From Sofia to Jaffa
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Introduction

The past twenty-five years have seen intense interest on the part of folklorists in immigration, ethnicity, and ethnic identity. For many researchers in America, immigrant groups have become the folk, replacing European peasantry, the traditional focus of folkloristic inquiry. These scholars have been concerned with the adaptation and transformation of expressive culture in the passage from Old World to New. Individuals change their behavior, and perceptions change in the new environment. Folklorists have been particularly interested in these changes, which manifest themselves in different forms, and can be studied as indicators of ethnic affect and acculturation.

American folklorists have been in the forefront of research on the nature and role of folkloric expression in the lives of immigrants and their progeny.1 The work produced by these scholars reflects major developments in the field of folkloristics. The 1960s saw the publication of works that addressed the notion of ethnic folklore as consisting of survivals from the old country or revivals in the new.2 By the end of the decade, works began appearing which saw in ethnicity a phenomenon more complex than a unilinear process of acculturation, and novel and exciting approaches were developed.3 Just as folklore was being viewed more as process and less as item, so immigrant folklore was being viewed less as survival and more as a dynamic element in cultural adaptation, as well as a symbol of identity and strategic asset.

The contextual, or performance-centered approach to folklore, which was the major new voice on the American folklore scene in the early 1970s, has been incorporated into the study of folklore and ethnicity.5 This approach emphasizes the study of folklore within its specific performance context.6 One of the weaknesses of this approach is its tendency to neglect the wider cultural and historical context, as well as the concept of folklore as a function of an individual's particular circumstances and life history. These issues have been addressed in the work of Linda Degh, who has blended elements of the European ethnographic approach with trends in American folkloristics.7

The scientific study of folklore in Israel has its roots in America, but has developed along very different lines. Dov Noy, the founder of
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folkloristics in Israel, studied under Stith Thompson at Indiana University in the early 1950s, but the new directions in folklore research which were developed during the 1960s and 1970s in America did not, until recently, find their way to Israel, and the folklore-as-survival approach continued in Israel long after its demise elsewhere. The study of immigration, ethnicity, and ethnic identity, then, was left in the hands of Israel's sociologists and anthropologists. To date, there has been no comprehensive treatment of the development of sociological, anthropological, and folkloristic approaches to immigration and ethnicity. The first part of this study addresses this lack.

There is a natural tendency among folklorists and anthropologists, both American and Israeli, to choose the exotic, the unusual, or the problematic as the topic of research. In Israel, the least assimilated groups command the greatest attention. For the present study of identity and acculturation in Israel, I have selected a different approach. The subject of this study, the Jews of Bulgaria, is a group well known in Israel for having adjusted swiftly, and for having made a positive contribution to the development of the new nation's institutions.

Between 1948 and 1949, approximately forty-five thousand of Bulgaria's fifty thousand Jews came to Israel. This mass transplantation of an entire community provided a unique opportunity to study cultural and folkloric adaptation from a specific point in time. I conducted a pilot study in 1974–1975 under the auspices of the Urban Studies Project at Tel Aviv University, sponsored by the State University of New York at Stony Brook. The results of this preliminary work inform the structure of the present study.

In 1980 I received an Israel Government Grant to spend a year in Israel collecting data for this study. The main emphasis of the research was on in-depth interviewing and participant observation. In planning a research strategy, special attention was paid to the problems of ethnicity research among a dispersed and assimilated population.

The Jews from Bulgaria in Israel could not be studied with the methods and techniques used in collecting data on geographically coherent, attitudinally homogeneous ethnic communities. It was necessary, then, to interview informants throughout the country: old folks who remained in the small Bulgarian enclave in Jaffa, kibbutzniks and moshavniks, and integrated city dwellers. Informants were sought from the least to the most assimilated to provide as wide a sample of opinions and outlooks as possible.

In-depth interviews were conducted with sixteen informants. The interviews were constructed on the basis of directions suggested in the earlier pilot study. The interviews were structured, but open-ended; informants were permitted to channel discussion to areas they felt
were important. Throughout the present study I have excerpted passages from the interview transcripts.

The interview schedule was divided into two parts; life in Bulgaria and life in Israel. Many of the same questions were repeated in both sections. Emphasis was placed on folklore, and groups of questions were designed to elicit types of folklore, context of performance, and attitudes toward preservation and transmission.

Participant observation was directed at all types of events where Jews from Bulgaria would interact: parties, weddings, holidays, immigrant clubs, performances, political rallies. These activities took place largely in the old immigrant neighborhood of Jaffa, and were attended by a small percentage of those immigrants who remained within the ethnic community.

The complexity of the field of ethnicity requires an openminded, eclectic theoretical orientation. In the words of eminent folklorist Richard M. Dorson: “Various processes are operating simultaneously. . . . Generalizations about acculturation must not be applied sweepingly to all immigrant groups.” Folklorists in the United States have indeed been at the forefront of multi-discipline research in the field. Israeli researchers have been less open-minded, due in part to the requirements of governmental institutions, and due in part to their mistrust of “soft” data, folklore being perceived as the softest of all. They have, nevertheless, produced an impressive amount of research on immigration, acculturation, and ethnicity, responding to the demographic, political, religious, and ideological factors which are unique to the Israeli ethnic equation. Whereas the development of American folkloristic research on ethnicity has been summarized, Israeli research has not. Part I, Israeli Social Science Looks at Immigration and Ethnicity, addresses this lack, with special emphasis on those works which bear on the subject of this study.

Part II, The Jews in Bulgaria, is a survey of the history of the Jews of Bulgaria. The survey was directed by informant data, i.e., those events, places, persons, movements, and ideologies which were consistently mentioned by informants as having been important in their personal development and worldview, received special attention. These phenomena I have called “components of identity.” They are illustrated with excerpts from the interviews.

Part III, The Jews of Bulgaria in Israel, is divided into three chapters. The first expands on the theoretical approaches discussed in Part I, and applies them to the present subject. Three Israeli studies in particular are applied to the present case and are discussed in detail. An original, fourth approach, defining “components of identity,” is used to further explain the data. The second chapter of Part III
describes these components, and each is discussed and illustrated with interview excerpts. The final four components are folkloric, and are treated as part of a general discussion of folklore and identity as they are perceived by the Jews of Bulgaria in Israel.

Until 1990 I had assumed that I had written the final chapter on the Jews of Bulgaria in Israel. Recent events in Eastern Europe proved me wrong. The withering of Communism in Bulgaria led to a renewal of Jewish life there, as well as a new group of immigrants to Israel. I returned to Bulgaria and Israel in the summer of 1992, and the observations made during that trip are contained in the Epilogue.

This study has several objectives: to accurately describe the nature of the concept of identity among the Jews of Bulgaria in Israel based on the perceptions of individual immigrants, with special consideration of the social, political, cultural, and ideological context of their lives in Bulgaria preceding emigration and in Israel after immigration; to approach this subject using the tools developed by Israeli social science for the unique conditions of Israel, adding the perspective of American folkloristics and an additional theoretical approach; and to describe and analyze the development of these tools.

My attitude toward the question of folklore and ethnicity reflects my training at Indiana University. The work of students and faculty noted above informs my assumptions. It is not my intention here, however, to apply theories and hypotheses developed in America to the present discussion. Rather, I will analyze the field data based on the critical application of Israeli models. In doing so I have surveyed and evaluated applicable Israeli scholarship, discussed its strengths and shortcomings in its application to the present case, and suggest a complementary approach. Thus, even though the historic-ethnographic perspective on ethnicity, which is the basis of the present research, was applied in Europe and America long before it was used in Israel, it is discussed here in the context of developments in Israeli social science, leaving the analysis of its international connections to another study.

In the present work on the Bulgarian Jews in Israel, these trends underlie much of the research. The attitude of this study is eclectic; no single approach is capable of adequately describing and explaining ethnicity. The concepts of survivals, revivals, performance, context, strategy, and identity are all important in gaining a clearer understanding of the present case.

Note: Hebrew and Bulgarian are transliterated according to the style of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Words spelled in English in an accepted form are spelled according to convention (e.g. kibbutz, Israel, Massada). A short description of informants mentioned or quoted in
the text may be found in Appendix B. Information in parentheses refers to transcriptions of the interviews, and contain informant name and transcript page number. These transcripts may be made available to researchers by contacting the author. Two sample transcripts are reproduced in Appendix C.
The Central Synagogue in Sofia, whose external beauty covers the devastation within. Illustration by Cheri Haskell.