

'Oy vey' is Yiddish for 'uff-da'

Songwriter Elisa Korenne brings the lost world of immigrant Jews back to rural Minnesota

By RABBI
JONATHAN PERLMAN

When New York native Elisa Korenne takes to the stage with her guitar at the Old Wadena Rendezvous and Folklife Festival in Central Minnesota on Aug. 14, she will perform original songs called "Mail Order Bride" and

"I find that if I can bring the audiences with me, then it feels great," the 35-year old singer-songwriter said. "It becomes an opportunity to open the hearts and minds of my listeners. The trick is really for me to find my own comfort in my Jewishness and the subject of Judaism, and then bring that comfort to my audiences."

Korenne's quirky songs are a mix between Cheryl Wheeler and *Trout Fishing in America*, the kind of folk hero songs you might hear on *A Prairie Home Companion*.

Just as Garrison Keillor searches out unusual stories to tell about life in the Upper Midwest, Korenne has her own share of ballads to tell about true-to-life Jewish Paul Bunyans who once graced the heartland.

Now she is moving her show, "'Oy Vey' is Jewish for 'Uff-da,'" through venues near her new hometown of New York Mills, Minn., about 90 miles from Fargo-Moorhead.

She will also present "On the Road: Urban Jews in Rural Places" at the final Rimon Artist Salon on May 9 at Patrick's Cabaret in Minneapolis.

"When I first contact venues like Wadena, they're generally a bit taken aback by the unfamiliar subject matter, but willing to hear more," Korenne said. "These are songs and stories about unique and uncommon individuals in history. They just happen to be Jewish immigrants, but no one ever hears about them."



Courtesy of Rimon

Elisa Korenne: The trick is really for me to find my own comfort in my Jewishness and the subject of Judaism, and then bring that comfort to my audiences.

For example, Korenne has traced the origins of Dr. Bronner's Peppermint Liquid Soap back to a radical Zionist refugee named Emil Heilbronner, who escaped Nazi Germany and immigrated to Chicago. He was later arrested and institutionalized for preaching his own bizarre brand of the "We are all one" philosophy. The doctrine is still printed on Dr. Bronner's soap bottles that are on shelves in health and beauty stores today.

Another song takes audiences to the town of Devil's Lake, where once a year the community gave up their courthouse to allow Jews from the area to pray on the High Holidays.

"The rabbi spoke from the judge's bench," Korenne sings, "The Torah stood on the witness stand / The sound of Hebrew prayers / Rang over the courthouse chairs."

How all of this will go over in places like Wadena or Fergus Falls remains to be seen.

How did a New York Jew with a Yale degree and a master's from the London School of Economics end up in rural Minnesota?

In 2006, Korenne met insurance broker and outdoorsman Chris Klein from Eagle Bend, Minn., on a stint at the New York Mills Regional Cultural Center. He was her tour guide during a camping and canoeing excursion, and nearly a year later (despite the cross-country distance), the two were in love. It was love that brought her to Minnesota to live. The two have been married for three years.

When she identifies herself as a Jew to people in central Minnesota, Korenne says, "there tends to be a pause, and then a syllable of acknowledgement like 'Oh' or 'Really?' The most amusing response I ever got was, 'You and I still believe in the same God, so you're all right by me.'"

Korenne has become an ambassador of Jewish culture, bringing Yiddishisms and the lost world of immigrant Jews back to the small towns of walleye and carp country.

"In rural Minnesota, being Jewish has an air of the exotic about it," she said. "I grew up feeling utterly normal [in the Northeast]; and here in rural Minnesota I have found this feeling of 'otherness' unexpected. It isn't uncomfortable, nor does it feel like I don't belong. Rather it makes me feel the importance of making a conscious connection to my heritage."

In one song Korenne tells of the

antics of Herman Fink, a grocer in turn-of-the-century Wadena, who tried to promote his new store by giving away free chickens.

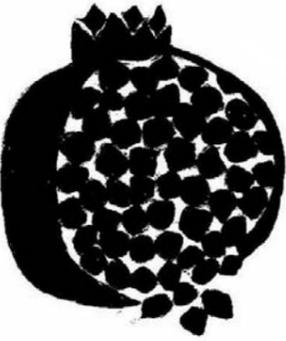
The chickens caused a mess in the quiet town: "Feathers flew, the chickens too / Officials didn't know what to do / Young boys chased, hens escaped, fistfights between the tightly laced / Ladies fussing, gentlemen cussing / And bird waste was everywhere musing."

Korenne wants Minnesotans to look back on the presence of Jews in rural spaces with fondness. It was a time when Jews brought spice to the homogeneous hotdish of their neighborhoods. Korenne's ballad about poor Mr. Fink ends with a longing for the Jews of yesteryear, for "Wadena settled back down / To be a quiet town / Where boring is better than too many birds around."

The final Rimon Artist Salon in the 2009-10 season, "On the Road: Urban Jews in Rural Places," will feature Elisa Korenne 4 p.m. Sunday, May 9 at Patrick's Cabaret, 3010 Minnehaha Ave. S., Minneapolis. The salon is co-sponsored by the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest. Tickets are \$10, and can be purchased in advance or at the door; call 952-381-3449.

The American Jewish World presents the Art Maven column by Rimon: The Minnesota Jewish Arts Council, an initiative of the Minneapolis Jewish Federation.

Art Maven



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"Courthouse Synagogue," which are about the old days of Jewish life on the prairie. There will be only one problem: it's likely that none of the audience members at this two-day, homegrown festival will be Jewish.

Korenne is not a stranger to this kind of experience.

MJTC's Women's Minyan tackles taboo topic

Naomi Ragen's play about domestic abuse in Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox precincts deserves a local audience

By DORIS RUBENSTEIN

Women in the Twin Cities Jewish community (and, men, you'll have to take my word for this) are familiar with the signs in the restrooms of synagogues and other Jewish community buildings: "Judaism has many rich traditions... Domestic abuse is not one of them." A telephone hotline number follows.

Another hotline to alert the Jewish community to this taboo is the current offering at the Minnesota Jewish Theatre Company, *Women's Minyan*, by Israeli playwright Naomi Ragen, and directed here by Carolyn Levy.

The play starts with the entrance of a group of 10 women dressed in a variety of styles and colors, expressing their individual personalities. Over the droning voice of an unnamed rabbi (provided by Rabbi Yosi Gordon) explaining the Talmudic laws of female modesty, we see them change into the drab garb that transforms them into the *Haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) women of the story. You can see the life drain out of their bodies and faces as they reluctantly fold these unique expressions of their lives into small bundles

and hide them away into black boxes (that are economically transformed into various parts of the set by scenic designer Mike Allen).

These pious residents of Jerusalem's Mea Shearim district live highly circumscribed lives. Most of them accept their portion in life and some even revel in it. Their life experience is such that they know little of what happens outside of their ghetto; and they have little time or energy, between earning a living for their scholarly husbands and caring for herds of children, to learn about it. Were it not for the essential telephone, there is not much of modern life evident to show that they live in our times.

And that's true, also, of domestic abuse. This is a crime that knows no time, religion or social class.

Women's Minyan, based on a true story, deals with the tragedy of Chana Kashman Sheinhoff (Kirby Bennett), a Mea Shearim rebbitzin who lives the lie of having the perfect marriage (12 children, kine hora!), while hiding the physical and psychological horror of abuse by her husband. The cards are stacked against her in Mea Shearim and its rabbinic court system.

To save her life, she abandons her family and uses the Israeli court and criminal justice systems to restore her children to her. This course of action is a considered a tremendous betrayal and shanda by the entire Haredi community, including her family: her caring mother-in-law (Miriam Monash) and stuttering sister-in-law (Bethany Ford); her witch of a mother (Meri Golden) and haughty sister (Delta Giordano); and her two eldest daughters (Kira Pontiff and Roneet Aliza Rahamim). Adding some comic relief are her Mutt and Jeff-like friends (played with relish by Jamie Kleiman and Natasha Oreskovich). Rounding out the cast and the minyan is her only true friend and confidante (Julie Ann Nevill), who, as a Sephardic Jew, engenders suspicion from the Haredim.

The play's first act is a long one, and I noticed not a few in the audience twitching in their seats. They were anxious to get to the second act where the truth behind this betrayal is revealed to all in the minyan. It was worth the wait: the bombshell that explodes the lie the women have embraced for two years shatters their world and their beliefs. It is not enough, unfortunately, to make for a happy ending for Chana. We learn in the program notes that she remains an outcast to her community and her

children.

While domestic abuse is — also unfortunately — universal, *Women's Minyan* is a very Jewish play. Hebrew and Yiddish words abound and various rituals are referenced or performed. Non-Jews in the audience (including a friend of mine) may find these mysterious or confusing, but not enough to seriously disturb their understanding and appreciation of the real message it delivers.

MJTC is offering a variety of workshops during the play's final days to explain and expand on the issues it

presents for those who wish to learn more. That may require a second visit to the Hillcrest Playhouse, a worthwhile activity. *Women's Minyan* ran for six years at Habima in Tel Aviv. It deserves a good run here, and perhaps a revival in the future.

***Women's Minyan* runs through May 9 at Hillcrest Center, 1978 Ford Pkwy., St. Paul. For tickets, call 651-647-4315 or e-mail: info@mnjewishtheatre.org. For information, go to: mnjewishtheatre.org.**

JTA journalist, author to speak May 12

Sue Fishkoff, national correspondent and contributing editor for JTA, will lead a discussion on Jewish identity today, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Wednesday, May 12 at Mount Zion Temple, 1300 Summit Ave., St. Paul. The forum will be sponsored by Women's Philanthropy of the United Jewish Fund and Council of St. Paul

and 10 prominent Jewish women will moderate.

Fishkoff's writing for JTA focuses on Jewish identity, intermarriage and conversion, as well as Jewish culture. She is a child of an intermarriage who converted to Judaism more



Sue Fishkoff

than 30 years ago and has both a personal and professional perspective.

The cost is \$20, which includes lunch. To make a reservation, call 651-690-1707 or e-mail: dales@ujfc.org.

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