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COOPERATIVE EXTENSION WORK
IN AGRICULTURE AND HOME ECONOMICS
U. of N. Agr. College & U. S. Dept. of Agr. Cooperating
W. V. Lambert, Director, Lincoln

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THE SONGS OF IRVING BERLIN

By Ethel Saxton, District Supervisor of Home Agents

This is the story of an American composer who wrote popular songs so beautifully that they are among the greatest of our time. The year 1957 marked the golden anniversary for Irving Berlin as a song writer. From the time he wrote Marie From Sunny Italy in 1907 right up to the present he has produced some of the best of the popular music written in this country -- from ragtime through the jazz of the twenties, right up to the current era of progressive music.

Moses Baline expected that he would live all of his life in Temum, a little town in Siberian Russia. Sometimes there was persecution of the Jews by the Cossacks who would swoop down on the people, bringing death and destruction. Cantor in the local synagogue, with an income too small to provide for his large family, Moses never counted his blessings in currency but only in spiritual values. He was a man respected in the community.

His family was a joy to his heart. It consisted of Leah, his devoted wife, industrious and indomitable of spirit, and eight children. They filled his home with warmth and laughter and were sure to be a source of comfort to his old age.

Often Leah Baline brought news of friends and relatives who had migrated to the New World. Most of them had prospered in America. There were tales of fabulous wages, free schools for children, freedom to worship God without persecution and inexhaustible opportunities for self-advancement and success. On occasion Leah took courage to tell her husband that she dreamed about schools for the children and chances to become people of consequence. She wanted her children to grow up in cities that had no ghettos. Moses did not share her dream and but for a day of death and terror, the family probably would have continued to live in their little town.

One terrible day in 1892 the Cossacks descended on Temum without warning, killing and wounding Jews, and burning houses. They ransacked the synagogue and trampled the Holy books. The Baline family somehow escaped from their home. In a nearby field they covered under blankets. They saw the smoke rise from their town and heard the anguished cries of the stricken townspeople. For hours they remained in hiding until the Cossacks, tiring of their sport, rode away without searching the fields. That day Moses Baline knew he could stay in Temum no longer. He could not doom his children to live with death and terror.

After weeks of travel the Balines ended their long journey in New York City. They were welcomed by a cousin who had arrived a few years earlier. He transported them and their possessions by his horse-drawn wagon to their new home, a damp basement flat of three rooms, no windows, no fresh air, and no sunlight. Moses found little for which to be grateful, and the noisy crowds and traffic left him exhausted. He never earned enough to take care of his large family. His children worked in sweatshops after school and sold papers on the street. He believed that the future belonged to those who prepared for it. Work in sweatshops, selling newspapers, neglect of study, exhausted little bodies and undernourished minds was not the preparation for the future he had dreamed of for his children.

Israel Baline was the youngest of this large family - four years old when they left Temum. The world of Cherry Street on East Side was home to him. He swam in the East River, and banded with his friends to form the Cherry Street gang. A member had to be tough to be accepted. One talent Israel inherited from his father was the gift of a sweet voice meant to sing. Moses Baline died in 1896 when Israel was eight years old.

Mrs. Baline gave herself unsparingly to her children. With the numerous chores of housework she now had to keep a father's watchful eye on the children. All contributed to the meager support of the family. Every evening the children filed, one by one, past their mother and dropped into her lap the money they had earned that day. One evening Israel joined the parade and dropped a few pennies in her apron. He had joined his brothers in selling newspapers after school.

One pleasure Israel enjoyed was wandering past the saloons on Cherry Street to listen to the music and singing. One day he confided to his mother that he hoped to earn money as a singing waiter in one of those places. To his consternation his mother's eyes filled with tears. She had hoped he would become a cantor like his father. He promised his mother not to become a singing waiter, but he could not stop thinking about it. More and more he felt impelled to wander along the Bowery and to imagine himself singing inside. Finally he made up his mind to run away from home.

One night after supper he strolled away as if to join friends. That night he slept under a stairway. The next day he searched for work, but could not find any. Finally discouraged he heard that Blind Sol, a street singer who went from bar to bar, needed an assistant. Israel sought out the blind singer and was accepted. At the end of the day his share of the receipts was 25 cents. Before many days, he joined Blind Sol in singing. Some days he earned as much as fifty cents. He did not stay long with Blind Sol, but found work where he could plug songs of songwriters. One day he found a long neglected, battered piano in a cafe and the owner told him he might use it. He spent many hours picking out the accompaniment to his songs. One day he turned at a familiar touch and saw his mother. "I want you to come home, Israel," she said, "I want you to come home." "But, Ma, I can't give up all this I want." "Who is asking you to give it up? Sing your songs, work where you want to, even though I'd rather you didn't sing these songs and work in saloons. Only come home, Israel. I've missed you terribly." Later, Mother Baline found one of the miracles of the New World was her boy's success as a song writer.

Israel wrote his first song at Pelham's Cafe, run by Mike Salter. This song, 'Marie From Sunny Italy.' was produced by Israel, because Mike insisted that one of his singing waiters write an original song, and he insisted on it being published. He worked out the words to a tune pieced together by Nick, the pianist. He received a royalty of 37 cents. It was published under the name "I. Berlin." Berlin moved out of Pelham's Cafe into the heights of Tin Pan Alley -- into the world of Harry Von Tilzer, Victor Herbert, and George Cohan. By 1910 he had become a salaried lyricist. Finally he could afford to buy a second-hand piano on which to compose melodies of his own. He was to conquer a new world soon -- the world of ragtime.

Ragtime came originally from New Orleans where Negro clog dancing was called "ragging." Syncopation was introduced by the Negroes to accompany their singing. As they drifted north they brought their music, which had its effect on future music, and evolved into "jazz," "boogie woogie." and "bebop." America went ragtime crazy when Irving Berlin wrote a song called "Alexander's Ragtime Band." Within a few months one million copies were sold. It brought endless debate concerning its values and its contribution to American music. In February 1924, Paul Whiteman gave his historic all-jazz concert to prove that American popular music had a significant contribution to make. Heard for the first time was George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" and also on the program was "Alexander's Ragtime Band."

Berlin married Dorothy Goetz in 1912 but shortly after the honeymoon Dorothy died of typhoid fever contracted during their wedding trip to Cuba. Berlin was inconsolable. From the depths of his grief he wrote, "When I Lost You."

In 1917, Berlin was drafted into the Army. He had tried to volunteer as an entertainer for troops, but was rejected as physically unfit. As a rookie no dispensation was made for him. One day the commanding officer told him that something needed to be done to raise the morale of the troops as they waited to go overseas. He proposed a new service center. He also proposed that Berlin produce a soldiers show to bring in the needed \$35,000.

Freed from the tyranny of Army life, Berlin wrote the show "Yip, Yip, Yaphank." One of its songs was "Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning," which sold more than a million and a half copies. In 1943, during World War II, Berlin again produced an Army show, "This is the Army." And again the song sung by Berlin, "Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning," stopped the show. "This is the Army" toured this country, the principal cities of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Then it was sent to the fighting fronts in Italy, Egypt, Persia, Australia, Admiralty Islands, the Philippines, the New Netherlands, East Indies, the Marianas, the Caroline Islands, Saipan, and Okinawa. It brought in more than 10 million dollars to the Army Relief Fund. Berlin was decorated by General Marshall with the Medal of Merit.

In 1925, Irving Berlin, from a ghetto in Czarist Russia, the slums of New York and Tin Pan Alley, met Ellen Mackay of the Social register and heiress to 30 million dollars. They were of different social levels, different origins and backgrounds, and different religions. Irving Berlin interested Ellen. She considered him a genius. Before they realized it they were in love. Ellen's father, head of the Postal Telegraph, refused to permit their marriage. He used every resource to break up the love affair. Her father took her to Europe so that she would forget Berlin. While she was gone, he wrote "Always" and "Remember." When she came home they were married at the City Hall and went off to Atlantic City to await the paternal blessing. Mackay disinherited his daughter and refused to see her. In late 1929 after the Mackay fortune was swept away, a reconciliation was effected.

Berlin was a prolific song writer, but after he wrote "The Song is Ended" it seemed as if he had exhausted himself. In 1929, he, too, lost his fortune. Although some old songs "Say it Isn't So" and "How Deep is the Ocean" were revived, he seemed unable to write new ones. Then one day he wrote a new song for a musical revue, "Easter Parade."

In 1938, Berlin, back from a trip to Europe, was asked by Kate Smith for a new patriotic song. His own experiences in war torn Europe, and his delight in being back in the United States, made him eager to try. After many painful efforts he was forced to give up. Finally he remembered a closing number he had written for "Yip Yip Yaphank" in 1917 which he had not used. He handed the yellowed manuscript to Kate Smith and asked her if she could use it. When Kate had run through the score, she exclaimed "Irving, do you realize you've written the second 'Star Spangled Banner'?" She introduced over radio "God Bless America," which became as well known to most Americans as their National Anthem.

In 1942, he sold to Metro Goldwyn Mayer a story originally intended for a lavish Broadway musical called "Holiday Inn." One of the songs, "White Christmas," has become as much a classic in American popular song literature as "Easter Parade." In the first four months it sold a million copies and close to two million phonograph records. It was written during the war and to the soldiers who were fighting in the muck, filth, and jungles of the Pacific, "White Christmas" came as a blessed reminder of happier days in happier places.

Berlin is a small, spare man. Outside of his family, his interest is centered in his work. Not trained in music, he plays the piano in one key on a special piano keyboard which has a device which enables him to play any song in this key. He must depend on a musical secretary for setting his melodies on paper. Painfully conscious that he is musically illiterate, he has an exaggerated awe for musicians who can sit down and write complicated orchestrations.

Of the thousands of songs he has written, he has singled out eight as the greatest: "Alexander's Ragtime Band," "I Love a Piano," "Always," "Say It With Music," "A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody," "Easter Parade," "God Bless America," and "White Christmas." Jerome Kern, another of America's great composers said, "Irving Berlin has no place in American music, He Is American Music."