

# CHOIR MEMORIES AT 40

By Victor Neuman

## Choir Prehistory History

As they say, nothing comes from nothing and so it is with the Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir of the Peretz Centre (The Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture if you want to get all technical). Officially our birth date was 1979 but, when you come right down to it, we were in labour for around 25 years before finally coming into the world. A long gestation perhaps but not bad when you consider it gave birth to a baby with eight heads.

An early predecessor to the Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir was a group called the UJPO's Vancouver Jewish Folk Singers. UJPO was the United Jewish People's Order and it was a decidedly political organization that positioned itself somewhere left of Lenin. Its 8-member choir, though keen on socially progressive issues as well, was somewhat less political and more focused on bringing Yiddish and international music to the Vancouver community. Famed Yiddish singer Claire Osipov, the choir's founder and director, formed the group in 1956 and kept it going for 6 years. In that time the choir performed at Peretz Centre events as well as reaching out to the community beyond. On two occasions the choir performed at the CBC studio and was broadcast over CBC radio.

One member of note in this choir was accompanist Peggy Kennedy, half-sister to famed indigenous artist, Bill Reid. Another member of special note to me personally was my cousin Leon Bard who, at the tender age of 14, was the choir's youngest recruit. Later in life Leon tossed aside his budding career as a choral singer to become a medical doctor. Go figure.

Everyone familiar with Claire Osipov knows she seems to have boundless energy when it comes to her love of music and so, to no one's surprise, Claire took on additional musical duties and began a children's choir at Peretz in 1959. The Peretz Centre had an active children's education program under principal Leibl Basman and Claire's choir drew on this group bringing in children that ranged in age from 7 to 11. Noteworthy in this choir was part-time piano accompanist Gyda Chud, current president of the Peretz Centre.

Time and circumstance brought both those choirs to an end some time in the 60s and, for a time, the halls of the Peretz Centre were chorally silent.

Then, just prior to the time of the Jewish Folk Choir, a Peretz choir formed under the direction of Morrie Backun, an employee of Ward's music. Little is remembered about this choir because Morrie discontinued the group after just one year. Tammy Jackson sang in this choir and one of her main recollections is not so much the repertoire and performances as the brilliant discount

they got on sheet music.

### **The Early Days**

Searle Friedman arrived on the Vancouver scene 1978. He had been out of the country for a number of years studying music in East Germany (back when there was still the Eastern Block). After his studies Searle and his family (wife Sylvia and sons Michael, Robert and David) returned to Canada and settled in Toronto where Searle became conductor of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir.

After a time, the family decided to move to Vancouver and Searle came to Vancouver on his own to pave the way. Searle taught at an alternative education program known as “Relevant High School” ----a program of studies that was based at the Peretz Centre. After a year in that post Searle parted company with that organization and found himself at loose ends while waiting to try his hand at a regular position as a music teacher within the B.C. school system.

Unfortunately, Searle’s teaching credentials which had been established in Ontario were not immediately transferable to British Columbia. Searle was temporarily not able to teach in this province. With no employment in Vancouver, Searle spent much of his time involved in the activities of the Vancouver Peretz Institute (now known as the Peretz Centre). It was there that he had a conversation with Tammy Jackson that was to launch the Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir. She suggested that Searle form a choir to occupy his time. Searle liked the idea and in 1979 the Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir was born.

The beginnings were rather humble. The choir consisted of just a few members and a Russian pianist named Wolfgang. The roster at that time is only vaguely remembered but it certainly included Tammy Jackson (Searle’s niece) and Sylvia Friedman (Searle’s wife). It likely also included David Friedman (Searle’s son), Goldie Shore, Betty Ewing, Davie Cramer, Carl Lehan and Margie Goldhar. When there were no-shows at rehearsals, the standing joke was that the choir could at least consider the possibility of becoming a barbershop quartet.

In those early years the choir did not have the numbers to put on a full and formal concert. Instead the choir performed informally at various Peretz Centre festival occasions and cultural gatherings. The repertoire was a potpourri of traditional Jewish folk songs sung in Yiddish as well as some non-Jewish selections that piqued Searle’s interest----sometimes in bizarre and peculiar ways (Roosters Crowing on Sourwood Mountain and Martian Love Song to name two). Incidentally, Searle found the “Roosters” song never sounded quite right until one day he discovered somebody in the bass section was consistently singing “roosters growing on the side of the mountain.”

But the choir grew rapidly. Searle Friedman was not just a brilliant conductor and arranger. He was very much a people person and had a charisma and affability that drew others to him. What

also grew his following was Searle's knack for making his singers believe in themselves. Maurie Jackson, an early recruit to the choir, recalls a mantra Searle repeated often to struggling singers: "If you can talk you can sing!" In a short time, the choir attracted many more people and grew to around 30 members----including myself.

Never underestimate the power of serendipity. I had seen Searle's rather small choir perform and I thought about joining but my interest was kind of a passing thing. I was determined to do something Jew-ish but my real hope was to join a folk dancing class at the Jewish Community Centre. My job was designing highways for the Ministry of Transportation and it kept me glued to a desk most days. I figured folk dancing would be a good way to get some exercise, lose some weight and meet new people. As fate would have it, the folk dancing class was cancelled so I had to begrudgingly fall back on my second choice----the Peretz Centre's Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir. It was a choice that I stuck with for almost 36 years and a choice that introduced me to the remarkable lady I've been married to for 31 years and counting---Tammy Jackson. Searle was Tammy's uncle and, when he came to know of our budding romance, he was inordinately pleased to know he had played matchmaker to two of his choir members. Like I said, Searle was a people person. He was also a bit of a *yenta*. As often as Searle gave me pointers on singing, he also asked me for constant updates on the state of my relationship with his niece. ("Are you seeing each other after choir?" "She's a sweet girl." "Are you engaged yet?" "Do you have a wedding date?")

The rehearsals were a lot of fun. Searle wanted to hone our singing skills but he liked to laugh and humour was always a part of our repertoire. I recall one day when Searle was working hard at getting us to blend our voices more closely. As he put it, he didn't want to hear individual voices. He wanted to hear a choir singing as one voice. After puzzling over how make us understand this, Searle hit on the exact phrasing to help us comprehend. "I want all of you to try really hard to feel each other's parts!" That did us in for most of the rest of that rehearsal and even Searle had to take time to get back his concentration.

Searle's one nemesis in rehearsals was his wife Sylvia. While the rest of us were in awe of his talents and put Searle on a pedestal, Sylvia felt no such compunction regarding her husband. She freely advised Searle of proper pronunciations of Yiddish words and even was vocal about the pace of various songs when she thought Searle had got it wrong. The expression we often heard from Sylvia was "In my village...." The expression we often heard from Searle was "Sylvia.... who's running this choir?" For fear of hurting his feelings no one ever answered that question.

Many a rehearsal degenerated into heated debates regarding Yiddish linguistics and the proper treatment of traditional songs. Singing even took a back seat to pondering the number of ways Hanukah could be spelled. If, at times, we didn't learn how to sing...we certainly learned how to debate.

As well as increasing the size of the choir, Searle wanted to increase our presence in the community and give us a focal point for our efforts. With that in mind we performed our first annual spring concert in the spring of 1984. Our guest artists were the Shalom Dancers. In addition to the choir fans who attended, the Shalom Dancers brought to the performance their own appreciative followers. The result was a very large and lively audience. The choir sang its portion of the concert, the dancers danced their part and at the end we combined. The choir sang Hava Nagila while the dancers danced their original choreography to our singing. The audience loved it. They both sang along and clapped to the music making for a rousing finish to our concert. The pervasive feeling in the choir was “We’ve got to do this again!” And so, we have. The choir’s annual spring concert has become a tradition that has spanned 35 of its 40 years in existence and is an event that continues to this day.

### **The Mid-life Crisis**

Searle’s energy and love of music had always made him seem like an unstoppable force of nature. We thought and hoped he would last forever. We were wrong. Due to a childhood bout of rheumatic fever Searle’s robust exterior masked the effects of a damaged heart. When he was still a young man his doctors basically told him not to take on any long-term magazine subscriptions. They said that, with the damage to his heart valves, he would not survive past the age of 40. Searle’s response was to get married, raise three sons, travel to East Germany to study music, get his Canadian teaching certificate and start a choir. When it came to living his life, Searle was not about to call it a day.

In September of 1974 Searle had a heart valve replacement and got on with his life. After he founded the Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir in 1979, he was spending repeated stints in the hospital. Nevertheless, Searle pushed through his medical setbacks and always came back to us ready to lead the choir without a backward glance. As these rounds of hospital treatment and choir repeated we saw them as a routine annoyance that interrupted our rehearsals temporarily. Searle kind of saw them the same way. He was focused on the choir. The hospital stays were just a temporary nuisance that kept him away from his music.

I had a conversation with Searle that pretty much says it all. I was visiting him in the hospital. He was in good spirits but he was bed-ridden and I saw dark blotches on his legs that gave me concerns. This was our conversation:

**Me:** How are you doing Searle?

**Searle:** Fantastic! I’ve gotten some very good news from my cardiologist.

**Me:** (greatly relieved) Wonderful! What did he tell you?

**Searle:** Well it turns out he sings in a choir and he’s not happy with it. He’s thinking of joining ours! AND HE’S A TENOR!!”

Searle returned to us from that hospital stay and all of that seemed behind him as he resumed conducting the choir and returned to his normal life. But tragedy struck on the afternoon of December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1990. Searle's heart just stopped. No drama. No clutching of the chest. No collapse on the floor. His heart just stopped like a watch that had run down. He was found by his family still sitting peacefully in his chair in the middle of writing New Year's greetings to friends. Searle was only 64.

Just over a week later we had our first choir rehearsal without Searle. We were still stunned by what had happened but everybody seemed hesitant to broach the subject. Like automatons we stood in a large circle and began our warm up exercises led by our accompanist, Susan James. It was a charade. No one's mind was on what we were doing. It all seemed aimless and pointless. And no one could bring themselves to talk about what really was on our minds.

After a few minutes I suggested we stop the warm ups so I could say a few things about Searle. I can't remember exactly what I said but it was generally about the manner of Searle's death and how much the choir meant to him. I also spoke about keeping the choir going as a tribute to his memory. Then the flood gates opened. As we stood in that circle there were tears and choked words but each and every choir member spoke of how much Searle had meant to them personally. When it ended there was a palpable sense of release and we got down to the business of carrying on what Searle had begun. And if we doubted ourselves and whether we were able to carry on, we only had to look at one of the choir members that stood in that same circle to warm up and sing with the rest of us. It was Searle's wife, Sylvia Friedman.

### **Modern Times**

After Searle's passing, our accompanist Susan James stepped up and became our conductor. Susan was a more reserved individual than Searle but she was a skilled conductor and her attention to detail was legendary. Nothing got by her and every note sung that was not to her satisfaction was drilled again and again until we got it right. And sometimes when the notes were right we were still stopped dead in our tracks because the page turns were too loud. We worked harder and dug into a lot of detail during rehearsals but we were better singers for it.

However, Susan's tenure was not a long one---it only lasted five years. The problem was that Susan was a devout Christian and the choir was composed mostly of a bunch of God-less secularists. Susan accommodated the spiritual chasm for a time but eventually she found it difficult to go on. In her farewell letter to the choir, Susan expressed her sadness and frustration at not being able to share her beliefs and the love of God with the rest of us. This preyed on her mind far more than anyone suspected and, in the end, she felt she had to leave. That departure happened in 1995 after our annual June concert had been performed and our season had ended.

We were in limbo once more but again a member from our ranks stepped up and helped us carry on. In the fall of 1996 David Millard---who for 3 years had been a hired gun (paid professional singer) in our tenor section---became our conductor and, much to our good fortune, is still at it today 23 years later.

David Millard has proven both brilliant and versatile in the post. Over the years he has conducted, served as our resident Yiddishist, sung as a soloist, filled in on occasion as our pianist, written choral arrangements for most of our songs and led audience sing-alongs at festival celebrations. As we declared in one of our concert narrations, David Millard is the Swiss Army knife of conductors.

In recent times, David demonstrated another part of his diversity of talent by composing an original six-part cantata based on a Yiddish translation of Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem, Jabberwocky----Yomervokhets in Yiddish. David's interest was piqued when he read a Yiddish translation of Jabberwocky by Raphael Finkel. Finkel had apparently found a Yiddish-English dictionary that no one knew existed. In this dictionary the "Jabberwock" translates as the "Yomervokh" and the "frumious Bandersnatch" is noted as the "froymdikn Bandershnits." The hero's blade that went "snicker-snack" as it sliced into the Jabberwock made a different sound held by a Jewish hero---"shnoker-shnik." Who knew?

Translation issues aside, Yomervokhets is a brilliant original composition by David Millard and an audience favorite for years. No history of the choir would be complete without it and it is to be featured at the choir's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert in 2019.

It was apparent to the choir that the delving into meaning and pronunciation had not ended with the era of Sylvia and Searle. David, as it turns out, has a major passion other than music----linguistics! And the beat goes on. When not conducting, David spends much of his spare time searching for Raphael Finkel's English-Yiddish dictionary.

### **High and Low Points in Choir History**

#### **The Low Point---It's Curtains for Us**

Our most embarrassing moment of choirdom was probably in 2003 at the start of our first performance of *Di Yam Gazlonim* (The Pirates of Penzance sung in Yiddish). The initial staging concept was simple: We would come onto the stage, sing two or three non-pirate introductory songs and then don our costumes (mostly pirate hats with sashes for the men and bonnets with scarves for the ladies) to sing *Di Yam Gazlonim*. The costumes were individualized and were to be stored under each choir member's seat for quick access. The concert would then consist of

songs interspersed with story narration by David Skulski. Simple, right?

Unfortunately, well-meaning choir members wanted to jazz things up a little. Leading the charge was most of the choir committee. They wanted the costume change to be a surprise to the audience and felt that having the hats and bonnets in plain view under our chairs would spoil the surprise. It would be better if the costumes were off stage until the time came to put them on. The changeover would be simple. Do our intro songs. Close the curtains while David Skulski narrates the start of Yam Gazlonim. Then open the curtains on the choir all dressed as pirates and maidens. The audience would love it! What could possibly go wrong? It was a question we were about to answer in real time.

One voice cautioned that we had all agreed in meetings to never again do any last-minute changes that could not be properly rehearsed. Overruled! Murphy's Law wasn't familiar to us then but we did a good job of winging it.

Here's how it went. We finished our non-pirate first songs and David Skulski stepped to the podium to narrate and cover us while we changed. Then as he began his narration the curtain closed in front of him effectively leaving him talking into a curtain instead of the audience. Gamely he fought his way through the curtain and stood precariously in the small space between the curtain and the stage's edge. I recall wishing we had an orchestra pit so at least his fall might be cushioned by a string section.

Meanwhile the choir was shocked to realize that with the curtain blocking the spotlights it was totally dark where we were and we needed to quickly retrieve our individual costumes out of three boxes that had been theatrically hidden off to the side of the risers. Many of the choir members seemed to think of the curtain as a magical acoustic barrier and voiced their concerns aloud as they frantically dove into the darkened boxes for their costumes. By that time the narrator had finished speaking, leaving the audience with nothing better to do than contemplate the commotion backstage. They were treated to a chorus of "Where's my hat?" "I don't know!" "My bonnet's not here!" "Who's wearing my bonnet?" "That looks like my hat you're wearing!" "I don't have your damn hat!" And so on. After a time (more like an eternity), the curtains parted and we were at last ready. The audience applauded loudly to finally see the pirates and maidens in all their finery. To this day I am not sure what the applause was for. It might have been for the colourful array of costumes or it might have been for the fact that we finally appeared at all.

#### The High Points---the Choir's Second Coming

Our first memorable high point was our very first concert in 1984 with the Shalom dancers. For reasons I have already described, it buoyed our spirits terrifically and gave us the confidence we needed to forge ahead and perform our concerts for years to come. We had really and truly become a performing choir with the ability to sing to a room or sing to a filled auditorium. It felt

like the choir's second beginning.

Our second high point came in June of 2017 with the annual concert called *The Family Naiman*. This concert was based on stories of my family's experiences during the dark days of World War Two. We told their history with narration, songs and projected photography. It was a complex concert with many songs to sing, 21 choir members, an accompanist, our conductor, four narrators, a projectionist, a videographer, light and sound technicians---over 40 people involved in total. But it was all worth it. Many of the audience were very moved by the performance and at its end we received a standing ovation. At the reception afterwards, there was an outpouring of stories from many of the attendees. Many had stories that told of other families and other histories as remarkable as the one we had recounted in our concert. It was humbling and made us realize that in people's lives there was no dearth of stories. Only of story-tellers.

### **Our Accompanists – Dainow Lots of Stuff**

Helping us sound our best over the years are our piano accompanists. Some choirs sing *a cappella*. Some choirs such as ours are community choirs that welcome enthusiasts of all abilities. For that reason many choir members welcome the guidance from our accompanist to help keep us on pitch. For them, singing piano-less is a bit of a high wire act. (Some of the choir still think *a cappella* is an Italian dish involving meat balls.)

Good accompanists not easy to come by. Sometimes they tinkle the ivories...sometimes they tinkle on the ivories. They also need to work closely in tandem with their conductors often to the point of trying to read their minds.

Over the years these have been the people we relied on to keep us in tune:

1979 – 1983 Wolfgang ?  
 1983 – 1990 Susan James  
 1991 – 1995 Mary McKinney  
 1995 – 1997 Marlon Hall  
 1997 – 1998 Anya Levykh  
 1998 – 2017 Elliott Dainow  
 2017 – 2018 Nicole Linaksita  
 2018 – present Danielle Lee

To this point in our history Elliott Dainow stands out as our longest serving accompanist----almost 20 years! Over that period of time Elliott grew to be one of the family and no one could ever imagine the choir without him. Beyond contributing his considerable talents at the piano, Elliott was a brilliant choral arranger and his version of Oseh Shalom has been performed by the choir many times. Nevertheless, to everything there is a season. Elliott left us in June of 2017 in

order to give more time to the renovation of his home on Hornby Island. That plan may have hit some snags. In a recent e-mail Elliott wrote:

*I only left because I wanted more time to, ostensibly, work on my renovation, but it may be that Netflix is the benefactor!....*

Elliott has his own memories of his adventures in accompanist land and, as with all memories, misadventures are remembered best:

*one of my 'key' memories is the time I was accompanying Stephen Aberle in a big solo... and although we had rehearsed it, somehow we ended up playing the end section of it in the key of F major, and David, from the wings, whispered loudly to us that it was supposed to be in F minor!....so I changed key and we blasted merrily along!*

Trust me on this. If you were a musician, this story would have you laughing hysterically. If you are like me then you might have to settle for a slightly quizzical smile.

### **And the Beat Goes On**

Over the years the choir has performed at many venues within the Jewish community as well as reaching out to the community beyond. We have sung at the Peretz Centre, South Granville Lodge, Louis Brier home, Cityfest Vancouver, Vancouver Public Library, VanDusen Gardens, Cavell Gardens, Orpheum Theatre's *Parade of Choirs*, the Vancouver Planetarium, Victoria's Emanu-El synagogue, the Israeli Street Festival and a number of other venues.

Sadly, one of our most recent choir performances was at a memorial service for our beloved Sylvia Friedman. Sylvia was still singing with us at our June concert in 2016 but became ill just afterwards and passed away in December of that same year. She was our last original choir member still active with the choir. We dedicated our 2017 June concert to her memory and said in the program notes:

*The choir dedicates this concert to the memory of our beloved Sylvia Friedman who sang with us for all but one of the 38 years of our existence. Sylvia wanted to sing this one last concert before retiring. Her death in December, 2016 prevented that, but in our hearts, she is always right there beside us, singing as beautifully as ever.*

Under David Millard's able baton (figuratively speaking, since there's no baton. David just waves his arms and hopes somebody notices) and inspired by the devotion to Jewish music of Searle and Sylvia Friedman, the choir is looking forward to its next 40 years.