

**FROM THE MELODY REMAINS:
THE MEMOIRS OF SHOLEM SECUNDA**
(as told to Miriam Kressyn)

Madame Regina Prager was a legendary figure, one of the first great prima donnas to come to the Yiddish theatre. How she ever got to the theatre is difficult to understand as she was extremely religious. In the early years of Yiddish theatre it was not easy to attract young girls from fine homes. Parents didn't send their offspring to New York with the express purpose of "Making It Big."

Madame Prager, at the time of my meeting her, had shed her bloom some years before. Yet her voice had retained its brilliance. She possessed a dynamic, soprano voice. Though she had had no musical training, her voice was clear and colorful. Had she studied, she might have easily taken her place among the world's greats. I was fortunate enough to have heard her in three of her most outstanding performances—Goldfaden roles: Deenah Deen in *Bar Kokhba*; Shulamis in the opera of the same name; and Mother Sarah in *Akeydes Yitzkhok* (The Sacrifice of Isaac).

Years later, I heard her again in one of Yosef Rumshinsky's plays. Outwardly, she had not changed much. But her voice—nothing was left of it except her soaring high C's.

I heard that Madame Regina Prager was engaged to play at the Odion Theatre for the coming season. I actually shivered with excitement. Could it be? Madame Regina Prager would sing my music? If this were possible . . . greater luck hath no composer. I ran to Mr. Blecher. "Who will compose the music for Madame Prager?" I asked. "It has not been decided as yet," Blecher answered. "I did mention your name, Sholemel. Her answer was one of doubt. 'How can I trust such a *Yingel* [youngster]? I have never heard of him. I would suggest, Mr. Blecher, you commission Rumshinsky to write music for me. Of him and his music I have heard.'

"My advice to you, Sholemel, is tomorrow Madame Prager will be at the theatre. Go over to her, introduce yourself. Tell her a little about yourself. You have already written music, tell her, for some other plays. She is an extremely delicate person. She wouldn't hurt a fly. Try. You may find merit in her eyes." I listened attentively to Mr. Blecher. I always listened.

Next day, at the Odion Theatre, I went over discreetly to Madame

The original Yiddish, as well as the English translation from which these selections are excerpted, ran serially in the *Jewish Daily Forward* from May 1969 to December 1970.

Prager and I ventured, "I am that Secunda that Mr. Blecher mentioned to you."

"My, my, you are a youngster. You are indeed very young, aren't you? You don't look more than sixteen, seventeen."

"I will be seventeen but I have a great deal of experience. I am a student at the Conservatory." I was sure she knew about musical conservatories. "I have been raised on liturgical music. I was a cantor at the age of ten." I could have even told her more, that I was the Greatest Boy Cantor. I didn't. She interrupted me.

"I tell you truthfully, young man, I find you pleasing, and your dimples are enough to lead an old woman astray." That, coming from Madame Prager, was something I had not expected. "However," she went on, "I have not heard any of your music. What type of music do you write? I don't sing this modern musical trash. I am, as you may well have heard, a little different from the average prima donna. Besides, I have already given the lyrics to Mr. Rumshinsky. You've heard of him, no doubt."

"Of course. Of course, Madame Prager."

"However, if you wish, I will give you a copy of the same words. Try your luck. If you have luck, you'll need no talent. Maybe, we'll both be lucky. I do promise, young man, that if I like your music better, Rumshinsky notwithstanding, I'll sing yours. Naturally, I'll pay Mr. Rumshinsky for his labor."

I could have kissed her, except one just didn't kiss Madame Prager. As for myself, I hadn't kissed any ladies as yet. Whether she had been kissed by any man, I wouldn't venture to guess.

"Come, this evening, to my home. I will give you the lyrics. Nevertheless, young man, don't get your hopes up too high, so that your disappointment will be easier to bear."

That evening she received me warmly and handed me lyrics to two songs: "Heym, Zise Heym" [Home, Sweet Home], also the title of the play, and the second song was "patriotic," she said. Jewish or English patriotism? I did not dare ask. I thanked her profusely for the privilege and trust she had shown me. That night my supper went uneaten. Even my family's supper was slightly disturbed. I sat at the piano till the rooster crowed and the Secundas were ready for work. I turned around and saw all of them, big and little, old and young, standing behind me. Seeing me finally put down my pencil and eraser, they applauded and chorused "Mazel Tov." It was indeed, as Madame Prager had wished me, "Mazel Tov." But I had no way of knowing it at that time.

I came to Madame Prager at the appointed hour. I was met at the door by the lady herself. From inside I heard the piano being played. I

was shown into the parlor, and who was it playing the piano? None other than Mr. Yosef Rumshinsky. You could actually hear my stomach drop. He turned on the swivel chair and looked at me. We had never met, but I recognized him from his photographs on the printed sheet music.

I sat down on the nearest chair. Madame Prager had not introduced us. Rumshinsky turned back to the keyboard and played his music for both songs. Madame Prager remained sitting without uttering a word. Her face was immobile. Did she or did she not like the music? After a pause, she said softly, "Mr. Rumshinsky, would you mind playing it again?" He obeyed confidently, playing and singing in his pleasant tremolo. She thanked him and then, pointing to me, said, "This young man [she probably did not remember my name] is studying music and hopes, in time, to be a composer." He didn't encourage a handshake, and I was too embarrassed to give my hand first. I did manage to say, trying to control my quivering voice, "I am pleased to meet you."

Rumshinsky left his music on the piano, shook Madame's hand, and left without as much as a glance in my direction. Madame Prager smiled at me.

"Now, we'll hear what our younger genius has to offer." I took the seat vacated by Rumshinsky. Carefully, I laid his music aside and began my "Heym, Zise Heym." I, too, sang and accompanied myself. "May I hear it again?" I sang it once more, this time a bit more relaxed, putting a smile into my voice. The second time she hummed it with me and when I finished she turned to me and said, "It begs to be sung. And now, young man, may I hear the second song." I played and sang the second one. "The patriotism is missing," she volunteered. "Could you play Mr. Rumshinsky's patriotic song?" I played and she sang along, comparing the songs. She was speaking as if to herself: "The first 'Heym, Zise Heym,' I like yours better. The second one, Rumshinsky's is . . ."

I had to agree with her. She now sang "Heym, Zise Heym" in full voice, testing it for key comfort. By the time I left, we were both quite comfortable. She bade me good night, thanked me for my promptness, and assured me that my "Heym, Zise Heym" would be the leitmotif of her play.

The posters and the newspapers read: "Music by Yosef Rumshinsky and Sholem Secunda." I used my formal Yiddish name for dignity and good luck. Was I happy? Indeed! I ran home to orchestrate my song. The violinist was also conductor of the five-piece orchestra. In deference to Madame Prager, they augmented the orchestra. Usually, there were four. They gave her one more.

I was walking on air. The family sang for joy, except my brother Willie—he was slightly skeptical. “I can’t believe it. I can’t believe that Madame Regina Prager would sing your song.”

The next Friday, Willie was convinced. The miracle did take place. I wasn’t interested in whether the audience or the critics liked the play. I only knew that Madame Prager sang my composition. Could I look at it objectively? Was it the music or the fact that Madame Prager sang it? I wouldn’t speculate. My family and all the neighbors couldn’t get enough of it. “You’ve turned the world upside down,” my mother said. “Yes mamma, your little world, 145 Columbia Street.”

It reminded me of Nikolayeve, when my nickname “Lemeshke” had suddenly blossomed into “Solomonchik.” So it was with “Secundale” the extra, the chorus boy, the “go-for.” Now I was “Sholem Secunda,” a budding composer, whose song was being sung by none other than the greatest Jewish prima donna, Madame Regina Prager.

Among those in the audience at one performance was the proprietor of Goldberg’s Music Store on Grand Street between Suffolk and Clinton Streets. He must have liked my offering because he asked five musician friends to get the “little fellow” Secunda to his shop. Why I was wanted, I had no idea. I did not know who Mr. Goldberg was and my friends did not elaborate. I got to Goldberg’s Music Shop and stood at the door. A gentleman beckoned me to step in.

“I want to hear your ‘Heym, Zise Heym’ once more. I am Mr. Goldberg.” He showed me to a piano. All the keys were black—the ivory was missing on all the whites. It looked toothless. I played on it to the best of its ability. I sang the song to cover up a sound appropriate to the piano’s looks.

“It’s a good song,” he said. “I want to print it.” He had printed all of Yosef Rumshinsky’s songs.

“When?” I asked, joyfully.

“As soon as you can arrange it for piano.”

I was sitting at mamma’s kitchen table arranging my first-born to be taken to the publishers. I don’t recall whether or not I had asked “How much?” or whether he had offered anything, for that matter. I know that the incubation period seemed endless, though it took only three weeks. I thought he had surely changed his mind about publishing it, but I was too timid to ask him. At the end of the third week “Heym, Zise Heym” was prominently displayed in his show-window. On the cover was a large picture of Madame Regina Prager and a tiny oval one of Composer Sholem Secunda.

It was a ritual walk that I took every evening to look at it, prominently displayed among such dignitaries as Yosef Rumshinsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Beethoven, and Mozart.