

THE POWER OF MUSIC – A SHORT KLEZMER LOVE TALE by Karine Schomer

Few things are more evocative than a piece of music that was the soundtrack for a special experience in your life.

Since the death of my husband Raphael Shevelev in 2021, I had been reluctant to look through and play our old collection of music CDs.

Love of music had been one of our very deepest points of connection.

The great symphonic, choral and operatic works of the western classical tradition. The rousing Russian soul music of the Alexandrov Red Army Choir. The archival footage of the great African–American contralto Marian Anderson singing at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939. The South African national anthem *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*. And the Swedish pop group ABBA's song *The Day Before You Came*, which we experienced as our own story of having found each other half way around the world from where we had each grown up.

One CD was particularly significant in our history together. We first heard it so soon after its 1995 release that it had not yet become famous.

[*In the Fiddler's House*](#) was a groundbreaking crossover album in which the classical virtuoso Israeli–American violinist Itzhak Perlman joined the best bands of the *klezmer* Yiddish folk music revival that had begun in the 1970s.

For anyone who has somehow managed not to know about *klezmer*, it's a music of enormous energy, pathos, emotional range, and deep cultural resonance. It's to the Eastern European Jewish diaspora world what Appalachian and African–American roots music is to American musical culture.

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So here is Raphael's and my tale of *klezmer* and love – a story from over thirty years ago yet as vivid in my memory as if it was yesterday.

We were living in the San Francisco Bay Area, had recently met and married after years of both fearing we would never meet our true soulmate. Broke but happy beyond words with the rapid blossoming of our worlds of shared reference, meaning and passion.

One weekend, we decided to go on a date into San Francisco, and see what we could do without spending more than \$25.

We had the most wonderful time.

\$15 got us round-trip tickets to ride the BART train from the East Bay to the Mission Street exit in San Francisco, some tacos from a street vendor, a visit to the historic Mission Dolores church, and a leisurely walk taking in the charm of 24th Street.

We also discovered an international newsstand where, at no cost, we leafed through papers and magazines in different languages from a dozen countries, catching up on the world.

With \$10 left, we figured we could afford some tea and cookies in a small coffee house we spotted across the street.

As we sat there sipping our tea, some music started playing on the sound system.

Raphael sat bolt upright.

It was the music from his 1940s childhood in the Jewish immigrant and refugee community in Cape town, the Yiddish music of his parents who had emigrated from Latvia and Lithuania. It was the lullabies sung by his mother, the dance music from the weddings he attended.

I knew this music too, as I had fallen in love with it in the 1960s when I was in college in the United States, a budding international folk singer type who loved to collect and sing songs in many languages, and through the songs enter the cultures.

We rushed up to the coffee shop owner.

“What is this you’re playing? Where does it come from? Who are the performers? What’s it called?”

He told us about the *In the Fiddler’s House* album, that it was still hard to find, that someone had made a cassette copy of it for him.

And since we seemed so enthusiastic about it, would we like to have him make us a copy too?

Yes, of course!

And so we ended our \$25 date with a free treasure to take home as well.

Because it would be quite some time before we felt we could afford to spend money on CDs, that third-generation cassette copy got played over and over in our home, filling it with those heart-warming and heart-breaking melodies from the lost Jewish world of pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe.

One day, my parents, arriving for Sunday lunch with us, came in the door just as one of the liveliest songs was playing—violin and clarinet wailing at top volume to a frenetic beat that seemed to compel one to jump in and start dancing with abandon.

They didn’t know this kind of music, but instantly started clapping to the rhythm and smiling with sheer delight, as if they had just stumbled into a wondrous celebratory party.

Eventually, we wore out the tape. By then, purchasing the CD was definitely within budget, and we ceased our criminal life as users of pirated material.

About a year ago, as I was gradually learning to live with the reality that Raphael was no longer alive, I decided it was time to start listening to our music collection again. I would reclaim it as a special inheritance, not just as a reminder of loss.

Gathering up my courage, I started with ***In the Fiddler's House***.

All the memories of that date in San Francisco so long ago came rushing into my mind as I put on and played the long silenced CD. My heart filled to the brim with longing, sorrow, joy, exuberance and love—all mixed together like in *klezmer* music itself.

There's nothing to equal the power of music.

Anyone who has a heart to feel must surely have one or more special pieces of music that reach to the core of their being and their most meaningful memories.

For us, ***In the Fiddler's House*** had that kind of power. And the ability to transport us to a magic moment when all seemed right with the world.

In times of difficulty and dread like our world today, maybe we all need to let those special pieces of music re-enter us from time and remind us that life can be good.

I invite you to share any of your own deepest heart and memory music, and to lose yourself in my favorite track from ***In the Fiddler's House***:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xaWt6SacOU>



A word about the author: Karine Schomer was born in the United States, raised in France, and was involved with India for many years as a professor and scholar of South Asian Studies. After subsequent careers in academic administration and cross-cultural management consulting, she now devotes herself to essay, memoir and opinion writing (www.schomer44.medium.com or <https://karineschomer.substack.com/>). She has never been to South Africa, but in the three decades of her marriage to the late Raphael Shevelev, who left South Africa in 1964, she has absorbed the culture, the history, the feel, the references, and the lore of her husband's native place to the point that she feels deeply and personally connected to it. She has shared with CHOL the stories Raphael himself wrote over the years about the sweetness and the tragedies of the "Beloved Country" he left behind. She lives in El Cerrito, CA, USA.

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