

## Ben Stonehill Yiddishist

Ben Stonehill was born Ben Steinberg on August 20, 1906 in Suwalki, Poland; he died December 27, 1965 at the age of 59. My dad was brought to America as a young child and grew up in Rochester, New York where he attended public schools. He completed high school at East High School in Rochester, and then accompanied several boyhood friends to Ithaca, where the friends attended Cornell University, and he worked in the Red and White grocery store in Collegetown. My mother said he was a self-educated man.

Ben Stonehill arrived in New York City in 1929, working first at laying carpets and linoleum. Once he had learned the trade, he went into business for himself in the Wall Street area. He was the salesman, and employed two workmen. He called the business Mallory Carpets and Floor Service. The business remained unincorporated throughout. My mother said of him proudly, "He was an expert salesman. He could sell anything because he could sell himself," meaning he could impress a customer by his personality.

Dad described himself as a Yiddishist. In addition to the NY Times, he read Der Tog daily and Forverts on weekends. He read Yiddish books and magazines, and attended YIVO lectures. My parents sang in a Yiddish chorus, and they enjoyed vacations at Camp Boiberik and at Workmen's Circle Lodge. Though he was concerned for the future of mameloshn, he was not authoritarian about imposing it on the family. English remained the language of the home even after it was known that the Holocaust had removed the reservoir of Yiddish speakers.

As the Second World War was coming to an end, Ben Stonehill set about to inspire his Jewish neighbors in Sunnyside Queens to start a secular Sunday morning school that they called The Jewish School of Sunnyside. It operated from fall 1945 to spring 1950.

In 1948, took on a project on his own to record over a thousand songs from Holocaust survivors, who were being temporarily housed in the Hotel Marseille on West 103 Street and Broadway. This entailed obtaining and lugging heavy recording equipment to the hotel lobby. Not only is his work important because of all the songs he collected, but in the act of recording, he was letting these refugees know that someone in America knew their language and cared about the world they had left behind.

My father's early death from cancer made it impossible for him to complete his project, but he managed to leave his legacy by donating the collection to the Library of Congress's American Folklife Center. The collection has been digitized by the Library and is now housed in the American Folklife Center, at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, the YIVO Institute and Yad Vashem. The New York City-based Center for Traditional Music and Dance has graciously offered space for this collection on its website: <http://www.ctmd.org/stonehill.htm>.

I believe my dad's motivation in recording Yiddish folksongs was his wish to follow in the footsteps of Ruth Rubin and Shmerke Katcherginski, about whom he spoke frequently. Preserving Yiddish culture was a form of resistance to the Nazi efforts to obliterate

the Jews from the face of the earth. My brother remembers that Ruth Rubin was once a dinner guest at our home.

Dad was a Yiddishist, a parent and a talented salesman. Recording equipment was obtainable. The song carriers were clustered in one building. It seemed to dad that everything was ready for song collection. It required only the appearance of someone with the initiative and determination to make the project a reality. The Stonehill family is immensely proud of him. Mir hobn dich libe, tateleh.