

S'BRENT

It Burns!



Mordekhai Gebirtig, 1887-1942.

Mordekhai Gebirtig, a much-loved Yiddish folk poet, wrote "S'brent" (also known as "Dos Shtetl Brent"—The Little Town's Afire) one year before the outbreak of World War II. It was his reaction to the series of bloody riots against Polish Jews that culminated in a pogrom in the little town of Przytyk in central Poland. During the pogrom, in which three Jews were killed and sixty more wounded—a small pogrom by later standards—one Jew killed a Polish attacker in self-defense. He was condemned at a trial in which no distinction was made between attackers and defenders.

"S'brent" was a dramatic warning of disaster. Scarcely noticed at the time, the powerful visionary character of the song was realized only after the German invasion in 1939, when the world around Europe's Jews was literally burning.

Mordekhai Gebirtig had been celebrated for his poems and songs about Jewish life in prewar Poland. He was "the gentle harp of the Polish Jew," as Yisokhor Fater calls him in his book *Jewish Music in Poland*, praising the sensitivity and compassion with which Gebirtig portrayed his people in his works.

Krakow, the birthplace of Gebirtig, is a city on the Vistula River in Galitsia,

south Poland. Before World War II, Krakow had been one of Europe's most important Jewish settlements, with a history that could be traced back to the fourteenth century. Gebirtig grew up in this community rich in social and cultural activities. His talent and love for music were manifested early—as a small child he taught himself to play the shepherd's flute. There was no money for his education, and to earn his keep he worked in his brother-in-law's furniture store. He sought spiritual nourishment through the Jewish working people's cultural circles, which he joined as a youth. Soon he met the writer Abraham Reizin, and under his influence began writing verse and songs.

Gebirtig's first book of poetry, *Folkstimlekh* (In a Folk Mode), was published in 1920. In 1936, on the thirtieth anniversary of the beginning of his literary career, his friends surprised him with a publication of his poetry entitled *Mayne Lider* (My Songs). Menakhem Kipnis, an important critic and folklorist of the time, wrote, "Gebirtig is the perfect Jewish folk poet."

In the true tradition of the folk poet, Gebirtig turned many of his poems into songs and sang them himself. Though not a schooled musician, he created the most beloved songs of the Yiddish song literature.

During the First World War, Gebirtig served in the Austro-Hungarian army. Thrown into daily contact with Czechs, Hungarians, Serbo-Croatians, and Rumanians, he eagerly absorbed their richly varied folk melodies. Elements of this music are blended in his colorful songs, which were sung by everyone, including wandering street musicians, who performed them throughout Poland. His songs, which treat the timeless themes of love, childhood, marriage, old age, as well as the particular struggles and joys of Polish-Jewish life, are suffused with his wisdom and wit. Some of his songs, like "Dray Tekhterl" (Three Daughters), which tells of the pleasures and difficulties of raising children and then losing them, are about his own family. Many describe the struggles of the poor. His song about a pickpocket, "Avreml der Marvikher," creates sympathy even for this low-life character.

"S'brent," written in 1938, anticipates the tragic epoch that followed. *Shtetl*, a diminutive of *shtot*, the Yiddish word for "town," meant more than just "small town" to the Polish Jews. It represented a unique way of life centered around family, synagogue, and marketplace, focused on *yiddishkeit* (Jewishness) and *menshlikhkeit* (humaneness). Characterized by struggle and more often than not by great poverty, the shtetl was nonetheless a colorful world full of music and love of life.

At the time Gebirtig wrote "S'brent," he sensed the end of the shtetl era and of Jewish life in Poland—a premonition that was realized during the Nazi occupation. His song was, and still is, a warning of the dangers of passivity in the face of oppression.

ES BRENT by Mordecai Gebirtig

It burns brothers it burns
Es brent, briderlekh, es brent

Oh our poor town unfortunate burns
Oy undzer orem shtetl nebekh brent

Angry winds with rage
Beyze vintn mit yirgozn

Tear break and fan
Rayzn brekhn un tseblozn

Stronger still the wild flames
Shtarker nokh di vilde flamen

All around already burns
Alts arum shoy n brent

And you all stand and look like this
Un ir shteyt un kukt azoy zikh

with folded hands
Mit farleygte hent

And you all stand and look like this
Un ir shteyt un kukt azoy zikh

Our town burns
Undzer shtetl brent

It burns brothers it burns
Es brent, briderlekh, es brent

Oh our poor town unfortunate burns
Oy undzer orem shtetl nebekh brent

It has already the fire tongues
S'hobn shoy n di fayer-tsunen

(The) whole town swallowed
(Dos) ^Sgantse shtetl ayngeshlungen

And the angry winds howl
Un di beyze vintn hudzhen

Our town burns
Undzer shtetl brent

And you all stand and look like this
Un ir shteyt un kukt azoy zikh

with folded hands
Mit farleygte hent

And you all stand and look like this
Un ir shteyt un kukt azoy zikh

Our town burns
Undzer shtetl brent

It burns brothers it burns
Es brent, briderlekh, es brent

It can God forbid come the moment
Es ken kholile kumen der moment

Our town with us together
Undzer shtot mit undz tsuzamen

should in ash away in flames
Zol oyf ash avek in flamen

Remain should like after a battle
Blaybn zol vi nokh a shlakht

Only empty black walls
Nor puste, shvartse vent

And you all stand and look like this
Un ir shteyt un kukt azoy zikh

with folded hands
Mit farleygte hent

And you all stand and look like this
Un ir shteyt un kukt azoy zikh

Our town burns
Undzer shtetl brent

It burns brothers it burns
Es brent, briderlekh, es brent

The help is only in you alone depends
Di helf iz nor in aykh aleyn gevendt

If the town is (to) you dear
Oyb dos shtetl iz aykh tayer

Take the vessels extinguish the fire
Nemt di keylim lesht dos fayer

Extinguish with your own blood
Lesht mit ayer eygn blut

show that you this can (do)
Bavayzt az ir dos kent

Stand not brothers like this
Shteyt nit brider ot azoy zikh

with folded hands
Mit farleygte hent

Stand not brothers, extinguish the fire
Shteyt nit brider, lesht dos fayer

Our town burns
Undzer shtetl brent

Es Brent

ES BRENT Poem: music: M. Gebirtig Arr. L. Werner (adapted)

S
A
T
B

S' BRENT S' BRENT UNDZER SHTETL BRENT

S' BRENT S' BRENT S' BRENT S' BRENT

no breath 3

ES BRENT, BRIDERLEKH ES

S
A
T
B

S' BRENT UND- ZER SHTETL BRE-E-E-ENT

S' BRENT S' BRENT S' BRENT

BRENT. oy UNDZER OREM SHTETL NEBEKH BRENT:
ES KEN KHOLILE KUMEN DER MO-MENT.

oo quiet and eerie

BEYZE VINTH MIT VIRGOZN RAYSH BREKH UN TSEBLOZN,
UNDZER SHTOT MIT UNZ TSUZAMEN ZOL OYF ASH A-VEK IN FLAMEN

ah ah

SHTARKER NOKH DI VILDE FLAMEN ALTS ARUM SHOYN BRENT.
BLAYBN ZOL VI NOKH A SHLAKHTNOR PUSTE, SHVARTSE VENT.

(2)

notes separated not staccato

S
A
T
B

UN IR SHTEYT UN KUKT A-ZOY ZIKH MIT FARLEYGTG HENT.

p UN IR SHTEYT UN KUKT A-ZOY ZIKH MIT FARLEYGTG HENT.
crisp *no breath*

SAB: quiet + eerie

S
A
T
B

UN IR SHTEYT UN KUKT A-ZOY ZIKH UNDZER SHTELT BRENT.

legato *p* *mp* *p*

S
A
T
B

ES BRENT, BRIDERLEKH, ES

ES BRENT, BRIDERLEKH ES BRENT.

S'BRE-ENT S'BRE-ENT S'BRE-ENT S'BRE-ENT

S'BRENT S'BRENT S'BRENT S'BRENT

Handwritten musical score for Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B) voices. The score is written on four systems of staves, each with a vocal line and a bass line. The lyrics are in Yiddish.

System 1:

- Soprano:** BRENT. OY DI UNDZER OREM SHTETL NEBEKH BRENT. HILF IZ NOR IN AYKH A-LEYN GE- VENT.
- Alto:** UNDZER OREM SHTETL NEBEKH HILF IZ NOR IN AYKH A- LEYN GE- BRENT. VENT.
- Tenor:** S'BRE - ENT S'BRE - ENT
- Bass:** S'BRENT S'BRENT

System 2:

- Soprano:** FAYER - TSUNGEN IZ AYKH TAYER. AYN-GE - SHLUNGEN LESHT DOS FAYER
- Alto:** S'HORN SHOYN DI FAYER - TSUNGEN (DOS) GANTSE SHTETL AYNGE - SHLUNGEN OYB DOS SHTETL NEMI DI KEYLIM, LESHT DOS FAY - ER,
- Tenor:** FAYER - TSUNGEN IZ AYKH TAYER. AYN-GE - SHLUNGEN LESHT DOS FAYER
- Bass:** FAYER - TSUNGEN IZ AYKH TAYER. AYN-GE - SHLUNGEN LESHT DOS FAYER

System 3:

- Soprano:** VINTN HUDZHEN EY- GN BLUT, BA- UNDZER SHTETL BRE- ENT. VAYSI, AZ IR DOS KE- ENT.
- Alto:** UN DI BEY-ZE VIN-TN HUDZHEN UN LESHT MIT AY- ER EY- GN BLUT, BA- UNDZER SHTETL BRENT. VAYSI, AZ IR DOS KENT.
- Tenor:** VIN-TN HUDZHEN EY- GN BLUT, BA- UNDZER SHTETL BRENT. VAYSI AZ IR DOS KENT.
- Bass:** VIN-TN HUDZHEN EY- GN BLUT, BA- UNDZER SHTETL BRENT. VAYSI AZ IR DOS KENT.

notes separated not staccato

S
UN IR SHTEYT UN KUKT A - ZOY ZIKH
SHTEYT NIT, BRIDER, OT A - ZOY ZIKH
MIT FAR-LEYGTE HENT.
MIT FAR-LEYGTE HENT.

A
p crisp

T
no breath
UN IR SHTEYT UN KUKT A - ZOY ZIKH
SHTEYT NIT, BRIDER, OT A - ZOY ZIKH
MIT FAR-LEYGTE HE-ENT.
MIT FAR-LEYGTE HE-ENT.

B

S
UN IR SHTEYT UN KUKT A - ZOY ZIKH
SHTEYT NIT, BRIDER, LESHT DOS FAYER -
UNDZER SHTETL BRENT!
UNDZER SHTETL BRENT!

A
p legato
UN IR SHTEYT UN KUKT A - ZOY ZIKH
SHTEYT NIT, BRIDER, LESHT DOS FAYER -
UNDZER SHTETL BRENT!
UNDZER SHTETL BRENT!

T
UN IR SHTEYT UN KUKT A - ZOY ZIKH
SHTEYT NIT, BRIDER, LESHT DOS FAYER -
UNDZER SHTETL BRENT!
UNDZER SHTETL BRENT!

B

S
UNDZER SHTETL BRENT!

A

T
mf
UNDZER SHTETL BRENT!

B