion* (transcriptions of the music from the CD of the same title)