

A BALLAD OF AUGUST BONDI

By Aaron Kramer

This ballad is being set to music by Serge Hovey and will be performed by the Jewish Young Folksingers, who commissioned this work as their contribution to the nationwide festivities honoring the tercentenary of Jewish life in the United States. The following are excerpts, accompanied by a synopsis of other sections.

I.

NARRATOR:

This happened a hundred years ago,
when the States—that lately had been a child
needing the milk of peace to grow—
suddenly jumped from their cradle, and smiled
a wicked smile, and pounced like a wild
beast upon infant Mexico!

That was a feast! When they'd had enough,
they flexed their muscles, and roared at the sun:
"Look at us now: we're big and rough.
Even *you'll* look puny before we're done:
more gold's in the rivers and hills we've won
than you at your shiniest ever showed off. . . ."

Rivers and hills: a luscious land
eager for ploughing, open to claim. . . .
The brander of slaves flew West, to brand
the bark of every tree with his name.
But, just as swiftly, another came
with seeds of freedom in his hand.

BALLADEER:

The streets of St. Louis looked busy and bright;
but Bondi, young Bondi, his smile wasn't right.
A wind from the river hissed into his ear:
"Say, friend! Aint'cha glad to be here?
The day I first met you, six winters ago,
how different your face was! The smile said Hello.
Now, year after year, you escape from this town
as though it were tracking you down. . . ."
The streets of St. Louis looked busy and bright;

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but Bondi, young Bondi, his smile wasn't right.
—The river ice cracking was so much like whips:
the sound of it twisted his lips. . . .

(Lament of slave woman heard, accompanied by sound of lash)

BALLADEER:

One morning in March, while he sat at his work,
he opened a paper that came from New York:
"Young men—are you anxious for freedom to win?
Then Kansas will welcome you in!
The ones who want whips to be heard in the West
are trooping in thousands to win the great test.
If Kansas is shackled, the world will cry shame.
Young men—will you stake the first claim?" . . .
Next morning young Bondi marched down to the
store,
bought two saddle-bags, and they asked him what
for.
Instead of an answer, he gave them a grin:
"Excuse me—I'd better begin!"
He stayed just a moment, to polish his gun,
then out he went, whistling, and winked at the sun:
"Be seeing you, pal, in a prettier sky!"
—Then bid Martha Bondi goodbye.

AUGUST BONDI:

There is a land of unbitten fruit,
brooks never waded across or raced,
sunlight and starlight going to waste,
soil without suckling, seedling or root.

It lies like a gift for the greedy to take.
At night the four winds carry its cry:
"Whatever you plant here will not die;
my life and my law are for you to make!"

I am greedy, mother, for such a soil.
Long enough we wander and weep,
driven away before we can reap
the golden harvests of our toil.

The wandering-time is over and done.
I yearn for that soil as it yearns for me.
What rises out of my husbandry
may make you happy to call me son.

Not so much the corn and the wheat,
the peach-trees neither, nor the cows—
but freedom, the frame of every house;
freedom, the stones on every street.

(When he names Kansas, and admits that he expects trouble there, Mrs. Bondi reminds him of other goodbyes. In March of 1848, at the age of 15, he had gone with her blessing to face the guns of Metternich in Vienna, and had lifted the first stone of the first barricade. "Moses' fire burns in you!" she had said.)

CHORUS OF FEARFUL FRIENDS:

Kansas? Is he out of his head?
Twenty-two's a young age to be dead . . .
Before he sows one kernel of wheat
they'll find his heart, and sow it with lead.

After one night without light, without heat,
after one week without milk, without meat,
after one month without roof, without bed,
he'll wish he never had left this street. . . .

MARTHA BONDI:

Because there's a rumbling when you listen to the
ground,
a rumbling from out of the West—
am I to hold my son back, safe and sound,
while others lunge to the test?

I—who made Freedom a childhood refrain
till it rang like a bell on his tongue—
shall I now strike those syllables out of his brain
as a fairy-tale word for the young?

Safe be your sons: the smith and the scribe,
the cantor, the counter of coins!
Safe with my son is the dream of our tribe:
safe in his arms, in his loins. . . .

CHORUS OF FEARFUL FRIENDS:

Kansas! The brooks there are running red.
Kansas! The grass there cries out to be fed.
Kansas! The blood of young fools is sweet!
August Bondi—are you out of your head?

MARTHA BONDI: There'll be trouble.

AUGUST BONDI: I've a gun.

MARTHA BONDI: Go, then. Go with God, my son!

II.

This section depicts, in the form of letters from Bondi to his mother, his early days as a settler in Kansas. First he encounters a large group of pro-slavery "ruffians" returning to Missouri after an invasion of the new Territory; they boast of their cruel exploits, and threaten the same treatment to all who oppose slavery. Then, one evening, alone on his claim, Bondi bakes Matzoh and celebrates the Passover.

Twenty "ruffians" gallop up to his cabin, ask where he stands on the issue of slavery and threaten to kill him when he calls himself a "free-soiler." Soon after, he meets four of John Brown's sons and allies himself with them. "Any time you let us know," they assure him, "we will come to your assistance. We are four brothers, all well armed." The section ends as he writes: "This time, mother, I sign the letter not only as your devoted son, but also—as a son of John Brown."

III.

Early in October 1855, thousands of Missourians invaded Kansas to stage another "election"—this time, for a representative to Congress. The free-state settlers boycotted the polls that day but on the 9th they conducted their own election despite threats of bloodshed. August Bondi left a sick-bed that frosty morning and insisted his friends drive him to the polls.

BALLADEER:

"Young man, you look bad; if you want to look worse
we'll take you—but mind, you'll come home in a
hearse!"

Said Bondi, "Let's go! I'll be fine in this coat.
We're here to vote free, and we'll vote!"

A wagon caught up with them. "Howdy!" "Good
day!"

Six Browns and a Brown-in-law sat on the hay.
And there, with his cavalry sword belted on—
plush cap, and revolver—sat John.

(Bondi was introduced to John Brown; they shook hands.
"What do you think of this land?" he asked.)

JOHN BROWN:

I met those at the border
who love the crack of whips.
Winds came from their lips:
"Our guns are loaded with thunder.
This year's storm arrives
on the lightning of our knives!"
Be patient, I whispered
to the rifles under the hay.
You will have your say.

I passed those on the highway
who brought a hope from far.
Pale and cold they are:
"Bolt the doors and windows
from friend as well as foe!
Keep the lanterns low!"
Be patient, I whispered
to the rifles under the hay.
You will have your say.

I found those trembling
in their tents, who were my sons,
—too weak to load their guns.
Did they not come here
to plough in freedom's name?
Where, then, is the flame?
The rifles are losing
their patience under the hay.
They must have their say!

BALLADEER:

His rifles said plenty. At blossoming-time,
John Brown was an outlaw, accused of a crime.
His kin lay in hiding, God only knows where,
their cabins deserted and bare.
On May 26th, looking weary and weak,
a lad stumbled into the camp by the creek.
"Come in, August Bondi!" called Brown to his guest,

"and hang up your gun with the rest!"

Another Jew, Weiner, and six of Brown's sons, and Townsley, a neighbor, had come with their guns. And though the few muskets looked foolish and worn, a mighty allegiance was sworn.

(Brown and his nine followers vow: "Yes, we'll stir at any sound of trouble, and march no matter where or when, and fight to the death for freedom, matching a thousand with our ten!" Soon a messenger from Prairie City brings word that a hundred Missourians are lurking in the woods, perpetrating much and threatening more. Brown's little band marches to the rescue, and sets up camp near Prairie City, waiting for the promised reinforcements. But day after day Captain Shore, head of the Prairie City militia, returns to Brown with the same tidings: "My men are just now very unwilling to leave home." Brown refuses to fight for the town unless its own men join him.)

BALLADEER:

On May 31st, Captain Shore galloped back:
"The enemy's gone into camp near Black Jack. They've raided Palmyra—our village is next. At last every settler is vexed. A prayer-meeting's called for tomorrow at ten; before the prayer's over, you'll have sixty men. Bring all your guns loaded, and fit for attack. There'll be a day's work at Black Jack."

(The following day, about 40 men of Prairie City agreed to support John Brown's attack on the pro-slavery camp at Black Jack, a grove of black jack oak trees besides a creek two miles away. At nightfall they entered the woods, planning to surprise the hundred Missourians, led by Henry Clay Pate, at daybreak.)

BALLADEER:

The first streak of dawn was a call to close ranks. With Captain Shore's company guarding their flanks, John Brown and his boys lunged ahead for the kill. Like daybreak they crested the hill. Below them, half-hidden by oak-trees, they saw the smirking battalions of order and law. "Now follow me, soldiers!" cried old Captain Brown; behind him they avalanched down. Before they had gone more than half of the way the guns of the enemy wished them good day. Three volleys resounded, three volleys in vain: they shook off the bullets like rain.

(Reaching the Sante Fe road, where the old washed-out wagon-tracks served as a trench, they looked back and discovered that none of the Prairie City men had followed them downhill, except Captain Shore. Brown's son-in-law was shot in the lungs and had to be led away. Then Carpenter, who'd brought the appeal from Prairie City in the first place, was wounded. A short while later Captain Shore squatted on the ground, announced that he was "very hungry" and walked off "to hunt up some breakfast." Then Townsley told them that he was "running out of

ammunition" and disappeared "to find some more." Brown made no effort to stop them; but rushed back and forth to encourage those who were left, urging them to "step it up." Through the spy-glass he could see that some of the enemy had been hit by the fire of his men, and a number were fleeing. "We must never allow that," he said. "We must try to surround them, and compel them to surrender!" Pointing to a hill south of the Missourians, he announced what seemed an impossible scheme: August Bondi, Theodore Weiner, and two others would follow him up that exposed hill, leaving seven at the Santa Fe road. If they could reach the top, the enemy would be surrounded.)

BALLADEER:

The grass of last summer still clung to that slope. It gave them some shelter, but not what they hoped. Growled Pate of Missouri: "I see through the glass five rattlesnakes stirring the grass." The bullets flew after them, gave them no rest. "Nu, Weiner," called Bondi, "*was meinen Sie jetzt?*" "Was soll ich denn meinen?" was Weiner's reply: "Sof odom muves."—All men die. "Wir machen ihn broges!"—Before he gets mad, we'd better catch up to the old one, my lad! They laughed at the bullets still buzzing around, and raced up the hill to John Brown.

(Pate's men were panic-stricken, imagining that a large force must be supporting the five on the hill. "I'm going ahead alone," said Brown. "If I wave my hat, you follow. I've told the others to join us at the signal.")

BALLADEER:

He walked twenty paces, and lifted his hat. The fighting free-soilers flew forward at that. Said Brown: "You'll surrender—no ifs, buts or ands!" The rifles slipped out of their hands. First Pate handed over his sword and his gun, then twenty-four followed his lead, one by one; then out of the bushes popped "brave" Captain Shore to carry the trophies of war. Then Pate turned his frown on a bullet-holed tree: "Don't anyone ever breathe Black Jack to me!" Said Brown: "You may hear of it once in a while!" and Bondi, young Bondi—he smiled.

NARRATOR:

At noon the shade they cast was small; but before the sun of that day rolled down, the oaks of Kansas arose so tall their shadow reached into Birmingham town; and from every branch the name of John Brown rang through the world like a thunderbird's call.

Some say (though proof would be hard to find) the roots of two young blackjacks grew quite fierce, and groped till they intertwined, like John Brown's hand, and the hand of the Jew; and, deep in free soil, those flaming two are everlastingly enshrined.

* "Nu, Weiner," called Bondi, "what do you think now?" "What should I think?" was Weiner's reply.