

Singing with Yiddish voices from the past: Engaging with field recordings of Magid and Beregowski as memory work

[Monika E. Schoop](#)

[Leuphana University, Lüneburg](#)

monika.schoop@leuphana.de

The ethnomusicologists Sofia Magid and Moishe Beregowski recorded Yiddish folk songs between 1928 and 1943 in Belarus and Ukraine. The field recordings fell into oblivion and were rediscovered with the end of the Soviet Union. Since 2014, the Hamburg-based ensemble WAKS has creatively engaged with these phonograph recordings, (re)arranging the often fragmented pieces and using state-of-the-art recording technology to sing with the voices from the past. In this presentation, I explore the ensemble's engagement with the field recordings as a multilayered memory work. My inquiry draws on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, including in-depth interviews with the musicians and an analysis of their creative process. Placing my ethnomusicological approach in dialogue with cultural memory studies, I show that the cracks and gaps in the wax cylinder recordings can symbolize the violent historical ruptures caused by the suppression of Jewish culture under Stalinism and its near extermination by Nazism. I argue that by singing together in dialogue with the Yiddish voices from the past, the ensemble creates manifold connections between the past and the present. Beyond framing the ensemble's musical practice as a revival or re-introduction of long-forgotten Eastern European Yiddish folk songs into cultural memory, my research unveils how WAKS' musicians build affective connections to the past through their creative engagements with the field recordings. I trace how the formation of deeply felt personal bonds with these Yiddish voices prompted the ensemble to research the biographies of the singers recorded by Magid and Beregowski, where they discovered that many had perished in the Holocaust. Finally, using the ensemble's genealogical research and subsequent repatriation of field recordings to the singers' descendants in Israel and Australia, I probe how WAKS contributes to filling gaps in family memory ruptured by Nazism. Reflecting on the diverse intertwined layers of WAKS' memory work, I conclude with an outlook on the potential and challenges of a creative engagement with historical field recordings for remembering violent pasts.