Band (or klezmer band) "Veretski Pass" plays Polish music on a new CD
By Itzik Gottesman

During the last week in June the public at the Krakow Jewish Festival heard something that probably was not expected: a Jewish band from America playing Polish folk music and folk dance.

The group "Veretski Pass" from California were invited to play Polish oberex, polkas, and krakowiaks that one can hear hear on their new CD "Poland: a Reincarnation."

Why is it called "Poyln: A Gilgul (Poland: A Metamorphosis)"? The group was inspired by I. L. Peretz' story "Metamorphosis Of A Melody." According to Peretz, the melody begins as a creation from the fiddler Pedotsur, that becomes rolled into a song to welcome the bride. It then goes through several transformations and becomes a melancholy "El Maley Rachamim," a wild freylekhs, a theater song, a street song by magicians, a lament of a young female beggar, a melody that a scholar cannot drive from his brain and a melody sung for the Tolner Rabbi. Finally, thanks to the melody, the beggar girl is saved.

On this CD, "Poyln," the melodies are divided according to the plot of the story. Some titles of the pieces refer to heroes, cities, and towns that we read about in the story as "Reb Chaim's Freylekh", "Kiever Kozak" and "Katsners Obereks". There is a lovely scene of Peretz' in which a woman goes dancing, colorfully dressed, and holds a tray. A band follows behind her, playing, and Jews throw coins in the tray. On the CD the scene is performed with three melodies in a section called "The Street": "Belfer's Overture", "Boilers Galop" and "Polka Sharpana." Later, according to Peretz, when the folk melody becomes a theater piece, one hears on the CD the section "Theater" with three pieces: "Thoughts" (composed by Majer Bogdanski), "Prince and Princess" and "The Dark House-Oberek. "

In all, there are 33 melodies: Jewish and Polish, melodies and dances. The melodies are from various sources: from old and new folklore collections, from a few known Hasidic traditions, and from Polish rural dances. In addition there are six new melodies composed by the musicians.

"Veretski Pass" writes about this CD - "We newly arranged urban and rural music in order to enrich what is today known as klezmer music. On the recording we bring together Jewish and Polish music - the lost link in the chain of the klezmer revival."

Well, it may be that this declaration is a little exaggerated, not because it is not true, but because Polish music is not the only 'lost link." One can also add Ukrainian and Gypsy links. It is indeed true that the former Jewish klezmorim in Poland knew the popular non-Jewish Polish dances and melodies well, both because they occasionally played for Polish noblemen and because Jewish youth knew them and wanted to hear them.

"Veretski Pass" consists of three classically-trained musicians: Cookie Segelstein on violin, Josh Horowitz on accordion and tsimbl, and Stu brotman on bass-cello. They have played klezmer music together for many years, and have releaed fascinating and innovative recordings. For this recording they also invited master clarinetist Prof. Joel Rubin. The listener becomes immediately impressed by the virtuosity of the musicians. The superb arrangements leave room for improvisation. For example, in the first piece, "The Master's Song," in "Dinover Doyne," and "Kiev Kozak" the musicians live it up.

There are interesting melodies in "Poyln," which one would like to know more about. For example, "The Warsaw Dance House" sounds in my ears like an old Celtic tune from the south of France. I can imagine the Polish aristocracy dancing to this two hundred years ago and hearing the melody in a French aristocrat's home. Later, Jewish children heard it in a Polish dance house and that's how the melody transformed from one place to another, just as in Peretz' story!

The company "Golden Horn Records" published the CD "Poyln: A Gilgul" in 2015 but it was only recently delivered to us. One can hear the group "Veretski Pass" playing "Reb Khaim's Freylekhs" on the weblink below.