



YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH



NUSAKH VILNE MEMORIAL

Songs of Eliakum Zunser

ANNUAL NUSAKH VILNE MEMORIAL PROGRAM

October 11, 2026 | 1:00pm

PROGRAM

LECTURE BY:

Alyssa Quint

MUSICAL PROGRAM:

Words by Eliakum Zunser

Arranged for voice with piano
accompaniment by William Fichandler

Zunser's melodies circulated orally.
The transcriptions used for these arrangements
were supplied by Joseph Rumshinsky.

PERFORMED BY:

Maximillian Jansen — *tenor*
Dan Schlosberg — *piano*

CO-SPONSORED BY:



CONSULATE GENERAL
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New York

COVER IMAGE:

Peddlers under the arch on Jatkowa
Street in the Jewish Quarter, Vilna,
c. 1920s-30s. YIVO Archives.

The Song of the Railroad

Dos lid fun ayznban | דאָס ליד פֿון אייזנבאַן
1870

The Postilion

Der potshtover glekl | דער פּאָטשטאָווער גלעקל
1871

The Return to Zion

Shivas Tsien | שיבת ציון
1882

The Jew Always Pays

Reb Yakov meshalem | רב יעקב משלם
1882

The Nineteenth Century

Der nayntsntn yorhundert | דער ניינצנטן יאָרהונדערט
1885

The Eternal People

Dos umshterblekhe folk | דאָס אומשטערבלעכע פֿאָלק
1885

The Aristocrat

Der aristokrat | דער אַריסטאָקראַט
1885

The Moon

Di levone | די לבנה
1885

My Feelings

Mayne gefiln | מיינע געפֿילן
1886

The Plow

Di sokhe | די סאָכע
1887

The Peddler

Der pedler | דער פעדלער
1890

A Letter from Mother Zion

A briv fun der Muter Tsien | אַ בריוו פֿון דער מוטער ציון
1892

Never Say

Zog nit keyn mol | זאָג ניט קיין מאָל
Words by Hirsh Glik, Music by Dmitri Pokrass

SYNOPSSES

Song synopses by Maximilian Hurwitz

From *Selected Songs of Eliakum Zunser* (The Zunser Publishing Company, New York, 1928)

“DOS LID FUN AYZNBAN”—THE SONG OF THE RAILROAD (1870). This poem was inspired by the building of the first railroad in Lithuania. The poet compares life to a train, with its power, speed, set hours for coming and going, and arrangements for the accommodation of the passengers. We are but passengers on the train of life; each of us is assigned either to a luxuriously appointed and spacious compartment of the first or second class, or to an uncomfortable and overcrowded one of the third class; each of us, too, is permitted to travel only thus far and no farther; the human mind is the engineer, and religion, the safety-valve. Do not complain at the class you are made to ride in, or at the briefness of your journey or that of your near and dear ones, for everything is decreed by the Director of the railroad, whose ways are inscrutable to us.

“DER POTSHTOVER GLEKL”—THE POSTILION (1871). This poem, one of the most powerful ever written by Zunser, is a fine illustration of his happy faculty of finding food for the profoundest reflections in the most common objects. It was written on the eve of the Jewish New Year, 5632 (1871), shortly after the poet had lost his wife and all his children in the cholera epidemic of 1871. The bell of the mail wagon rings merrily as it rumbles into town, and the poet wonders what the mailman—the New Year—will bring. He laments the swift and inexorable march of the years, the briefness of life, and the evanescence of human glory, even the greatest. All our achievements are like driftwood on the stream of Time, which soon sweeps them into oblivion; and the same fate that has overtaken the preceding generations awaits us, too. The earth undergoes cataclysmic changes which destroy all forms of life and replace them with new ones, and thus the process of evolution goes on.

“SHIVAS TSIENT”—THE RETURN TO ZION (1882). This is one of the most famous of Zunser’s songs. It was written under very dramatic circumstances. The Jewish student youth of Russia, having become disabused of their assimilationist illusions by the outbreak of virulent anti-semitism

following the accession of Alexander III, formed an organization known as “Bilu”—a word composed of the initials of four Hebrew words meaning, “House of Jacob, come and let us go”—for the purpose of establishing Jewish agricultural settlements in Palestine. And suiting the action to the word, many of them dropped their studies and emigrated to Palestine, where, after enduring incredible hardships and privations, they succeeded in establishing a number of such settlements. Now a party of these student pioneers, from Kharkov University, on their way to Palestine, passed through the city of Minsk, where Zunser was then living, and paid a visit to the poet, whose home was the rendezvous of the local Jewish intellectuals and Zionists. It is in honor of these young idealists homeward bound that the poet composed this stirring song, wherein Mother Zion, seeing through the windows of her desolate house the return of her long absent children, gives vent to her joy and welcomes them to her bosom. The third stanza, in which the poet compares the young Zionist movement to a rivulet destined to swell into a mighty river, has, as we know, proven prophetic. The song instantly became enormously popular, and contemporaries attest to its magical effect on audiences and how potent a factor it proved in spreading the Zionist ideal.

“REB YAKOV MESHALEM”—THE JEW ALWAYS PAYS (1882). This song laments the innumerable and heavy burdens the Jew must bear, as contrasted with the few and light ones borne by his neighbors. The Jew cannot pray, eat a morsel of meat, or even die and receive a decent burial without having to pay a heavy toll for it to a host of idlers and parasites of his own breeding who prey upon him from the day of his birth until and including the day of his death and interment. This poem is perhaps the most deeply felt of Zunser’s works; it labors with wrath which rises to red hot indignation and withering sarcasm in the refrain, wherein the poet tells the aforesaid parasites to go on feeding upon their people because the Jew is “a soft bone, full of marrow, that melts in the mouth.” The title of this song, *Reb Yakov meshalem* (literally, Mr. Jacob

Pays), has become proverbial among Yiddish-speaking Jews the world over.

“DER NAYNTSNTN YORHUNDERT”—THE NINETEENTH CENTURY (1885). A celebrated poem which marks perhaps the highest flight of Zunser’s poetic genius. In it the poet surveys the nineteenth century and traces the rise and decline of the Haskalah movement—i.e., the movement for secular education and western culture—among the Jews of Russia. Israel is represented as a wanderer from Asia who comes to Europe and stops at an inn, where he goes to sleep for seventeen centuries, remaining blissfully unaware of the world around him and of the insults and mockeries of his revilers and traducers. In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, his sleep is interrupted by the Maskilim (as the champions of Haskalah were called), who knock at his door and tell him that it is time to wake up because a new day—that is, the day of humanism and enlightenment—is dawning. At their advice, he pursues secular education, discards his Jewish traits and ways, extinguishes the lamp of his religion—for what need is there of a lamp when the sun shines high—and tries to fraternize with his Gentile neighbors, in the fond hope that they too have awakened, cast aside their prejudices, and are ready to receive him in their midst as a member of the same human brotherhood. But his hope is short-lived; for, when he ventures out of his room, he discovers that the other guests are still asleep, and when he tries to awaken them, he is beaten and ejected from the hotel as a disturber of the peace. Alas, the day of human enlightenment and brotherhood has not yet dawned! And now he regrets bitterly that he has extinguished the lamp that had illumined his path for centuries without number, and that might have relieved the present darkness and gloom.

“DOS UMSHTERBLEKHE FOLK”—THE ETERNAL PEOPLE (1885). In this poem the author discourses on the immortality of Israel, who has seen mighty empires rise and fall, while he alone survives. Every nation passes through three stages: youth, middle age, and senescence, following which it disappears from the world. The Jewish people alone is an exception to this inexorable law of life. It, too, passes through these three states; but when it grows old, it is seized with fever and becomes rejuvenated. But what if the Jewish nation should begin to intermingle with, and become lost in, the other and mortal nations? That is not likely to happen, answers the poet, because God has instilled in the Gentile nations a hatred for the Jews which causes the former to repulse them whenever the

Jews make any attempt at assimilation to their neighbors. But if all the nations hate the Jews, is it not possible that they will enact discriminatory laws making it impossible for the Jews to earn their livelihoods? No, replies again the poet, because God has endowed the Jew with resourcefulness which enables him to find means of subsistence where another nation would starve to death. But if the Jews are so hated by their neighbors, is there not danger that the latter may rise against them and destroy them? The answer is that that is why God has scattered the Jews all over the face of the earth, so that if they are attacked and exterminated in one country, those in other lands survive. For the same reason the Jew has been given the ability to adapt himself to any climate.

“DER ARISTOKRAT”—THE ARISTOCRAT (1885). This was written shortly after the first wave of progress swept over Russian Jewry, bringing in its wake great disillusionment to those Jews who had counted so much on the Russification of the Russian Jew and the triumph of nineteenth century liberalism to solve the age-old Jewish question in the land of the Czars. The poem describes the sorrow and remorse of a rich Jew who has drifted away from his people, whom he despises and shuns. In his desire to appear 100 percent Russian, he surrounds himself with Christian friends, servants, governesses and teachers, and brings up his children in complete ignorance of their race and spiritual heritage. But when a mob of Russian hoodlums pogromize the Jewish community and even pillage his own house—with the assistance of his Christian servants, and to the great surprise of his children, who naively ask, “Are we then also Jews?”—he realizes that his whole life has been a lie and returns to his brethren and fellow sufferers. The poem recounts his trials and tribulations as a homeless refugee and his final happiness as a tiller of the soil in Palestine, where along with hard toil he finds peace, security, plenty and contentment.

“DI LEVONE”—THE MOON (1885). The moon, Earth’s nearest neighbor and traveling companion for countless aeons, bewails the things she sees happening daily here below—the wars, the bloodshed, the oppression of the weak and the poor and the disinherited. “These little microbes I see crawling around there—they call themselves men, I know not why—spend their brief lives in quarreling, intriguing, and trying to wrest from one another the Earth which is God’s gift to all of them.” The moon prays for a cloud to appear and veil from her sight the deeds of horror and shame done here on Earth.

“MAYNE GEFILN”—MY FEELINGS (1886). This poem is perhaps the most lyrical that Zunser ever wrote. A sensitive nerve, says the poet, binds him to his people so that his whole being vibrates in sympathy with his brethren, sharing their joys and woes, their glory and shame. He invokes God’s mercy on His people, who, if they have strayed from the path of righteousness and forsaken His ways, have erred but humanly; and whatever the Jew’s shortcomings may be, he should be forgiven in view of the heroic sacrifices he is making to restore his ancient homeland and settle there as a tiller of the soil. Here follows a passionate avowal of love and longing for Zion, reaching its climax in the twentieth stanza where the poet cries out: “Wings, oh, wings give me, that I may fly to thee, beloved Zion!”

“DI SOKHE”—THE PLOW (1887). This is among the most popular of Zunser’s songs. In it the poet lauds the free life of the workers in the field and compares it with the terrific struggle for existence of the Jewish city dweller. In many witty passages he parallels the life of the petty Jewish artisan and trader, the housewife, the children, with the wholesome, carefree and invigorating life of the colonists in Palestine. He urges his people to give up the precarious struggle for a livelihood in the cities and settle as farmers in Palestine.

“DER PEDLER”—THE PEDDLER (1890). In this poem Zunser, who believed that it was the poet’s mission not to sing of the beauties of nature, but to act as a sympathetic teacher and mentor of his people, advises the Jewish immigrant in America to give up peddling as an occupation and become a farmer. Peddling, he says, is merely another form of beggary and only serves to make the Jew unpopular and unwelcome in this country, his last haven of refuge. He describes the hard lot of the peddler and urges that the millions donated by the famous Jewish philanthropist, Baron de Hirsch, for the relief of the Jewish immigrants in the United States, be used in helping these newcomers to settle on land and become tillers of the soil.

“A BRIV FUN DER MUTER TSIEN”—A LETTER FROM MOTHER ZION (1892). Mother Zion sends a letter to her children in America. She tells the Jews of America of the great sacrifices that the Jews of the Old World are making to rebuild Palestine, and how Jewish agricultural settlements, villages, and towns are springing up in the Holy Land, and appeals to them to join their less fortunate brethren in the effort to restore the ancient homeland of their people.

ABOUT THE SONGWRITER

Eliakum Zunser (1836/1841–1913) was a Yiddish folk bard, whose songs captured the experiences, aspirations, and everyday lives of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe and beyond. Zunser, who was born in Vilna in either 1836 or 1841, was a *badkhn*—a professional wedding entertainer who told jokes and recited rhymes in honor of the bride and groom. He was also a famed songwriter whose songs were known around the Yiddish-speaking world. Abraham Cahan, editor of the Yiddish daily *Forverts* described Zunser as “one of the immortals in the history of Yiddish life.”

Coming of age during the Haskalah, or the Jewish enlightenment, Zunser’s lyrics document this period of modernization and secularization. The songs are not only heady and intellectual, but also they appeal to the masses, featuring social commentary about poverty, persecution, workers’ rights, and Zionism.

Zunser is also appreciated for his contribution to the development of the modern literary Yiddish language, as well as his improvisational abilities. According to one account, he once delivered an hour-long speech entirely in rhyme. He is further remembered for his role in bringing blank verse into Yiddish poetry.

Much of Zunser’s life was marked by hardship. Raised in poverty, his father died when he was still young, and he and his brother were conscripted into the Russian army. He had five children, one of whom died in an accident and the others, along with his wife, succumbed to a cholera epidemic. He later remarried and started a new family in Russia. He emigrated with them to America, where he worked as a printer in New York. He died in 1913 and was buried in Brooklyn.

His songs provide a glimpse into a time of tremendous change in Jewish history. They offer a snapshot of the Yiddish-speaking world’s collective consciousness at a moment that, while radically different from today, very much shaped the Jewish world as we know it.

ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

Learn more about Eliakum Zunser's life and work:

- ▶ Entin, Nathaniel A., perf. *Selected Songs of Eliakum Zunser: Sung in Yiddish*. With Marienka Michna, piano. Folkways Records, 1963.
- ▶ Glasser, Paul. "Tsunzer, Elyokem." In *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 2010. <https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article/1155>.
- ▶ Liptzin, Sol. *Eliakum Zunser: Poet of His People*. New York: Behrman House, 1950.
- ▶ Quint, Alyssa. "The Culture of Capitalism in Nineteenth-Century Yiddish Song." *Jewish Social Studies* 27, no. 2 (2022): 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jewisocistud.27.2.01>.
- ▶ Schaechter, Mordkhe, ed. *Elyokum Tsunzers verk / The Works of Elyokum Zunser: A Critical Edition*. 2 vols. New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1964.
- ▶ Zunser, Eliakum. *Melodien zu zehn jüdischen Volkslieder*. Vilna, 1887.
- ▶ Zunser, Eliakum. *Selected Songs of Eliakum Zunser*. Introduction by Abraham Cahan. Synopses by Maximilian Hurwitz. Arranged for voice and piano by William Fichandler, from notations by Joseph Rumshinsky. New York: Zunser Publishing Company, 1928.
- ▶ Zunser, Eliakum. *Tsen yidishe folkslider*. New York: The Hebrew Publishing Co., 1897.

Alyssa Quint is the Leo Charney Visiting Fellow at Yeshiva University's Israel Studies Center and a co-editor of the *Yiddish Voices* translations series (YIVO/Bloomsbury). She is the author of *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater* (2019), which was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award and the Jordan Schnitzer Award. She is also the editor of three volumes on the Yiddish theater: *Women on the Yiddish Stage* (2023), *Three Yiddish Plays by Women: Female Jewish Perspectives, 1880–1920* (2023), and *Mississippi: a Yiddish Play About the Scottsboro Affair* (2026). She is a contributing editor of the online Digital Yiddish Theater Project and an editor and writer for *Tablet Magazine*.

Tenor **Maximillian Jansen** is a versatile performer acclaimed for his work in opera, concert, and musical theater, praised for his "warm, but penetrating voice" (*The Times Union*). Recent highlights include his Lincoln Center debut with the New York Choral Society in Honegger's *King David*, appearances with the Metropolitan Opera, Berkshire Opera Festival, and Opera Saratoga, and performances at the Bard Music Festival. In 2022, he presented a live premiere of a new work by David Ludwig Serkin for the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. This premiere was given as part of YIVO's *Continuing Evolution: Yiddish Folksong Today*, a music festival celebrating Yiddish folksong.

Brooklyn-based composer, pianist, arranger, and music director **Dan Schlosberg** creates acclaimed work across opera, theater, and concert music. Recent projects include arrangements and music direction of the original cast recording of Heartbeat Opera's *Manon!* (2026); the new opera *Complications in Sue* (2026) with Michael R. Jackson's libretto at Opera Philadelphia; the new musical *The Counterfeit Opera* (2025), which premiered at Little Island; and new orchestration for Poul Ruders' *The Handmaid's Tale* (2025) at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. In 2021, Schlosberg was the audition, rehearsal, and soundtrack pianist for Steven Spielberg's *West Side Story*.

Never Say

זאג ניט קיין מאָל | Zog nit keyn mol

WORDS BY HIRSH GLIK, MUSIC BY DMITRI POKRASS

*Zog nit keyn mol az du geyst dem letstn veg,
Khotsh himlen blayene farshteln bloye teg.
Kumen vet nokh undzer oysgebenkte sho,
Es vet a poyk ton undzer trot — mir zaynen do!*

*Fun grinem palmenland biz vaysn land fun shney,
Mir kumen on mit undzer payn, mit undzer vey,
Un vu gefaln s'iz a shprits fun undzer blut,
Shprotsn vet dort undzer gvure, undzer mut.*

*Es vet di morgnzun bagildn undz dem haynt,
Un der nekhtn vet farshvindn mitn faynd,
Nor oyb farzamen vet di zun in dem kayor —
Vi a parol zol geyn dos lid fun dor tsu dor.*

*Dos lid geshribn iz mit blut un nit mit blay,
S'iz nit keyn lidl fun a foygl af der fray,
Dos hot a folk tsvishn falndike vent
Dos lid gezungen mit naganes in di hent.*

*To zog nit keyn mol az du geyst dem letstn veg,
Khotsh himlen blayene farshteln bloye teg.
Kumen vet nokh undzer oysgebenkte sho —
Es vet a poyk ton undzer trot — mir zaynen do!*

זאג ניט קיין מאָל אַז דו גייסט דעם לעצטן וועג,
כאַטש הימלען בליענע פאַרשטעלן בלויע טעג.
קומען וועט נאָך אונדזער אויסגעבענקטע שעה,
עס וועט אַ פויק טאָן אונדזער טראַט — מיר זיינען דאָ!

פֿון גרינעם פאַלמענלאַנד ביז ווייסן לאַנד פֿון שניי,
מיר קומען אָן מיט אונדזער פּיין, מיט אונדזער וויי,
און וווּ געפֿאַלן ס'איז אַ שפּריץ פֿון אונדזער בלוט,
שפּראַצן וועט דאָרט אונדזער גבורה, אונדזער מוט.

עס וועט די מאָרגנזון באַגילדן אונדז דעם היינט,
און דער נעכטן וועט פאַרשווינדן מיטן פֿינד,
נאָר אויב פאַרזאַמען וועט די זון אין דעם קאַיאָר —
ווי אַ פאַראַל זאָל גיין דאָס ליד פֿון דור צו דור.

דאָס ליד געשריבן איז מיט בלוט און ניט מיט בליי,
ס'איז ניט קיין לידל פֿון אַ פֿויגל אויף דער פֿריי,
דאָס האָט אַ פֿאַלק צווישן פֿאַלנדיקע ווענט
דאָס ליד געזונגען מיט נאַגאַנעס אין די הענט.

טאָ זאָג ניט קיין מאָל אַז דו גייסט דעם לעצטן וועג,
כאַטש הימלען בליענע פאַרשטעלן בלויע טעג.
קומען וועט נאָך אונדזער אויסגעבענקטע שעה —
עס וועט אַ פויק טאָן אונדזער טראַט — מיר זיינען דאָ!

Never say this is the final road for you,
Though leadened skies may cover over days of blue.
As the hour that we longed for is so near,
Our step beats out the message — we are here!

From lands so green with palms to
lands all white with snow,
We shall be coming with our anguish and our woe,
And where a spurt of our blood fell on the earth,
There our courage and our spirit have rebirth.

The early morning sun will brighten our day,
And yesterday with our foe will fade away.
But if the sun delays and in the east remains —
This song as password generations must maintain.

This song was written with our blood and not with lead,
It's not a little tune that birds sing overhead,
This song a people sang amid collapsing walls
With grenades in hands they heeded to the call.

Therefore never say the road now ends for you,
Though leadened skies may cover over days of blue.
As the hour that we longed for is so near —
Our step beats out the message — we are here!

TRANSLATION FROM

We Are Here: Songs of the Holocaust
by Malke Gottleib and Chana Mlotek



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