SONGS OF THE BOBOVER CHASSIDIM, VOL. 2
Collected and Sung by RABBI LAIZER HALBERSTAM
The Chassidic Chorus - Velvel Pasternak, Director
accompanied by
The RUDY TEPDEL ORCHESTRA
Vocal Settings by Velvel Pasternak • Orchestrations by Richard J. Neumann
Produced by B.-H. Stambler

MEMBERS OF THE CHORUS: Tsvi Alman, Reuven Botton, Pesah Carus,
Baruch Greisendorf, Shelomo Mendelson, Mordecai Savitt, David Schwarzman, Avraham Shapiro

Bobov, a tiny village in West Galicia, was the home of a remarkable Chassidic dynasty of rebbeim, known not only for their personal magnetism, erudition and dedication to the education of youth but also for their great tradition of music. Before the Nazi holocaust there was hardly a town in West Galicia without a Bobover shul. One could tell a Bobover Chassid by his immaculate dress, high-crowned velvet hat, carefully-curled earlocks, and, most uniquely, by his knowing a song for every occasion.

Bobover negiah began one day, tradition has it, when the first rebbe, Rabbi Shelomo Halberstam, called his only son, six-year-old Ben Zion, to him and told him to begin the study of Mishle (Proverbs). As the lad came to the fifteenth verse — "B'ni... My son, walk thou not in the way with them" — he started to hum a tune to himself. Thus was born the first Bobover nignon, to be followed by hundreds of others; thus emerged the composer in the future Bobover Rebbe.

A notable achievement of the Bobover Rebbeim was the establishment of a system of Chassidic education. Chassidic yeshivot (rabbinical schools) were unknown in Galicia until the time when the first Bobover Rebbe, Rabbi Shelomo Halberstam, opened one in Vishnitz, Galicia, where he himself taught the senior group. Before this a young Chassid had no choice but to study by himself in the shiur of his isolated home-town. A revolution in Chassidic life took place when the Rebbe's son, Rabbi Ben Zion Halberstam, opened the gates of learning to the young throughout Galicia by expanding the one big yeshivah established by his father into forty-six branches of the Yeshivah Etz Hayyim, with the center at Bobov.

Boys and young men came to Bobov from everywhere, from cities and hamlets, from the Polish mountainside of Torki, where their fathers tilled the hillside lands. No one knew how the name of Bobov reached them but they came, making their way hundreds of miles on foot. Too poor to afford the train fare, they walked, with their shoes tied together over their shoulders to save wear and tear. Hypnotized by the name of Bobov, they came from high schools and universities, from all parts of Europe and overseas, from pious homes and homes long assimilated to Western ways. They came and they stayed, becoming ardent Chassidim, devout Jews, outstanding Talmud scholars and great rabbis.

Wherein lay the magnetism of Bobov that drew these masses? Surely it was the personality of the Rebbe, his unequalled influence as a leader, his charm, wit and learning, his organizing ability, and the overflow of love he had for his followers. Still another powerful factor was the rich treasure of negiah in Bobov. It was the dynamic force of this music which the present recording attempts to reproduce.

The Bobov Dynasty

All Chassidic dynasties reckon their spiritual genealogy in generations of discipleship beginning with the Baal Shem Tov (1700-1766) and his successor, Rabbi Dov Ber, the Magid of Mezeritz (1710-1772). In the third generation leadership divided more or less geographically among Rabbi Dov Ber's disciples. The recognized head of the Chassidism of Poland, Galicia and Hungary became Rabbi Eliyahu of Litzensik (1717-1787). After him one of his disciples, Rabbi Yaakov Yitzshak, the Hozeh (Seer) of Lublin (1745-1815), led the Chassidism of Poland and another, Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Rimanow (d. 1815), led in Galicia. When Rabbi Menahem Mendel passed on the Chassidism of Galicia were headed by Rabbi Naffali of Ropchitz (d. 1827), who had been a disciple of both the Hozeh and the Rimanower.

Then for half a century Rabbi Hayyiam Halberstam of Sandz (1793-1876), the famous Sandzer Tzaddik, was the overall leader of the Chassidism of Poland, Galicia and Hungary, becoming known as the Rebbe of Rebbeim. Although a disciple of the Hozeh, whom he called My Teacher, he considered himself principally a follower of the Ropchizer Rebbe, whom he named The Holy Rebbe. To the Sandzer came as Chassidim (followers) rebbeim of great renown in their own right, bringing with them their own Chassidim.

The first Bobover Rebbe, Rabbi Shelomo Halberstam, was a grandson of the Sandzer Tzaddik. His father, Rabbi Meir Natan, passed away at an early age, leaving his only son, born in 1847, an orphan at the age of eight. Thus the child was reared by his grandfather, the Sandzer Rebbe.

Under the guidance of this world-renowned gaon (scholar) and tsaddik, Shelomo grew in Torah and wisdom. So high was the Sandzer Rebbe's regard for him that the grandfather used to urge his own Chassidim to go to his grandson, Rabbi Shelomo, where "m'ken shepen ieras Shomayim mit lefel" — "one could steep himself in awe and reverence of the Divine." In one of the Sandzer Rebbe's responsa he even asked his grandson to pray for him.

At first Rabbi Shelomo served as a rav (rabbi) in Bukovsk, Galicia, then in Oshpetzin (where years later the infamous Auschwitz concentration camp was to be located). He became recognized as a great gaon. It was in Vishnitz that he founded his yeshivah and began his leadership as a rebbe. From Vishnitz he moved to Bobov, where he became world-renowned as the Bobover Rebbe. In 1903, when he passed away, his son Rabbi Ben Zion, only thirty-one, was proclaimed the new Bobover Rebbe. To pledge their allegiance to him came all of his father's Chassidim, many of them distinguished rabbis who had known the Sandzer Tsaddik himself.

Rabbi Ben Zion, in addition to his emphasis on the education of youth, vitalized the tradition of song in Chassidic life. He composed many new niginim himself, revived those of the Ropchizer and the Sandzer Rebbeim, and encouraged the composition of neginim by his followers.

The same pattern was followed by the Bobover Rebbe, Rabbi Shelomo, who succeeded to the leadership after the murder of his father by the Nazis in 1941. Thus today in a cluster of buildings around a spacious central courtyard in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York, one can find the Bobover Beth Hamidrash, the Yeshivah B'nei Zion (named after the late Rebbe) with its many classes, the Mesivta Etz Hayyim, dormitories, and other related institutions. In Israel the Rebbe erected a new settlement, Kiryat Bobov, to perpetuate the name of the European Bobov of old. In the principal cities of Israel, Bobover stitbelach once again add their bright color to the Jewish rainbow as they did in the past.

In Brooklyn on Simchas Torah eve, when the Bobover Rebbe dances untriumphantly in his Beth Hamidrash for hours with the Sefer Torah in his arms, the synagogue and the courtyard are jammed with dancing Jewish masses. The golden chain of Bobov is unbroken. The song of Bobov lives on.

Notes by B.-H. Stambler

Laizer—Sing!
An Autobiographical Sketch
by Rabbi Laizer Halberstam

I am an alumnus of the Yeshivah Etz Hayyim of Sandz, a city made famous by my great-grandfather, the saintly Sandzer Tsadlik, Rabbi Hayyiam Halberstam. On both sides of my family I am a direct descendent of the Sandzer Tsadlik: my paternal grandmother Nehumeele and my maternal great-grandmother Yitta were his daughters.

It was my paternal grandfather, Rabbi Yitzshak Tovye, of blessed memory, who placed the talith (prayer shawl) over the shoulders of Rabbi Ben Zion on the first Sabbath eve after the passing away of his father, Rabbi Shelomo, in 1905. In Chassidic circles this act constitutes the investiture of a new rebbe.

My other grandfather, Rabbi Mendel Baron of Yaslo, the son of Rabbi Laizer Krakover, after whom I am named, was a close friend of Rabbi Ben Zion in Vishnitz. They had in common a deep love of music, since Rabbi Mendel was a great menager and baal tefillin. It was a delight for the "cytlink" (worshippers) when Rabbi Mendel prayed at the amud (reader's stand) on special Sabbaths or holidays in Vishnitz or Bobov.

My father "traveled to Bobov," in the Chassidic phrase, as did I. In fact my father, Rabbi Moshele Rubin-Halberstam, of blessed memory, was dubbed the "foreign minister" of Bobov, since he represented Bobov in governmental affairs and matters of general Jewish interest.

I can still remember Simchas Torah night in Bobov, when, wet to the skin with perspiration, we would dance for hours, standing in one place, keeping exact time with the varying rhythms of each new song. So great was the influx of Chassidim for this Yom Tov that there was no room to turn around in the wooden shalash constructed especially to hold the crowd. Nevertheless, everyone was dancing, and so was the building — it moved up and down so much that one would think it had erected on a foundation of springs!

And I recall the Rebbe, of blessed memory, the talith covering his head and face, singing the Hakafot Zemiroth Nissah Sandz. Again and again he repeats the words, "Holy are Thy children amongst nations; they have given up their lives like burnt offerings and peace offerings." One cannot see the Rebbe's face, only his tears, big as pearls rolling down his beard in a steady stream. I remembered that scene and that verse again when I heard of how the Nazis had murdered the Rebbe and his youngest son, Moshe Arele.