

Molly Newman, Dina Malka Botwinik, and Shlomo Jack Enkin Lewis,  
with Maya Pasternak

**For Composer David Botwinik, Pedagogy was More  
than Just a Day Job**

Alexander (Sender) Botwinik first contacted the Jewish Public Library Archives (JPL-A) in 2021, shortly after his father, the renowned Yiddish music teacher David Botwinik, celebrated his one hundredth birthday, with materials for donation that tell the story of David's passions in Yiddish musical composition and education. The acquisition of David's materials puts him in conversation with a number of educators featured in the JPL-A, such as Aviva Ravel, Bebe Trepman, Chayele Grober, Dovid Kunigis, Shulamis Yelin, and Shloime Wiseman. Together, they offer a snapshot of literary, theatrical, and Yiddish-language education in Montreal in the twentieth century.

Jewish educational institutions in Montreal are also represented in the Archives, including the Jewish People's and Peretz Schools (JPPS), the Education Resource Centre (ERC), United Talmud Torahs (UTT), Baron Byng High School, the Morris Winchevsky Schools, the Abraham Reisen Schools (founded by the Workmen's Circle), and the Jewish Public Library's educational programming roster. While it is common to hear about language policy debates between English and French in Montreal, these fonds highlight a parallel tension between Yiddish and Hebrew dominance. UTT, founded in 1896 with Yiddish-language instruction, shifted to Hebrew instruction in 1917. As a long-time music teacher at UTT, David Botwinik himself weighs into the discourse as a steadfast proponent of Yiddish-language instruction in Jewish educational settings.

David Botwinik was born in Vilna in 1920. As a small child, he used to walk quite a distance with his father on Shabbat and holy days to the largest synagogue in Vilna, the *shotshul*, to listen to cantors. By the time he was eleven, he had already appeared as a junior cantor in several local synagogues and participated in the *khورشul* choir. By the age of twelve he had started composing music. Shortly after that, he began to study music formally: piano, theory, and solfeggio (sight-reading) in Vilna's Jewish music conservatory. At eighteen he was the prompter for a Yiddish version of Verdi's opera "Aida." Shortly after the Nazis invaded Poland, in 1939, Botwinik fled east to Soviet territory.

At the end of World War II, Botwinik began to write down songs he had composed during the war. He worked with Shmerke Kaczerginski in Łódź, Poland, to listen to survivors sing and transcribe the notes of many unknown songs for the book *Lider fun di getos un lagern (Songs of the Ghettos and Concentration Camps)*, which was published in 1948.<sup>1</sup> From Łódź, Botwinik moved to Rome to study music at the renowned Santa Cecilia Conservatory. There he married Silvana di Veroli. In 1956, the couple immigrated to Canada with their first child and settled in Montreal, where Botwinik worked as a music teacher and choir director for thirty-five years. In 2010, the League for Yiddish published *From Holocaust to Life (Fun khurbn tsum lebn)*, a book with fifty-six of Botwinik's original solo and choral compositions, including many children's songs.<sup>2</sup> Botwinik died in February 2022 at the age of 101.<sup>3</sup>

MUSIC SCHEDULE FOR FEB. 15-19, 1988

SNOWDON  
 MON. 15/II, FROM 12<sup>45</sup> (OR) GR. III'S IN GYM,  
 OR IN SYNAGOGUE-HALL  
 (IF TIME - CHOIR SOLOISTS ALSO)

THUR. 18/II = 8-9<sup>15</sup> (OR 8-9<sup>30</sup>), BOTH VOICES, WITH OR  
 WITHOUT A PIANIST.  
 (TEACHING ALSO THE OTHER 7 SONGS) TEACHER - ESSENTIAL  
 9<sup>30</sup>-10 = GR. II  
 10<sup>15</sup>-12 = GR. III'S TILL 12

FR. 19/II = ~~AFTERNOON 12<sup>45</sup>~~ ~~MORNING 8-9~~ ~~IF NECESSARY~~ GR. III'S  
 (FEB. 19, MORNING: CHOIR REHEARSAL IN COTE ST. LUC)

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CHOMEDEY  
 TUE. 16/II = 8-9<sup>15</sup> (OR 8-9<sup>30</sup>), BOTH VOICES, WITHOUT A PIANIST  
 (TEACHING ALSO THE OTHER 7 SONGS) TEACHER - ESSENTIAL  
 9<sup>45</sup> = GR. V AND LATER GR. II TILL 2<sup>15</sup>  
 (WITH LUNCH-BREAK)  
 MAYBE SOLOISTS  
 AT 2<sup>15</sup> SOMEWHERE  
 (TO BE ANNOUNCED) (FEB. 19, MORNING - CHOIR REHEARSAL OF ALL 4 BRANCHES)

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COTE ST. LUC  
 WED. 17/II = 8-9<sup>30</sup> (OR 8-9<sup>15</sup>), BOTH VOICES, WITH  
 (TEACHING ALSO THE OTHER 7 SONGS) OR WITHOUT A PIANIST  
TEACHER - ESSENTIAL

9<sup>30</sup> - 1  
 10<sup>30</sup>  
 12<sup>45</sup>

Hydro-Québec  
 C.P. 6072  
 Succ.  
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Apposez un timbre poste  
 Place stamp here

2 Gym or R. 16

7W2

CHOMEDEY

CENTRE FISCAL  
 SHAWINIGAN  
 (QUÉBEC)

SOPRANO R.5  
 GUZ

SOPRANO R.4  
 RABINOVITZ 7

Figure 1. Weekly schedule and Zimria (song festival) envelopes organized by school campus.



Botwinik was a Holocaust survivor, one of the few in his extended family. Given this trauma, it is remarkable that Botwinik maintained a strong connection to his hometown of Vilnius. He would not allow his trauma to prevent him from engaging with what was important to him. In particular, Botwinik participated in the *Vilner farband*, or Vilna Society, a *landsmanshaft* for Montrealers from Vilna. “Vilne, Vilne” was the organization’s anthem, sung at every event. The song expresses the participants’ connection to Vilna; at each refrain, the participants sang “Vilna, Vilna, our hometown, our longing and desire / your name calls out a tear from my eye oh-so-often.”



Figure 3. Magazine cover and sample page, *Der nayer dor* (The New Generation).

Botwinik did not compose “Vilne, Vilne,” but he transcribed the song for a non-Yiddish music reader (see Figure 2); in other Yiddish sheet music he typically wrote only the Yiddish lyrics below the notes. This demonstrates not only his active participation in the Vilna Society, but also his instincts for education—even for adults. Botwinik understood musical performance as an important avenue for processing the world, for maintaining a tie with one’s hometown. Botwinik was committed to making music accessible for all—whether by teaching children, or by transliterating for adults. Botwinik also composed music to commemorate the Holocaust, including the song “Dem tog tsu gedenken” (The Day of Remembrance), set to a poem by Ida Massey, which he often played at the annual memorial programs of the Vilna Society. Botwinik was not only dedicated to the preservation of Yiddish through education, but he also contributed creatively to the life of the language. Figure 3 depicts the cover of the second of four issues of *Der nayer dor* (The New Generation), a magazine with beginners’ Yiddish lessons, short stories, Botwinik’s original songs, jokes, and



azine's creator, his children contributed as well, in particular his oldest son Leybl, who was co-editor and responsible for layout, artwork, and typesetting. The sheer hope and joy for the strength of the Yiddish language shines through the magazine.

As a music teacher, Botwinik's work often involved organizing and preparing for school recitals, including the performance celebrating Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israel's Independence Day) in Figure 4. Botwinik collaborated with other teachers, working together to arrange a program of songs and texts that the students learned in the classroom. He also played an active role in the performance itself, providing piano accompaniment. The "very nice" and "going great" stickers signalled to Botwinik when it was time to accompany the next song.

Next to each song, Botwinik wrote a few measures of musical notation to remind himself of the opening notes, or introduction, as well as the most comfortable key



Figure 5. "Farvos lozt men diskriminir men digrimidish?" Forverts, August 10, 1982.

for the children to sing in. These are characteristic of Botwinik’s personal notes. He rarely wrote only the name of a song, reflecting the extent to which music and musical notation was integrated into his thought process. Botwinik, after all, grew up with musical notation, achieving a high level of proficiency at a young age. Musical notation was as natural for him as written Yiddish, and a few notes of the melody were instrumental in helping him recall a piece of music.

Botwinik demonstrated his strong convictions about Yiddish in a fiery article published in the New York-based *Forverts*, in 1982 (Figure 5). In “Why are we allowing discrimination against Yiddish?” he forcefully criticizes Jewish institutions that discriminate against rather than invest in the Yiddish language. He attacks, often by name, Jewish schools that neglect to teach Yiddish, Jewish organizations that refuse to use the language, and Yiddish intellectuals whose false optimism prevents these deficiencies from being rectified. Botwinik reserved his harshest criticism for laws

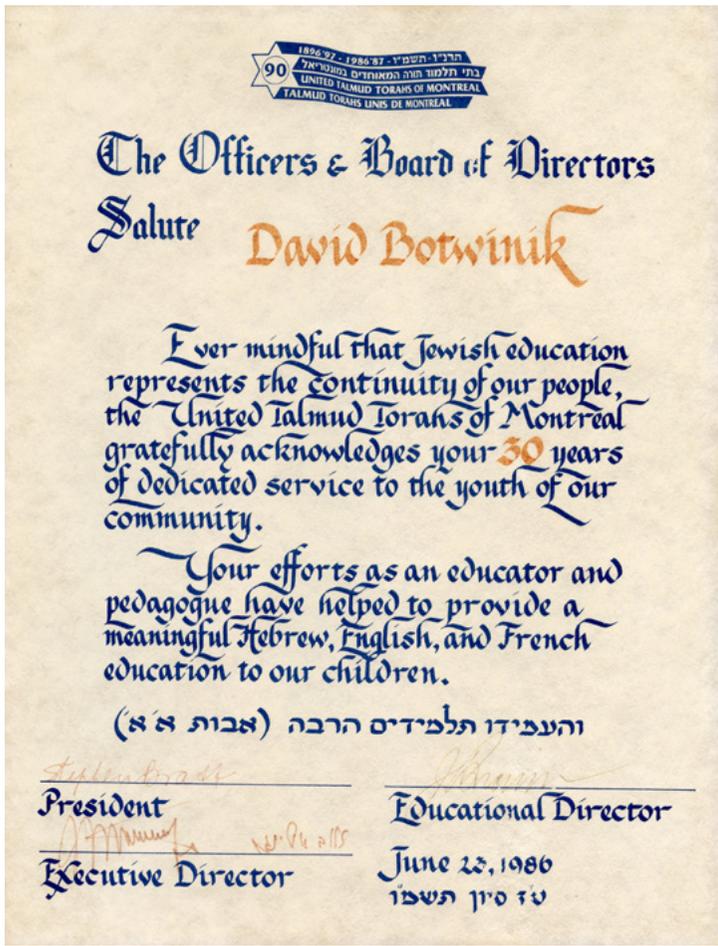


Figure 6. Jewish Education Certificate, 30 Years.

banning the Yiddish language from public life in the State of Israel. “The discrimination against Yiddish, both in Israel and in the whole Jewish world,” he wrote, “will continue and will become even sharper—unless we do something substantive against it.” Indeed, Botwinik did not shy away from strong and decisive action when he deemed it necessary; after Yiddish was reduced from the UTT elementary school curriculum, Botwinik protested by removing his younger children from the school for a year. The *Forverts* article demonstrates not only Botwinik’s passion for the Yiddish language, but also his determination. Rather than assuming that he only needed to win hearts over to the beauty of the Yiddish language, Botwinik recognized that state and institutional policy had far-reaching effects on language preservation. Botwinik rightly saw that the Yiddish language was undergoing an active suppression, and he called for a fight to reverse this trend. For Botwinik, children’s music education in Yiddish was more than a day job. The actions that he took to protest the removal of Yiddish from the curriculum reveal both dedication to his principles and his belief in the power of education to shape the future. David Botwinik worked to shape the next generation, and to pass down a strong Jewish identity, familiarity with Yiddish language and culture, and a love of Yiddish (and Hebrew) song to his students.

*All images courtesy of the David Botwinik fonds, no. 1477, The Jewish Public Library Archives, Montreal*

**Maya Pasternak** is the Director of Archives at the Jewish Public Library of Montreal. With a background in interdisciplinary art and social practice and a masters of information from the University of Toronto in archiving and user experience design, she previously managed the archives of the Center for Digital Art (Holon, Israel), the Center of Contemporary Art (Tel Aviv, Israel), and the Noa Eshkol Foundation for Movement Notation (Holon, Israel). In this issue of the Archives Matter she has compiled the work of co-authors **Molly Newman**, archives intern from the BA program in Jewish Studies, McGill University; **Dina Malka Botwinik**, archives intern from the MS in Library Science program, Pennsylvania Western University; and **Shlomo Jack Enkin Lewis**, special collections intern, from the BA program in Jewish Studies, McGill University.

**1**

Shmerke Kaczerginski, *Lider fun di getos un largern* (New York, 1948).

**2**

David Botwinik, *Fun hurbn tsum leben: naye Yidishe lider* (League for Yiddish, 2010).

**3**

Biographical details for David Botwinik are courtesy of Alex Botwinik and Naomi Cohen.