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## Synopsis

They say the Devil came to Lublin, Poland once, in the early spring of the year 1797 of the Christian calendar. For the Jews of Lublin, it was the month of *Nisan* in the year 5557.

There are two calendars because there are two Lublins: the Lublin of the Polish Catholics, who fear only God, the Devil, and their local nobleman, Count Sobieski – and the Lublin of the Jews, who fear everyone and everything, and with good reason. For despite having lived in Poland for hundreds of years, the Jews live every day in Lublin only by the grace of the Count's uncertain tolerance. The Jewish holiday of Passover nears and with it hangs the threat of violence.

It's happened before, in Lublin, and all over. Suddenly, in come the soldiers with the orders of eviction, and maybe a gang of angry peasants with torches – a pogrom – to pillage, rape or kill any Jews who don't get out fast enough. The Jews of Poland have plenty to worry about in 1797.

*Graf Sobieski* rules all of Lublin, but even within Lublin's Jewish community, there is a social hierarchy – perhaps successful businessmen like the butcher (and the butcher's wife) wield the most power, but it is the rabbi who is the community's spiritual leader. A poor, unmarried woman with barely two *groszn* to rub together, two unmarried daughters and an orphaned granddaughter to support would barely cling to the bottom rung of the social ladder.

"The Witches of Lublin" is a new radio drama coming in April. Co-written by Mythic Journeys™ Conference presenter Ellen Kushner with Elizabeth Schwartz and Yale Strom, the story is based on the true and little known history of klezmer musicians in Eastern Europe. Yale Strom's research disclosed that Jewish women (as well as men) were klezmer musicians in 18th century Europe. Here are two articles written in anticipation of the radio show. One is a synopsis announcing the show, and the other by Yale Strom introduces the history which inspired the radio show. The website is <http://www.thewitchesoflublin.com>.

## The Witches of Lublin:

A radio drama

by Ellen Kushner, Elizabeth Schwartz  
and Yale Strom  
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With music by Yale Strom

Directed and Produced by Sue Zizza



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Unless that woman were Rivke. Widowed, poor and struggling, yes, but Rivke is no ordinary woman. Daughter of the great Jewish mystic Reb Leyb Sora, sister to the rabbi's wife, weaver of lace, Talmud scholar and extraordinary musician, Rivke has struggled to maintain her little family under the most trying circumstances. It is her insistence that her daughters Leah and Sorele play music (as well as the men - better, in fact) and that her granddaughter Sofia sing that leads to the family's downfall. The women's talents, intellect, and spirituality only raise suspicious whispers in the Jewish community.

But the women's reputation as the best klezmer musicians in Poland spreads beyond the ghetto's boundaries. When the Count commands Rivke, her daughters and granddaughter perform at his son Bogdan's name day celebration, Rivke is faced with an impossible choice: Do as he commands and risk scandal, or refuse and risk the Count's revenge on the entire Jewish community - a pogrom.

No one could have anticipated the tragic love that heedlessly sows the seeds of disaster for Rivke and her daughters, that exiles Sophia from her people and that opens the very doors of heaven. But there is more to the legacy of Reb Leyb Sora than even those in the Jewish community could have anticipated, and as these witches reveal themselves to be holy women, they leave behind them a legend that cannot die.

"The Witches of Lublin" is based on true and little known history of klezmer musicians in Eastern Europe. Co-writer Yale Strom's research uncovered the facts that there were women klezmer musicians, and that when klezmers would play for gentile nobility, their reward could sometimes be beatings, death or even kidnappings. This history formed the springboard for this work of fiction by Strom, Schwartz, and Kushner based on Jewish women's lives in 18th Century Europe, klezmer music and feminist history, with a healthy dose of magical realism thrown in.

## Creativity in Captivity: The Research Behind "The Witches of Lublin"

By [Yale Strom](#)

While researching the klezmer musicians of Central and Eastern Europe for *The Book of Klezmer: The History, The Music, The Folklore* (A Cappella Books, 2002), I found two historical facts that helped inspire "The Witches of Lublin," a radio drama co-written by Ellen Kushner, Elizabeth Schwartz and myself: First, that there were rare klezmer ensembles comprised of women, and second, that there were occasional incidents when klezmers were kidnapped by their audiences in Poland.

As the klezmer developed from itinerant troubadour to significant *shtetl* personality (klezmer) from the 13th to 18th centuries, a number of catastrophic social and political forces occurring outside the Jewish community came to affect his music. Hysterical religious hatred fomented at the time of the First Crusade in 1096 caused thousands of Jews to seek safe haven in Poland. In the sixteenth century Martin Luther said: "If it is a mark of a good Christian to hate Jews, what excellent Christians all of us are!" The protection the Jews received from the Polish crown during the Black Plague of 1348-49 (during which Jews were blamed for poisoning the wells) saved many of them from being murdered. During the Thirty Years' War (1618-48) when Protestants and Catholics fought in Germany and the surrounding countries, Jews again fell victim to religious politics. Then, the greatest cataclysmic event for Jews (until the Holocaust) came: The Chmielnicki massacres of 1648-49, during which some 200,000 Jews were murdered by Ukrainian and Polish peasants. All of these events, and especially the Chmielnicki massacres, had adverse effects on the klezmer musician - traveling from gig to gig literally became a life-threatening activity. But the role of the klezmer was so essential to Jewish functional life, and financial and social stability was so uncertain, that klezmers had no choice but to continue to take any and all work they were offered. Most of the time, these experiences were happy ones - but sometimes, they went horribly awry.





One of the things Christians would do was to invite a klezmer band to play for a celebration (e.g., dance, wedding, etc.) and then, in lieu of payment, kidnap them and throw them into prison. The musicians were held for ransom. In captivity, these generally poor, itinerant klezmer musicians had to endure all kinds of mistreatment until their fellow Jews in their hometowns could collect enough funds to pay the ransom. Sometimes, punishment for not paying the ransom was forced conversion to Christianity. And sometimes, even after the ransom was paid, the klezmer musicians were forced to go to the baptismal font under threat of death. The life of the klezmer - even more precarious than his fellow Jews - was never dull and seemed to always hover on the brink of disaster. In creating the fictional world of "The Witches of Lublin" we not only referenced history, but honored the spirit of the lives of the klezmerim of 18th Century Poland.

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**Yale Strom** ([www.yalestrom.com](http://www.yalestrom.com)) is an internationally recognized authority on klezmer music and culture, and is a leading artist-ethnographer in the field. An award-winning author, musician, composer, photographer, playwright and filmmaker, he is also artist-in-residence in the Jewish Studies Program at San Diego State University.

*Klezmer music in the style of Moldavian klezmer from Yale Strom's CD, "Bread with Borsht Brothers," on the ARC UK label. The new CD will be out this fall. [www.yalestrom.com](http://www.yalestrom.com) All Rights Reserved. Reproduced with permission.*



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