

FEEDING WORLD HUNGER FOR JEWISH MUSIC

By Casey Sanchez | The New Mexican

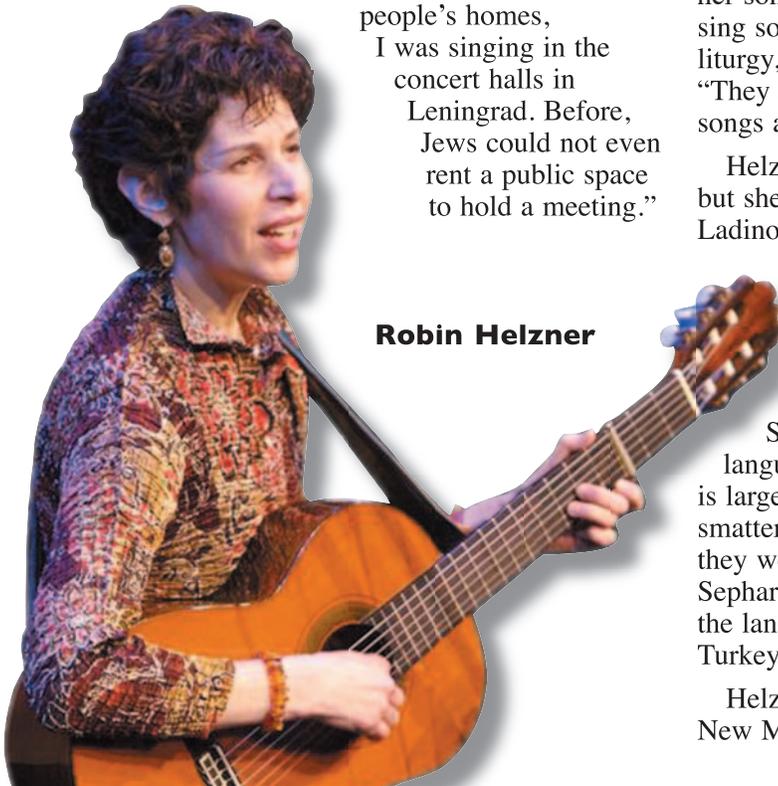
AS SHE SEES IT, Robyn Helzner's mission is to bring Jewish music to the world, whether the world is ready for it or not. She traveled to the Soviet Union in 1987, when she was in her 20s, and risked prison time to perform concerts of Jewish music in private homes. She learned enough Russian to navigate the subway, used pay phones to avoid hotel-room wiretaps, and breezily smuggled cassette tapes through customs.

"I think there was a bit of naiveté that worked in my favor, Helzner said in an interview with *Pasatiempo*. "I was selected by my own community here in Washington, D.C., to perform underground concerts. It was illegal to do what I was doing. The Jewish community had been sending teachers and educators, trying to bring in material to feed that hunger."

Since the collapse of the Communist regime, Helzner has returned to the former Soviet Union several times in an official capacity as an ambassador of Jewish music. Her sold-out 1989 performance in St. Petersburg was filmed for a PBS special. "Instead of giving

underground concerts in people's homes, I was singing in the concert halls in Leningrad. Before, Jews could not even rent a public space to hold a meeting."

Robin Helzner



From her home base in our nation's capital, Helzner continues spreading Jewish music around the world, performing solo and with the Robyn Helzner Trio. On Sunday, Jan. 9, Helzner performs at Temple Beth Shalom in a concert whose proceeds benefit the synagogue and the New Mexico Women's Foundation.

Helzner sings in what she calls the five languages of the Jewish world: Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, English, and Ladino – also known as Judeo-Spanish. But the themes of her music are easily understood and appreciated by non-Jews. "This is not all about Jewish religion," she said. "Judaism, in addition to being a religion, is a culture; it's a way of life."

"I sing world Jewish music. Jewish music has been influenced by all the countries, the cultures where we have lived. World Jewish music is, for me, singing in these traditional languages, employing all these rhythms and different melodies from all over the world."

Her concerts attract a mix of listeners, many who have little to no experience with Judaism but find her songs fresh and accessible. "Although I may sing songs that come from the Bible or psalms or liturgy, it's not a religious concert," Helzner said. "They are universal. There are love songs. There are songs about work and songs about community."

Helzner has studied Hebrew throughout her life, but she admitted that singing songs in Yiddish and Ladino has taken some effort on her part. "My parents were Yiddish speakers. Unfortunately, I don't speak Yiddish. I would go to my dad for help with translation and pronunciation."

Her songs in Ladino should be understandable to many New Mexican Spanish speakers. Ladino was the predominant language of Iberian Jews. The Romance language is largely based on Spanish grammar, with a smattering of Hebrew and Aramaic words. After they were expelled by the Spanish in 1492, many Sephardic Jewish families continued to speak the language from their new homes in Greece, Turkey, the Balkans, and in the Americas.

Helzner said she is aware that many Northern New Mexicans have embraced a crypto-Jewish

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identity — Hispanics who remember their older relatives practicing Jewish religious traditions without being aware of their faith — but has yet to come across a song that comes from the scattered Jewish diaspora of Northern Mexico and the American Southwest. “But I’m going to do a number of Judeo-Español songs that connect to that tradition,” Helzner said.

Members of the Robyn Helzner Trio— Helzner, Dov Weitman, and Matt Holsen — blend Jewish lore with a wide array of languages and musical styles. On their 2006 album, *Signs and Wonders*, the three musicians easily cross space and time. “Oyfn Nil” is a Yiddish lullaby beseeching the River Nile to be calm so the infant Moses can float down the waters unharmed. “Dia de Shabbat” is a Ladino song that recounts a 1917 fire in Salonika, Greece, that torched the entire town. In a humorous vein, “Ch’vil Nisht Aza Chosn” looks at the old-world role of Jewish matchmakers giving way to the romantic wants of more independent daughters.

While many of these songs are not sung in English, Helzner does her best to properly introduce them, matching the vocal arrangements to the nature of the tune. “Most

Jewish audiences don’t speak those languages,” Helzner said of the non-English tongues. “They are filtered through my artistry as an American Jewish woman.”

It’s a sound that plays as well with Jewish communities overseas as it does here. In the early 1990s, Helzner headed to Hong Kong to serve as the High Holiday cantor for the United Jewish Congregation of Hong Kong. The Jewish presence in China is old, if discontinuous, she said. “A thousand years ago, there was a community in Kaifeng. There were four to five thousand Jews who came along the Silk Road. I’ve started to give workshops about this.”

She has since returned to China several times, officiating at the first bar mitzvah to be held in Beijing. “I never thought in my life I would make seven trips to Beijing,” she said. By becoming a musical envoy, Helzner has in some way re-created the global journeys of Jewish immigrants before her.