

# CHANA MLOTEK BIO

Chana was born in East New York, Brooklyn on April 9, 1922. Chana grew up in the North Bronx with her older sister, Malke Gottlieb, and their parents, two Russian immigrants who spoke Yiddish fluently; their father, Leo Gordon, a garment manufacturer, and their mother, Bessie Gordon, a seamstress. Chana studied piano with Jacob Helmann, a student of Hungarian composer Franz Liszt, and would later go on to develop her talents as a musician and educator at Camp Boiberik, a Yiddish culture camp in upstate New York, where she worked as music director and created Yiddish musical curriculum and programming for children. She attended the Yiddish high school of the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute and graduated from Hunter College with a B.A. in French and music in 1946.

Due to her excellent Yiddish, at the age of 22, Chana began working for Dr. Max Weinreich, co-founder of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, as his secretary, then later as the assistant to the research director. While at YIVO — then known as the Yiddish Scientific Institute — Chana founded and served as co-editor for the Y.L. Cahan Folklore Club, which published *Yidisher Folklor* (Jewish/Yiddish Folklore), a magazine which collected songs and research about composers and lyricists. In addition, she contributed to the first two volumes of Uriel Weinreich's compendium *The Field of Yiddish: Studies in Language, Folklore and Literature*. It was during this period that Chana was awarded a competitive scholarship to attend the first ever Yiddish linguistics and folklore classes at UCLA. By coincidence she had already met one of the other scholars, a young man named Yosl Mlotek, the previous summer at Rockaway Beach, where she had heard him playing Yiddish songs on the mandolin for a group of her friends. Reunited in California, the two lovers of Yiddish music began a romantic relationship. Shortly after their class at UCLA, Yosl was offered the position of education director for the Workmen's Circle in New York, where he joined his beloved Chana. They married in 1949. Two years later, on June 15, 1951, Chana gave birth to their first son, Zalmen Nosn, and four years later on August 8, 1955, she gave birth to their second son, Moish Mark Elchonen.

In 1968, Chana began publishing Yiddish songs, together with her sister, Malke Gottlieb, with the song book *Fin fun Tsvantsik Geto Lider* ("Twenty-Five Ghetto Songs"), through the Workers Circle, in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Her second collaboration with Malkhe came later in 1983, with their book *Mir Zaynen Do: Lider Fun Di Getos un Lagern* ("We Are Here: Songs of the Holocaust".)

In 1970, Chana and Yosl began writing a bi-weekly column for New York's *Yiddish Forverts* ("The Jewish Daily Forward"), and published over 2,000 Yiddish songs. Titled "Perl fun der Yiddisher Poezie" ("Pearls of Yiddish Poetry"), the highly regarded column brought the couple's unique Yiddish wisdom to a wide audience, and was the basis for their celebrated anthologies. In 1972, Chana published the first anthology of these songs, *Mir Trogn A Gezang*, which to date sold over 25,000 copies. And, in 1974, she published *"Perl fun der Yidisher Poezye* ("Pearls of Yiddish Poetry") in Tel Aviv.

Chana Mlotek returned to YIVO in 1978 on a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and in 1984, she became music archivist, a position she held for nearly three decades. Over the course of her illustrious career, Chana wrote over 20 essays, articles, and research papers on folklore, folk songs and poetry, and Yiddish literature in various journals. She published her last anthology Yiddish Folksongs from the Ruth Rubin Archive, with Dr. Mark Slobin, and released an English translation of her and Yosl's *"Perl fun der Yidisher Poezye"* ("Pearls of Yiddish Poetry") in 2007. Chana was the recipient of numerous Lifetime Achievement Awards, including her induction into the Hunter College Hall of Fame in 2009.

As an ethnomusicologist and folklorist, Chana once expressed that the Yiddish songs she disseminated were powerful stimulants to retrospection. "There's a song everybody loves." She wrote her first research paper on a song called "The Beard," in which a wife asks her husband why he cut off his beard because she no longer recognizes him. "I found it to be a poem by Mikhl Gordon from 1868," Chana said, "It went through many different translations and melodies. When a song is transmitted orally like that, it becomes folkloric."

Chana Mlotek was authoring her ninth book anthology up until her passing on November 4, 2013.

See also:

An interview with Chana Mlotek: ["Chana Mlotek's Oral History"](#).

[Rescuing Old Yiddish Songs from the Haze of Memories](#) (New York Times, 1997).