Episode 3: “Sing This At My Funeral”
Transcription

An actor reads from *Sing This at My Funeral*:

“Make sure you sing this at my funeral,” Dad said to me after belting it out for what would be the last time in his life on December 26, 2015. We had just finished singing “Di Shvue” — “The Oath” — the anthem of the Jewish Labor Bund, the political movement to which our family had been attached for around a century. We didn't know then that three days later he'd be dead. And eight days after that, we would indeed be singing it by his grave side, just as he had by his father's grave side, 38 years earlier.

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Host Aaron Henne: Welcome to *The Dybbukast*, the show in which we ask: What do poems, plays, and other creative texts from throughout history tell us about the times in which they were written, and what do they reveal about the forces still at play in our contemporary societies? I'm Aaron Henne, artistic director of theatre dybbuk. In this episode, we will be investigating *Sing This At My Funeral*, a memoir of fathers and sons written by Dr. David Slucki, the Loti Smorgon Associate Professor in Contemporary Jewish Life and Culture at the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation, Monash University. This episode is presented in collaboration with that institution. You will hear David share with us about his family history and the ways in which that history speaks to a variety of cultural and societal considerations in Australia and beyond. At the beginning, actor Damian Walshe-Howling read a section from David's book. Throughout the episode, Damian reads a number of excerpts from that memoir, including a couple of selections from letters by David's grandfather, which are also featured in the book. And now, *The Dybbukast*, Season Two, Episode Three: “Sing This at My Funeral”.

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Dr. David Slucki: The story is a multi-generational memoir of my family, and particularly the men in my family, and specifically my grandfather, my father, and me.

Actor: *This is a story about fathers and sons. It's about my father, Charles Roger Slucki — “Sluggo,” to most who knew him — a man with deep wells of compassion and an endless reserve of energy. Charismatic, complex. It's about his father —my grandfather — or* zaida *in Yiddish. Jakub Slucki was so traumatized by what he suffered that he couldn't model how to be a father. So broken that he lived himself into an early grave.*

David: I don't want to just write about me ‘cause I don't think I'm that interesting. And I didn't just want it to be about my dad and grandfather ‘cause I thought that's interesting to my family. But what I really wanted to do is, like, show how those stories tell all these bigger stories of the Jewish 20th century. And stories that haven't been told a lot, like the story of Jews in Siberia during World War II, the story of Jews in Melbourne, the story of kind of trying to re-settle in Poland and that not working. Like, these are stories that don't get told very often. They're starting to be told more. I hope my book’s part of that. My grandfather was born in Poland in 1901, in Warsaw, and he lost his parents during World War I. His father was murdered by German occupying soldiers. His mother died in very tragic circumstances after being forced to remarry and falling pregnant by the new partner, and, in an attempt to self-abort, she died through complications, which, I mean, it's just a really haunting story. So after that, my grandfather moved to the small city of Włocławek, once 200

kilometers outside Warsaw. And we're not quite sure where, probably sometime during World War I, he joined this organization called the Jewish Labor Bund, which was a socialist, Yiddish-oriented, kind of diasporic Jewish political movement. And he really threw himself into the party and its ideology. He married, had two sons. And when the war broke out in 1939, within a couple of months the Nazis occupied. And then, about two months later, the family decided that he should flee. They thought, as a socialist, he was in danger, but at that stage they still thought the Nazis probably wouldn't target women and children.

Actor: *I decided, figuring and believing in a certain kind of humanism, that they wouldn't harm women and children. And that was how I was separated forever from my dear Gitl, little sons, Chasha, on the 22nd November, 1939 at six o'clock in the morning when they took me to the train.*

David: So he fled east, found himself in the Soviet Union, kept writing letters back and forth, and we've got the letters that his wife and sons wrote to him in the Soviet Union in Polish. And he tried to come back to Poland at some point in the middle of 1940, but then got arrested at the border by Soviet authorities; sent east, I mean, almost as far east as you could be sent in Siberia. He ended up in a — like a deportee camp, kind of like a gulag, like a labor camp. That camp was particularly for Poles and Polish Jews who had escaped. So they were seen as enemy combatants before the summer of 1941. So summer of 1941, Germany invades the Soviet Union, and all of a sudden, Poland are now allies to the Soviet Union. And so these deportees are all set free. They didn't have any money. They didn't have means to head back west. Basically, he was alone. He wouldn't find this out for a couple of years, but, in April 1942, his wife and sons were transported from the ghetto in Włocławek to the Chelmno extermination camp. And they were murdered in mobile gas vans, and then their bodies burned in large pits.

Actor: *Ashes and mud are all that are left of my beautiful family life. My dear Gitl ended her blooming, beautiful, earnest life. Such a tragic death at only 41 years. My dear Shmulek, who had not yet truly learned how to relish life, was not yet 15. My delicate flower Chaimek, still in his innocent years, was only 10. My dear sister Chasha, blossoming at 30 years old with her dear, one year-old daughter. Innocence killed by murderers, the beastly German fascists, and me completely broken. They are forever engraved in my life. No matter what happens to me in my life, my heart will always be bloodied.*

David: He met a young woman and her family, who later he married and was my grandmother. And they basically spent the rest of the war in this city called Yakutsk in far east Siberia. One thing about my grandfather's story that I really want to make clear is that it's not exceptional. It's actually like quite a common story. So the stories of Polish Jews that survived in the Soviet Union, that's how most Polish Jews who were alive at the end of the war survived, even though most of the literature on survivors focuses on — and understandably so — focuses on Jews who survived under Nazi occupation. For Polish Jews, the majority — some 250 or 300,000 — survived in the Soviet Union. So the Holocaust creates this kind of wave of Jewish immigration to Australia, a kind of critical mass that completely reshapes what the Australian Jewish community is because, before the war, there was something like 20,000 Jews in Australia. By the early 1960s, that number had tripled. So the narrative goes that the Jews who came to Melbourne brought this like Yiddish-speaking, fiery kind of Polish-Jewish sensibility, this like fervent Jewish national way of being. So what a lot of the survivors did — and I think this is not just true in Melbourne, I think this is true in a lot of migrant communities everywhere in the world — is they try and create a slice of what they lost. So one of the things I always describe about my grandparents' world: They lived in this neighborhood, North Carlton; 501 Canning Street, North Carlton. And it was a small Victorian or Edwardian cottage.

Actor: *There was something special about that address, the beating heart of a community. Unassuming on the outside, rundown on the inside, but always full of food, people, laughter, tears and life. Step in from the quiet streets of North Carlton, and you were transported back to a worker's club in eastern Europe, where socialism ruled the day; the guttural, lyrical dialects of Yiddish filled the air and there was always a bowl of soup or a slice of herring for the guests. 501 Canning Street, somewhere between a community center, a halfway house, and a party headquarters.*

David: And so, like, they're in this deeply multicultural, particularly European — although, you know, in that — adjacent to that neighborhood was also a neighborhood that was heavily populated by Indigenous people. So it's like a deeply multicultural area but very thickly Jewish. At the same time as they were playing cricket on the nature strip and learning to eat Vegemite, they were also deeply engaged in Jewish cultural life and Jewish institutions. I went to this little Jewish elementary school where we learned Yiddish and, you know, we celebrated Yom Ha'atzmaut every year, but it wasn't like a major factor. There wasn't this big emphasis on Israel education and learning Hebrew and stuff like that. I went to SKIF, the Bundist youth movement. SKIF stands for — it's an acronym from the Yiddish *Sotsyalistishe Kinder Farband*, which means Socialist Children's Union. It was founded in Poland in 1926. The Melbourne chapter was founded in 1950.

Actor: *In some ways, SKIF camp was like any summer camp. Tents or cabins. Sports activities. Kids getting into mischief, making lifelong friends and taking advantage of the chance to forge our own selves away from our parents. These are the hallmarks of summer camps: a place for parents to send their children; somewhere fun with an educational bent.*

David: We learned about this notion of *doykeit*, this idea — Bundist idea: "here-ness," literally of being here, that Jewish communities ought to be fostered everywhere, like this de-centering version of Jewishness that doesn't have a — this spiritual center in Israel, but the center is wherever you are. That was the notion I grew up with, that the place we are is where we should be and where we should foster Jewish life, and, and do it in a local way.

Actor: *SKIF was unique. There was the ideological component, the three pillars that Skifistn learned early: chavershaft, comradeship, the socialist pillar of the movement; doykeit, literally "here-ness," the conviction that Jewish life ought to be fostered anywhere that Jews live, a counterpoint to Zionism, which imagined a Jewish center and periphery; and yiddishkeit, a commitment to a secular Jewishness with Yiddish at its core.*

David: So the Bund was founded in 1897 in the Russian Empire. It was the coming together of these kind of diffuse groups of Jewish socialists from different parts of the Pale of Settlement, who had been kind of agitating among Jewish workers for about a decade or two by that stage. And they'd kind of gone through these different iterations of what it looked like to agitate among workers, Jewish workers. For many of those early Bundists, particularly the kind of theorists and ideologues, they were kind of like part of the Haskalah or were influenced by the Haskalah, this Jewish enlightenment. The way that scholars talk about the Haskalah has changed in the last 10 to 15 years, but this kind of modernizing movement, they were influenced by that. They had had secular Russian educations. They were deeply engaged with socialist literature. But many of them were conscious of the working conditions of the Jews of the Russian empire, which was most Jews who were workers. They were conscious of the particular oppression of Jews as Jews, which had been marked by pogroms, particularly since the early 1880s. What they recognized was that there needed to be a movement that agitated among Jews in the language that they spoke. So that's how they kind of came to Yiddish.

Actor: *It was a secular, Marxist party, ultimately committed to fostering Yiddish culture and replacing capitalism with a democratic socialist state. Its leaders asserted the Jews were not simply a religious group, but a nation bound by history, culture, and language. These ideas were all relatively new in Jewish life, building over the course of a century, but taking expression only in the 1890s and 1900s as Jews in the Russian Empire finally took their major steps toward modernity. The Bund led the way.*

David: The Bund got pretty big. Like, maybe, in its peak, during the years of the 1905 Revolution, there were tens of thousands of adherents. And it was an illegal movement at the time. It got repressed, like they kind of ended up just a trickle through the 1910s. They're energized during the Russian Revolution and they participate in the revolution, and the Bund as an independent entity ceases to exist in the Soviet Union. And the center shifts. It had been sort of centered in Vilna — of present-day Vilnius in Lithuania. The center shifts to Warsaw and the Bund becomes predominantly a Polish movement, a Polish Jewish movement. And it grows pretty big again; thousands of members, thousands of children participating in the children's movement. They oversee unions. They oversee an educational network of Yiddish schools. What they do really successfully from about the mid-1920s is they establish this network of counter-cultural organizations, and, in doing so, what they do is create a kind of cradle-to-grave movement, right? The Bund becomes this movement that serves many of your social and cultural and political needs at all stages of your life. And, you know, they're not the most popular party — political party in Poland — but they are very strong in the mid-to-late 1930s, about a decade after they start ramping up these counter-cultural activities, because they're willing to like send out self-defense bands to physically defend Jews against pogromists. They're willing to lead general strikes when the Polish parliament —the *Sejm* — decides to outlaw kosher slaughter. And they're not a religious movement, but they defend the rights of Jews. You have this generation of Jews that grows up in interwar Poland that is imbued with this way of being Jewish. And on the eve of the war, the Bund is one of the most popular political movements in Poland, among Jews.

Basically what happens to the Bund is the fate of pretty much all Polish Jews; that is that it was decimated by the war. Most Bundists were murdered by the Nazis. Now the Bund was active as an underground movement in many ghettos and participated in resistance organizations, crucially in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. But, like, what happens to Polish Jews? They really can't stop the onslaught of Nazism. So once the war ends, the Bund tries to re-establish itself in Poland. But the truth is, you know, the leaders that had left at the beginning of the war and moved to London or New York stay there. They don't want to come back to Poland, and it's increasingly difficult to rebuild a movement like the Bund in Poland, where the Jewish population is tiny compared to what it was and is getting smaller because the Jews that are returning for the most part don't want to stay because of antisemitism, because of the onset of communism. And so there are Bundists now spread in other parts of the world. They reconvene in Brussels in 1947, and they reformulate as the International Jewish Labor Bund. Before, it was mainly a Bund in Russia or Poland with some satellite groups, organizations, affiliates, but now they become a kind of global organization with member organizations in about 13 countries. The Bund as a movement opposes the establishment of a Jewish state. By their third international conference in 1955, they accept Israel as a fact, Israel as a country, and they accept that it exists, but they argue for the de-Zionization of Israel, that is they think it should be a democracy for all its citizens and inhabitants rather than a Jewish state and particularly not a Jewish center. You know, they're very opposed to this idea of Israel as the Jewish center and everything else as kind of peripheral.

You know, they still hold onto this doykeit idea that Jews, wherever they are, should foster Jewish life and culture within that context, and influenced by that context. In a place like Melbourne, the Bund in this kind of nascent post-Holocaust Jewish community — the Bund is actually like relatively

important in communal affairs. The Bund still exists today. My son went recently to their winter camp and goes week-to-week to their meetings. It's one of the unique things about Melbourne Jews is this very strong current of Yiddish cultural life, and children and now grandchildren of Bundists who arrived from Poland after World War II and now carrying on a legacy in a distinctly 21st century Australian way. You know, there's a Yiddish day school here. There's a Yiddish cultural center. There's like all these Yiddish cultural activities, Yiddish theater and music. So, you know, this is about the only place that a kind of formal Bund organization exists. There is a Bundist institution in Paris. There are Bundists in Tel Aviv, and there is this like upsurge among young leftist Jews of interest in the Bund and its ideas historically. Young Jews looking for a usable past, some kind of leftwing, non or anti-Zionist, Jewish historic movement that they can connect to and identify with and say, I'm part of this tradition and trajectory.

Actor: *The Bund was truly my father's family, his essence, and SKIF his incubator. The movement connected him to his father and the life of a man he knew relatively little about. It filled that gap for him and for me. It helped forge that bond between me and Sluggo, between me and the ghost of Zaida.*

David: Being Jewish in my family is very closely tied to our involvement in the Bund for a century. We don't know exactly when my grandfather joined the Bund but it was probably sometime after his father died. He adopted this fairly early and was attached to the Bund for the rest of his life until he died. He — as far as I can tell, he never wavered in his commitment. That was a very important factor in how he raised my dad and my aunt. And my dad was knee deep in the Bund. He was a *helfer* for a really long time. A helfer is a, like a counselor in American parlance. In 1972, he was a counselor on the Bundist summer camp in New York, Camp Hemshekh, that year, where he made these lifelong friendships. It was partly there that he developed this love he had for theatre, and just like being able to work with children and using theatre as a vehicle to teach them life lessons was really important to him. So that was part of it. The Bund taught him how to move about the world, how to treat other people. That really came from that background, and that my zaida really insisted on as well. You know, my dad became a drama teacher and a theatre director. And the most important thing to him wasn't necessarily that they learned Grotowski or the Stella Adler method. The important thing was that they learned to treat other people with humanity.

Actor: *Sluggo was clear about where his passion for drama education stemmed. It was not the product of a long family history of theatre or even education, although his father was highly educated and his Aunt Chava was a teacher and had received a master's in pedagogy and history at the University of Warsaw. Rather, Sluggo's passion for the theatre, for the classroom, and for the space in between, was driven by those ghosts haunting him. They were inseparable. This seemingly unlikely space, a high school drama class, was where he could pay his debts to the past.*

David: So he didn't like theatre just 'cause he liked theatre. He liked it because it helped him enact his values, and it helped him teach us values.

Actor: *Our family's most important ritual was always the Bund's Warsaw Ghetto Uprising commemoration,* Geto Akademye *in Yiddish, held annually on April 19. The* akademyes *were the centerpieces of Holocaust remembrance in our Bundist community, and April 19 was the single most important date on its calendar.*

David: A lot of people, after the Holocaust, their ideology transforms, whether it's about religion, whether it's about socialism or the state, or what is it that's going to secure Jews in the post-war world. But my zaida was like fairly rigid in his attachment to this universalism of the Bund, right? The

idea that the fate of Jews is intimately linked to the fate of everyone; that there's no justice for Jews without justice, writ large. And it's something that I try and teach my own son.

Actor: *We were the torch bearers of a glorious and tragic past, in which children, many of whom did not make it beyond childhood, were seen as the key to a socialist future, a more just world.*

We hear a portion of the song "Di Shvue"

David: *Di shvue* means "the oath". It was written by a non Bundist, the ethnography S. Ansky, who most famously wrote a play you would be familiar with, *The Dybbuk*. You know, it's quite a powerful anthem. Like, it doesn't say anything about ideology. What it is about is like a commitment to the movement. You will commit yourself to this idea. But it doesn't talk about socialism or Yiddishism or anything like that. You know, you would kind of think that maybe an anthem for a political movement would say something about their politics, but I think what's really important with it, and with the Bund generally, is it's more than a political movement. It's social, cultural. Growing up Bundist was an identity. And I think that was true for a lot of Bundists who still maintain their attachment despite — maybe they have very different feelings about Israel, for example. You could describe even a Zionist, but they're attached to the Bund. And that is, in a sense, primordial. It's not about ideology. It's about identity. And I think that was true for our family too, and "Di Shvue" is this kind of nice encapsulation of that.

Actor: *When my turn came to learn and sing "Di Shvue," the oath to party and ideology, I embraced it fully. I knew early that it bound me to my zaida and to a Jewish past that was relevant, usable, inspiring.*

Brothers and sisters in toil and struggle
All who are dispersed far and wide
Come together, the flag is ready
It waves in anger, it is red with blood!
Swear an oath of life and death!

Heaven and earth will hear us,
The light stars will bear witness.
An oath of blood, an oath of tears,
We swear, we swear, we swear!

We swear an endless loyalty to the Bund.
Only it can free the slaves now.
The red flag is high and wide.
It waves in anger, it is red with blood!
Swear an oath of life and death

David: We all grew up singing at the end of a meeting. Like, when the Bund gathered for some meeting, you sang "Di Shvue" at the end. But then, when my dad and I were in New York in 2015 — this was three days before he died — and we were at this event that was like an evening of Bundist songs, like to memorialize the Bund. And they sang "Di Shvue" at the start, and my dad was really grouchy about that. I mean, he said his customary thing that he always said to me when we sang "Di Shvue," which was, "Make sure you sing this at my funeral," because he had sung it at — they had sung it at his dad's funeral in 1978.

Actor: *When Dad died, we didn't see it coming, just as he hadn't seen it coming with his own father in 1978. I was raised by a fatherless father, like Sluggo was, and like Arthur will be. This new ghost has been added to the family of ghosts that have always been there in the background, whether we knew it or not.*

David: You know, the main thing — and I think this is what my dad thought too — I know it's what my dad thought 'cause he said it to me over and over — the main thing is that I want my son Arthur to be a mensch. I want him to treat other people with humanity. I want him to pursue the things that he's passionate about, and I want him to be passionate about helping people and finding a way to make the world just a little bit better with the capabilities that he's got. And there's lots of components to that. Like I want him to strongly identify as feminist, and I want him to take risks in his life, and I want him to move outside his comfort zone, and I want him to do things that are unpopular if they're right. And so, like, this is all tied up, you know: the Bundist sort of values that I grew up with and the kind of Jewishness and the notion of fatherhood and what a father does. Like, these things all got put in the blender and mixed together in the childhood that I had, and also in the childhood I'm trying to give my son as well. It'll make me proud in ways to see him engaged with Jewish life and Jewish world, but it really has to come from a place of how do we fix the shithole that we're in and what are the things that I can bring to the table with my own skills and personality and knowledge that can do that. Those are all things that I hope for him, and those are all things that I think, and lessons that I learned from my dad. And I think, whether explicitly or not, they're things that he learned from his dad and his upbringing and his childhood. And I think that's, to me, really important — that Arthur understands and recognizes that he's part of something that's much bigger, that goes back thousands of years. And I want him to connect with that deeply, to feel a sense that he's part of this chain of rabbis doing biblical commentary in the third century in Babylonia. He's part of a chain that goes back that far. He's part of a chain that goes back to King David. He's part of this tradition that goes back farther, but that is also adaptable and nimble and changing and that molds itself to whatever circumstance we find ourselves in. I want him to feel like he can experiment and create and imagine new ways of being Jewish that connect to his own immediate past, to our Yiddish-speaking, Bundist roots, but also to something much deeper; that the Bund is part of that too. The Bund isn't just a breakaway from all that came before. It's a continuation of all that came before it. And he's a continuation of that too.

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Aaron: Thank you for listening to this episode of *The Dybbukast,* "Sing This at My Funeral". Selections from the book were read by actor Damian Walshe-Howling. Thank you to Dr. David Slucki for sharing his work and his insights. The rendition of "Di Shvue" you heard is from a 1940 recording of what was then known as the Workmen's Circle Chorus. Our theme music is composed by Michael Skloff and produced by Sam K.S. Story editing is led by Clay Steakley, with support from Julie Lockhart and from me, Aaron Henne. This episode is edited by Gregory Scharpen.

Please visit us at theatredybbuk.org, where you will find links to a wide variety of materials, which expand upon the episode's explorations. And if you want to know more about theatre dybbuk's work in general, please sign up for our mailing list on that same website on the contact page.

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Actor: Like my own parents did and like their parents before them, we'll just have to keep improvising, work out how to be comfortable with those ghosts, comfortable with that knowledge and with the gaps in what we know. Even if we don't chase those ghosts, they find their way to us.