

# Re-fulfilling a Dream: Reconstructing Yossele Rosenblatt's *Dream of My People* (1934)

Benny Bar-Yehuda

Benny Bar-Yehuda is Hebrew Publications Editor at the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive (Jerusalem).

One of the leading goals of archives dealing with culture, if not their entire *raison d'être*, is preserving the historic heritage of the cultures they record. Moving image archives are not exceptional, of course, but the nature of the material they deal with requires that they do a great deal of planning in advance and problem-solving on the way. The following article describes such a project of preserving a unique film of great significance in terms of pre-Israeli and Jewish culture – *Dream of My People* (or in its alternative name: *My People's Dream*), and its main star, cantor Joseph "Yossele" Rosenblatt.

## BACKGROUND

Yossele Rosenblatt's name is well known to lovers of *hazzanut* (Jewish cantorial performance originating in Eastern Europe). Born in 1882 in what is now the Ukraine, then part of the Russian Empire, raised in Austria-Hungary, and having a long career in both Germany and the United States, Rosenblatt embodies in his life-story many aspects of the 20th-century Jewish world: emigrating from Europe to the New World, struggling between old traditions and new ways, taking part in many important cultural events, as well as supporting the great national awakening of the Jewish people in Mandatory Palestine, where his life came to

its sudden end in 1933. He was popular with Jews and non-Jews alike, and loved by all sectors and social groups of Jews – a pretty rare consensus among this opinionated nation. He was also a gifted author who composed hundreds of *hazzanut* musical pieces, some of them widely known.

After serving as a cantor in Munkacs (today Mukacheve, Ukraine), Pressburg (now Bratislava, Slovakia), and Hamburg, Rosenblatt emigrated with his family to the United States. They lived in New York City, where, over the years, he served in several congregations. His career took an unexpected turn when he was offered the chance to perform in a Chicago Opera House production of *La Juive*, a chance that he declined for religious reasons. However, he did appear in a cameo role in *The Jazz Singer* (1927), singing one of his own musical pieces. He also toured the world and was welcomed everywhere with admiration.

## DREAM OF MY PEOPLE

The Great Depression, as well as some mistaken financial choices, caused Rosenblatt to go bankrupt in the late 1920s which, in turn, led him to perform across America in vaudeville shows. In 1933 came a unique offer: the Kol Or production company was about to pro-

duce a “synagogical” *hazzanut* film. The idea was to illustrate cantorial segments about the yearning of Jews for their historic homeland, with film shot in locations (such as Jerusalem, Rachel’s Tomb in Bethlehem, the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, and the Jordan River) which appear in Jewish prayers, as well as to present the achievements of the Zionist Movement. The film’s title *Dream of My People* was meant to reflect the idea of a dream coming true. Rosenblatt was very excited by this offer and enjoyed his stay in the Holy Land very much. Again, he was welcomed by everyone, performing to Jewish crowds of all sectors and groups, and touring the country during the several months of the production.

A few days before the end, while shooting some last scenes at the Jordan Valley, Rosenblatt suddenly felt ill. He was rushed back to Jerusalem where he died the same night. Pictures of his funeral, attended by some 5,000 mourners, were integrated into the film.

Production of the film itself in Mandatory Palestine took about three months, from late March to June 1933. It was released during 1934, in several language versions, and was accepted enthusiastically by Jewish audiences around the world. Like similar productions of this time, *Dream of My People* was a propaganda film aimed at presenting the deeds of Zionist activists and pioneers, and the tremendous change they had brought about in Palestine. What was unique about this film was its prominent “celebrity” element, and the music accompanying the sights. Furthermore, the fact of Rosenblatt’s death during what turned out to be his final performance increased its impact. Additionally, the film gives a very detailed picture of cities, towns, villages, and sites, of great use to anyone researching Palestine in this period. Consequently it is of real importance that the film be preserved for future generations.

#### THE PRESERVATION PROCESS

During the 1970s, a documentary about Rosenblatt was produced by Israeli filmmaker Natan Gross. During this production, Natan’s son, Yaakov, a researcher into Hebrew film history, located two copies of the original film (in

Hebrew and English) in Jerusalem. The owner, Zvi Rechtman, had hidden those nitrate reels under his bed, so their storage had been far from optimal. Gross bought them on behalf of the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive, but without the Rosenblatt scenes, which were removed by the owner, a fervent admirer of the cantor. After Rechtman’s death, his relatives handed over those scenes to the Spielberg Archive. Those are the only two copies known to survive in Israel.

Another English-language copy of *Dream of My People*, deposited at the American Film Institute, was later passed to the National Center for Jewish Film in Waltham, Massachusetts. This is a nitrate copy, and, according to Yaakov Gross, has not yet been preserved. There is also a Yiddish-language version preserved by Ergo Media in New Jersey.

The Archive started the first phase of the preservation process in the late 1990s. The film elements were transferred, at the Archive, to U-Matic videocassette in order to provide reference copies. Subsequently, the originals were shipped to Henderson’s Laboratories in the UK where two copies of each original were printed on safety stock, along with various negative and sound elements. The table in Fig.2 (p.66) sums up their details, in terms of format, length, and condition. In bold are the versions used for the later reconstruction.

The full versions of the positive film were to be the access copies. All the rest of the material was labelled for preservation.

In early 2010, the Archive received grants from the Blumenthal Foundation and the Spielberg Righteous People’s Foundation, and embarked on a more thorough preservation and restoration project. A complete investigation of the materials was undertaken with the aid of Israeli film editor Irit Eshet. All in all, the inventory included 21 reels of 35mm, which consisted of the Hebrew and English versions, and the eight U-Matics made from the original nitrate copies.

## PLANNING AND DECISION MAKING

The Spielberg Archive decided to preserve the Hebrew version, firstly because it was the owner of the only known element in that language. Secondly, it wanted to make this material accessible to Israeli viewers as part of its remit to preserve Jewish and Israeli cultural heritage. A third consideration was that the narration of the film is less important than the music and the places recorded which are universal. The decision was therefore to provide access for non-Hebrew speakers by adding subtitles at a future time, which would have the added advantage of being much cheaper than a full preservation of the English-language version.

There were several differences between the two versions. The English one was shown mainly in the United States, while the Hebrew one, shown in Mandatory Palestine, was subject to British censorship. For example, the final scene in the English version shows – in the spirit of Zionism – an Israeli flag waving in the wind. British authorities banned that scene which was therefore cut from the Hebrew version and had to be incorporated during the reconstruction.

The Hebrew version consisted of Version A – combined duplicating negative, Version B – optical sound negative, and Versions C and D – optical sound positives (Fig. 1).

Though B was the most complete of all versions, it was not very good in terms of its editing. Cuts between scenes were quite sharp and abrupt. Versions C and D were selected for their sound condition as they contained the highest quality Hebrew tracks.

Table 2 (p.67) compares the differences between the various versions from which the final one (Script Offer) was compiled. Unless otherwise noted, all materials are from the Hebrew version.

The main problem with the editing of the original film was the lack of its consistency, geographically speaking. Scenes were jumping from one location to another, without any logical pattern. Editor Irit Eshet suggested ordering them according to the text of the opening titles, thus telling the story of former days and of Jewish life in Palestine before the Zionist



JFP

93 | 10.2015

Benny Bar-Yehuda

Reconstructing Yossele Rosenblatt's  
*Dream of My People* (1934)

ARCHIVES AT WORK

Fig. 1: Rosenblatt at the Tomb of Patriarchs, Hebron. Optical sound positive.

English Version	Hebrew Version
1 access positive copy. 35mm. 717ft.	1 access positive copy. 35mm. 717ft. Good condition.
1 Preservation Master. Positive. 35mm. 21 mins. 783ft. Excellent condition. Duplicate of original nitrate.	1 Preservation Master. Negative. 35mm. 20:29 mins. Excellent condition. Duplicate of original nitrate. (Version A)
1 Preservation Master. Negative. 35mm. 20:29 mins. 1844ft. Excellent condition. Duplicate of original nitrate.	2 reels of preservation positive optical sound. 35mm. Excellent condition. (Versions C & D) 20 mins. and 10 mins.
3 copies of negative. 35mm. Duplicate of original nitrate.	1 reel of a negative, incomplete version. 35mm.
3 reels of negative separate optical sound. Excellent condition.	1 reel of combined duplicated negative with separate sound. 35 mm. (Version B) 20 mins.
6 reels of combined duplicated negatives. 35mm.	
2 reels of positive incomplete version. 35mm.	

Fig.2. Comparison of the two versions of *A Dream of My People* surviving in Israel

Movement, and moving forward to the time when Zionist pioneers began rebuilding the land. To enable this, the Tel Aviv scene from Version D, originally found after the Rosenblatt funeral sequence, was incorporated at an earlier stage in the final version. However, this caused a problem because, at this point, the narration at the scene of Solomon's Pools is actually talking about another site, Be'er Ya'akov. In the original version this follows the Tel Aviv sequence, and here it appears before it (see the table in Fig.3, p.67). Nonetheless, the main consideration was keeping to the order described above, and this has been achieved.

The order of scenes of the new version starts with the opening sequence, followed by scenes from Jerusalem and its surroundings, Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem, Hebron and the Cave of the Patriarchs, the Jordan River, Samaria, Sebastia, and Nablus, the new Jewish settlement of Be'er Ya'akov, Jaffa and Tel Aviv, Solomon's Pools (south of Jerusalem), Mount Carmel and Haifa (showing a parade celebrating the Jewish festival of *Shavuot* (Pentecost)), and then more scenes from Jerusalem's old city, Bethlehem, and Rosenblatt's funeral.

A few other changes were made to achieve the final version, mainly the addition of some new intertitles, and correction to those in the earlier versions which were incorrectly spelt;

the quality of image and sound elements were enhanced through cleaning; image contrast was also improved (Figs. 4a and 4b, p.68).

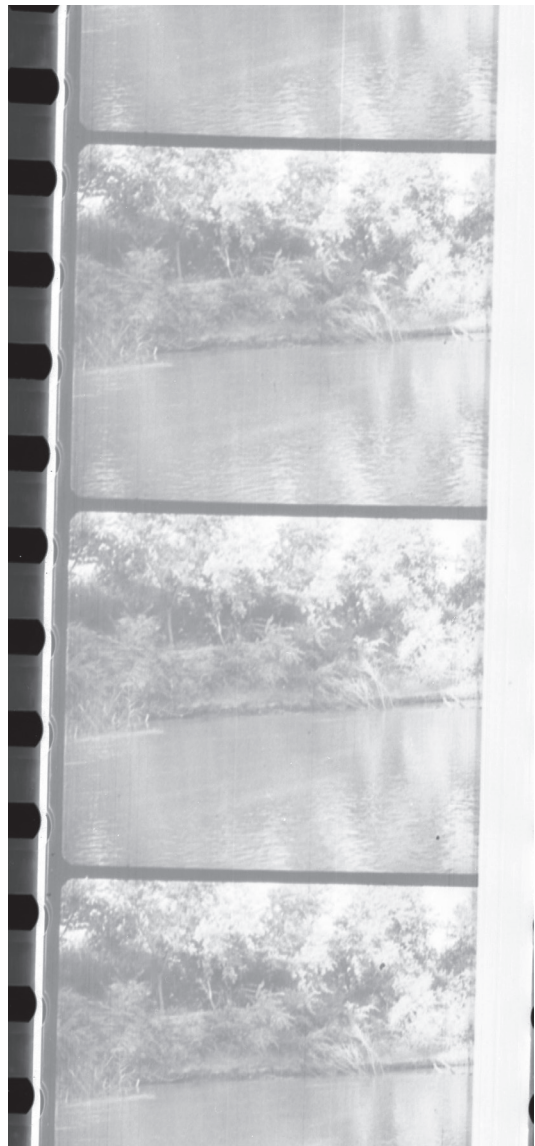
#### DIGITISATION

The Archive had originally intended to digitise the material at Czech Television, but, because of some technical issues, and because the Israeli national lottery awarded a grant, it was decided to use DB Labs in Tel Aviv. This ensured more hands-on capability, and cut down on expenses such as shipping and insurance.

Twenty-one reels of 35mm film and eight U-Matic videocassettes were all digitised at both MPEG2 and MPEG4. Our new digital masters were produced in Digi-beta, AVI, and WMV formats. There were multiple problems with the sound of the main Hebrew access version, a relatively common phenomenon when dealing with material of this age, so, to enhance the project, some sound sections were taken from a negative sound reel. In all cases, the chief consideration when deciding what segments to use for each scene was the quality of the material: whether or not it had sound problems, what the contrast was like, what its physical condition was – if it was scratched, and so on. Because we included all available scenes from the different versions (and added

Script Offer – Irit Eshet	A – Separate optical/sound negatives (10 mins approx.)	B – Optical sound negative (20 mins approx.)	C – Optical sound positive (20 mins approx.)	D – Optical sound positive (10 mins approx.)
1. Opening titles + credits	1. Opening titles + credits	1. Opening titles + credits	7. Cave of the Patriarchs	12. Jaffa
2. Opening text + Preface	2. Opening text + Preface	2. Opening text + Preface	8. Jordan River	13. Tel Aviv
3. Mount Zion	3. Mount Zion	3. Mount Zion	9. Samaria: Sebastia & Nablus	
4. Western Wall	4. Western Wall	4. Western Wall	13. Solomon's Pools	
5. Rachel's Tomb	5. Rachel's Tomb	5. Rachel's Tomb	14. Mount Carmel	
6. A shepherd & a flute	6. A shepherd & a flute	6. A shepherd & a flute	15. Haifa	
7. Cave of the Patriarchs	9. Samaria - beginning of scene only	7. Cave of the Patriarchs	16. Shavuot Parade, Haifa	
8. Jordan River		8. Jordan River	Final song - Yossele in Jerusalem	
9. Samaria: Sebastia & Nablus		9. Samaria	Yossele's Funeral - English narration	
10. Be'er Ya'akov		10. Be'er Ya'akov	1. Opening titles + credits	
11. Jaffa		13. Solomon's Pools	2. Opening text + Preface	
12. Tel Aviv		14. Mount Carmel	3. Mount Zion	
13. Solomon's Pools		15. Haifa	4. Western Wall	
14. Mount Carmel		16. Shavuot Parade, Haifa	5. Rachel's Tomb	
15. Haifa		17. Jerusalem: Old City Quarters	6. A shepherd & a flute	
16. Shavuot Parade, Haifa		18. Bethlehem	7. Jerusalem: Old City Quarters	
17. Jerusalem: Old City Quarters		Ending song - Yossele in Jerusalem	18. Bethlehem	
18. Bethlehem			Ending song - Yossele in Jerusalem	
Ending song - Yossele in Jerusalem				

Fig.3. The reconstruction of *A Dream of my People*. Final version ("Script Offer") on the left



Figs 4a and 4b. Two scenes from the Jordan River, before and after cleaning and improving contrast

some new intertitles). the final Hebrew version is 68 minutes long, thus considerably longer than any of the extant originals.

The restored version of *Dream of my People* was premiered in late 2012 at the Jerusalem Cinémathèque, during the Jerusalem Jewish Film Festival, and was accompanied by a cantor.

#### CONCLUSION

As suggested at the beginning of this article, good preservation work depends on meticulous planning in advance, while leaving enough space for corrections during the process. In

this specific case, the focus was mainly on incorporating segments from several versions of the same film, while taking into consideration the desired narrative and technical constraints. Practical issues, such as whether to have the process done locally or abroad, are of major importance as well. Working like this on future projects will allow us to share the cultural treasures in our archives with current and future generations. After all, it is not just our job. It is our duty.



fr

La conservation des films constitue une part essentielle du travail de toute archive du film. Cet article s'intéresse à un projet de conservation réalisé à la Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive, au mont Scopus à Jérusalem. Le film en question était une production américaine de 1934, *Dream of my People*, dont la figure centrale était le chanteur Yossele Rosenblatt. Une biographie succincte de Rosenblatt – décédé brutalement au cours de la production du film – et une description de son rôle central dans la vie culturelle juive du XXe siècle, sont suivies d'informations sur la production du film et son importance dans la carrière du chanteur. L'article détaille la provenance des copies en possession des Archives, ainsi que des versions détenues ailleurs, et inventorie plusieurs copies, précisant leur format, leur durée et leur état de conservation. Deux versions avaient été tirées sur acétate de cellulose à partir du support nitrate dans les années 1990, et le processus de conservation de la version en hébreu débuta peu après. Le choix des supports utilisés pour la numérisation, afin d'obtenir le meilleur résultat possible pour chaque scène, se justifiait essentiellement par trame narrative que les archives voulaient présenter. On trouve une description détaillée de chaque version, ainsi que le script établi préalablement à la reconstruction. L'article expose les motivations des changements apportés à l'ordonnancement de certaines scènes, et précise les autres améliorations physiques, comme l'ajout et la correction d'intertitres, le nettoyage et les ajustements du contraste. Le résultat final était légèrement plus long et de bien meilleure qualité que n'importe laquelle des copies disponibles jusqu'alors.

es

La preservación de las películas es una parte fundamental de la misión de cada archivo. Este artículo presenta un proyecto de preservación desarrollado por el Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive (Archivo Fílmico Judío Steven Spielberg) en el Monte Scopus, Jerusalén. La película en cuestión es la producción americana de 1934, *Dream of my People* (Sueño de mi pueblo), centrada en Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt. Una breve biografía de Rosenblatt – que murió repentinamente mientras se estaba haciendo la película – y una descripción de su importante posición en la vida cultural judía del siglo XX preceden a informaciones sobre la producción de la película y su relevancia en la carrera de Cantor. El artículo documenta la procedencia de las copias en posesión del Archivo, así como las versiones conservadas en otras partes, y proporciona un inventario de varias copias, incluyendo su formato, duración y estado. Dos versiones fueron duplicadas de soporte nitrate a soporte de seguridad durante la década de 1990, y la preservación de la versión hebrea se inició poco después. Hay una razón para la selección de los materiales para su digitalización con el fin de obtener el mejor resultado para cada escena: la decisión se basó principalmente en la narrativa que el archivo quería presentar. Hay una descripción detallada de cada versión, así como el guión elaborado para la reconstrucción. El artículo describe las razones para los cambios realizados en el orden de algunas escenas y también delinea otras mejoras físicas, tales como la incorporación o la corrección de intertítulos, la limpieza de la imagen o ajustes en el contraste. El resultado final fue un poco más largo y de mucho mejor calidad que cualquiera de las copias ya existentes.

JFP

93 | 10.2015

Benny Bar-Yehuda

Reconstructing Yossele Rosenblatt's  
*Dream of My People* (1934)

ARCHIVES AT WORK