LEGENDARY VOICES

by

Cantor Samuel Vigoda

THE FASCINATING LIVES
OF THE GREAT CANTORS

Volume I



New York, N.Y. 10462

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LEGENDARY VOICES

Dedicated to the blessed memory of
my dear Parents,
Feiwel and Soroh Rifke Steinkritzer
and my martyred
Brother Joseph
and Sister Rachel
and her family,
whose lives were cut short by the
Nazi beasts in the gas chambers of
Auschwitz.

Adoshem Yinkom Domom.

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in convention assembled presents its

Tenth Annual

KAVOD AWARD

to

Hazzan Samuel Vigoda

in recognition of more than four decades devoted to Hazzanut as Hazzan and composer. His prayer songs and the scores of his colleagues who continue to sing them will keep his name forever enshrined in the hearts of all who love the music of the Synagogue.

May 6, 1969 • Iyar 18, 5729

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PRESENTED TO THE
VENERABLE DEAN OF CHAZZANIM

CANTOR SAMUEL VIGODA

WHO HAS STIRRED THE JEWISH WORLD WITH THE POWER & MAJESTY OF HIS INSPIRING VOICE & SOUL-HEARTENING MUSIC FOR MORE THAN A HALF-CENTURY. HIS CONTRIBUTIONS TO CHAZZANUT HAVE BEEN ALL-EMBRACING & TIMELESS & HAVE EARNED OUR HIGHEST ESTEEM

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Cantor Samuel Vigoda



The Vigoda Family

דרך צדקה ומצא חיים צדקה וכבוד

משלי כא כא

"He that pursueth Righteousness and Mercy shall find Life, Righteousness and Honor." Proverbs XXI, 21

First Hungarian Congregation

OHAB ZEDEK

Awards to

Mr. Cantor Samuel Vigoda

This testimonial, in appreciation of distinguished service rendered to the Congregation, and whose name has therefore been inscribed with honors upon the scroll deposited in the archives of the Synagogue.

In witness whereof this 1 day of Sept 192[illegible] we have inscribed our names and affixed the seal of the Congregation.

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RABBI

Mort Neuman — Marcus J. Federman
HONORARY PRESIDENT — PRESIDENT

[illegible] — Sigmund Hagenbuch
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ORGANIZED [illegible] NOV. 15, 1873

Countersigned David Berliner
FINANCIAL SECRETARY

FOREWORD and APOLOGIA

This Foreword, far from being a four-word thesis is more likely to stretch out to a length of several hundred words, and that is one of the reasons for my having added the word "Apologia" in the title.

It is a well known fact, a matter of record, that the Jewish people, even though "M'at Hakamus" insignificant in quantity, small in numbers, looms nevertheless pretty large in quality (Rav Hoeychus).

It cannot be denied that we have given to the world invaluable books, scholars, scientists, writers, inventors, artists, geniuses of all sorts and experts in all imaginable professions and crafts in infinitely greater proportion to our numerical strength, than have other much more populous and incomparably richer nations.

The same holds true of course in the field of vocal art. Here we are concerned only with the great exponents of the uniquely Jewish religious vocal art of Chazzanuth, which even though of old traditional origin and overlaid with the coat of patina of many centuries, is still fresh and glistening as the morning dew in the rays of the awakening sun.

In the following pages we propose to explore the interesting life stories of these titans of liturgical chants, who have become legends in their own lifetime and have by their momentous contributions, carved out for themselves a niche in the forefront of the Pantheon, the Hall of Fame of the immortals of the cantorial art.

These virtuosos had the common denominator of belonging to the category of shining stars, of big league caliber and towering stature in the galaxy of liturgical art. They were however operating on different wavelengths. None of them was a carbon-copy of any other. As the Hebrew saying so succinctly puts it: "Lo ro'uy zeh k'ro'uy zeh" (one was not comparable to the other).

Each one of these outstanding giants of vocal art had his own in-

dividualistic style, line, method, concept and approach. Each molded his songs in his own image, that was typical and characteristic of his musical personality.

They were trailblazers, who opened up new vistas, originated new sounds, broke new ground for fresh trends. But in doing his bit, each was using his own formula in a manner and fashion that best suited his own taste, his particular endowment and talent, and even though they possessed the gift of versatility, the unmistakable stamp of their identity and individual brand is clearly distinguishable on all their works.

It is only natural, that their exceptional excellence brought them considerable public acclaim and a great many tangible rewards.

But lest the reader conclude, that the sole purpose and goal of their activities was success, fame, plaudits, financial gain and personal aggrandizement, it should be remembered that had they chosen a career in secular music, they could've reaped much greater rewards and more accolades from a larger circle of admirers.

It reminds me of Moshke the "Arendar," who was the concessionaire of the "Kretchma" (saloon) of the village, which belonged to the "Kniaz" (count) of the district.

One day he was summoned to appear before the mighty nobleman. Just then he happened to be in a financial squeeze and in arrear in the remittance of the rentals, that were long past due to the lord of the village.

Now that he was called to the presence of the owner, he feared the worst. The Count will most likely jail him for nonpayment of the rent, take away his concession and who knows what other punishment mete out to the indigent Jew.

But contrary to his ominous expectations, when Moshke arrived at the palace he was escorted into the brilliantly lighted dining room, where were sitting at the tables princes, counts, barons and other members of the high echelons of the social-register caste — eating and drinking and making merry.

He was warmly greeted by the smiling host, who told him that when he recently happened to pass by the synagogue, he heard some singing emanating from the sanctuary. But from among all the voices one in particular sounded familiar to his ears.

"My curiosity aroused I entered," he continued, "and I saw you there standing near the Ark facing the worshipers with raised hands, leading the chanting of a tuneful melody which I liked very much. As you see we have a gay party going and I want you to sing the same song for my assembled guests. I'm sure they too will enjoy it."

The surprised and greatly relieved Moshke tore with great gusto into the melody of the "Duchenen" giving it all he was able to muster. His performance found favor with his audience and the grateful host rewarded his Moshke with a bag of gold ducats. No mention was made of his debt to the mogul.

Taking advantage of the favorable opportunity the shrewd arendar also passed the hat around the tables and the jovial, pretty tipsy gentry

showed their appreciation toward the singing Moshke by dropping coins and banknotes into the hat of the Court Jew.

When in the wee hours his worried wife saw her Moishe alive and unharmed return home in a hilarious mood she couldn't believe her eyes.

In answer to her questions Reb Moishe emptying out his bulging pockets and dropping a small fortune on the table to the astonishment of his totally confounded wife, blurted out, "Soshe Mindel, just imagine! For twenty years I have been "Duchening" (reciting the blessing of the "Kohanim" [priests]) for our Jews for nothing, and here I was asked to Duchen for the "goyim" and look what a reward I received for chanting it just one time."

That compared to what opera singers, crooners and other stage warblers are earning, the compensations received by even the prominent cantors are picayune (in the vernacular: peanuts) nobody can dispute. Consequently monetary reward as the motive for embarking on a career of Chazzanuth can be ruled out. It must then of necessity be some other than practical mundane considerations, some idealistic impulses that propelled the individual toward the least remunerative vocation: the overriding national interest.

It should be noted that the personal gains, even in intangibles like fame and glory, of the practitioners of the sacred vocation were as nothing compared to the immense pivotal benefit that accrued to "Klal Yisroeyl," the Jewish people at large from the effect of their heaven-granted talent.

They performed a double task in the service of the national interest. The Music of the Synagogue, which they purveyed, propagated and nurtured, was a considerably potent spur in the promotion, advancement and enrichment of Jewish cultural life.

But what is even more important, the chant of the cantor proved to be a very effective factor in lifting the depressed spirit and the sagging morale of our people in time of distress, misery, danger and despair.

Living as the dispersed Jews in the diaspora frequently did under precarious conditions in hostile, perilous surroundings, it was in great measure the reassuring voice of the "Chazzan", proclaiming in sincere, convincing heartfelt manner to the harassed worshipers, that the Almighty was watching over them, will not forsake them, singing of a brighter tomorrow, when evil would be banned from the earth and the Lord in his mercy will return to Zion and gather in the exiles from all corners of the globe, which was instrumental in infusing new hope into their troubled hearts and souls. "Chazzanuth" was not merely a profession, a vocation, a job. It was a holy trust, a sacred mission.

Throughout the dark centuries of the "Galut" it was the sweet singers of Israel, lifting their voices in the sanctuaries, who carried the message of a new dawn about to break on the wings of their prayerful chants to their hardpressed brethren, strengthening thereby their "Bitachon" (confident belief) in heavenly justice, that eventually would prevail.

At the same time the balmy impetus of their cantor's voice stimulated their steadfast determination and resolve not to sit idly by and wait for it

to happen, but rather to strive and work for the day, when the visionary dream and coveted goal of ultimate redemption would come to pass and to do everything in their power to bring it about.

This was the challenging task, that was entrusted to the "Shelichey Tzibur" and the loyal, faithful emissaries of the Jewish communities carried out their vitally important assignments with evangelic zeal, spirited verve and exemplary dedication.

Their contribution to the very survival of the Jewish people, the "Kiyum Ho'umoh" cannot be overestimated.

If Israel through the ages repeatedly singed and often almost consumed by the fires of persecution was able like a phoenix to rise again from its ashes, start a new life and go on to write a new glorious chapter in its history, these great masters of the religious chants had a hand in hastening the advent of that renaissance.

It is for that reason, that I have always felt that we, the Jewish people in general, and the members of the cantorial fraternity in particular, owe a debt, which is too long overdue to the great chazzanim of yore, who have faithfully served not only their own communities but the Jewish people as a whole in the glorious yesteryears and who have since gone to their eternal reward. They were a unique, highly gifted breed, the kind of which is unlikely to be seen in the future.

They have not been treated very kindly by the succeeding generations, as far as perpetuating their memories is concerned. In a broad national sense, their graves are still unmarked.

Their genius and art were enthusiastically acclaimed and drew deep admiration, applause, accolades and laurels from the beguiled audiences of their time. They were hailed, cheered, toasted, feted, adored, venerated and handsomely rewarded in their heydays. But in most cases their moments of glory and triumph were short-lived. They were neglected and ignored in their declining years, and all but forgotten once death stilled their voices. Some of them even became dependent on a dole in the twilight and sunset of their lives.

Not much has been done to keep alive their memory in an appropriate manner for future generations. Nothing of significance has been written, recorded or published about them since they were taken from the scene of their activities. The eventual fate of most of them seems to have been, and continues to be inevitable gradual oblivion. Even for the most famous among them, there is hardly more available in print than bare, dry biographical data, condensed into a few lines. The sum total of the processed material that does exist, barely scratches the surface. They surely do not deserve such disinterest and indifference on our part. They were once the heroes of the crowd. They made cantorial history, for according to the definition of Carlyle, history is the story of people and is made by individuals, gifted, inspired personalities of great ability, passion, ambition and drive, chosen by destiny. It is the end product, the sum total of the activities and achievements of these outstanding influential figures, the "avant guard", who can always be found where the actions take place,

who invariably are seen marching at the head of the class, leading the procession playing the role of the initiators, the leading spirits of the pertinent happenings, the decisive, innovative steps and path-breaking movements designed to shape the future of their chosen fields of endeavors in their characteristic mold. They were phenomenons, who sparked, inspired their fellowmen, elevated their spirit and carried them on the wings of their memorable songs to dizzying emotional heights. They gained enviable reputations, legions of fans and devoted followers. The masses flocked in droves to their services and concert appearances. There they sat on the edge of their seats agitated, excited, enthralled, listening as if in a trance to their magnificent voices with worshipful awe and grateful appreciation. Their music was infectious and irresistible.

Yet once their voices were muted, little interest has been shown in keeping fresh the memory of the once idolized bards, who gave the people so much pleasure and enjoyment. No one has so far felt the urge to relate the full story of their interesting lives, to paint the contours of their distinguished personalities and to preserve their memories for posterity. There surely ought to be a place in our libraries for a detailed account of their artistic development, their evolution, their struggles for recognition, their great achievements and their significant and lasting contributions to the treasured musical heritage of their people.

Surely they will go down in history as the builders of a substantial element of the culture of the Jewish community, and the beautifiers of its religious life. In all justice, an appropriate monument to them should be erected, at least in words and records, that will endure for all time. They made history, for the history of the cantorial profession is the sum total of the activities of its leading, outstanding personalities, and it is a truism that we can successfully chart the course of the future only if we study and try to learn the lessons of the past.

The task is not an easy one and no doubt beyond the capacity of any one individual. This author is not so vain and presumptuous as to think that his present feeble effort is the answer that will effectively remedy the omission of generations. Martin Luther once said, that any individual who undertakes to write history must be very courageous and according to Voltaire history is nothing but a pack of tricks we play on the dead. I am not that brave and I have no tricks up my sleeve. But at least it is a modest beginning and in the words of Rabbi Tarphon, "Lo olecho hamelocha ligmor" (It is not incumbent upon thee to complete the task). But on the other hand, "Velo ato ben chorin lehiboteyl mimeno" (Neither art thou free to desist from it altogether).

Fascinated as I was by the colorful lives led by the outstanding figures of our calling, who had achieved worldwide fame, I felt dutybound to do some research and commit to paper what I succeeded in finding out about them. I wanted to know and to learn as much as possible about every phase of their careers. But my search yielded very little. Since there are available only very meager sources from which to draw, I was obliged to gather most of my material through conversations with venerable, old

gentlemen, who were kind enough to share with me their recollections of their youth. Many among them sang in the choirs of their cantors and knew them personally. Others heard them chant the prayers or related what they heard and had learned from their parents and different reliable authentic sources. Some of them I was able to interview personally, from others I received tidbits by mail.

There was of course no foolproof way of checking the accuracy of all the information that came into my possession in this manner. But then everyone who attempts a pioneering work, faces a similar difficulty and must of necessity use and rely on whatever means are available to him. I did however try, as best as I knew how, to separate chaff from grain, applying every reasonable discriminating criteria. In addition, I pored over and waded through a mass of old, yellowed newspapers, from which I gathered some pertinent data. Incidentally I endeavored also to capture some whiffs of the atmosphere of the respective periods. I also included some episodes and anecdotes that at first glance may strike the reader as purely personal and immaterial. But according to Plutarch one can often tell more about a man's character and his "weltanschauung" (philosophy) from some playful action than from his momentous public deeds.

From the nature of the manner in which I gathered this material, it follows that it came to me in an unorganized, irregular, haphazard fashion, without system and order. I processed the material and a considerable number of articles were published in the *Jewish Daily Forward.* I subsequently rewrote them in English and they are here presented in the same sequence as they were printed in Yiddish, quite naturally still suffering from the exigencies and flaws of the serial format.

Sometimes after having written about a certain cantor, I subsequently came into possession of additional data bearing on his life and career, and I had the opportunity to include the newly acquired information in a later article when I met up with him again in another city. As a result, some of the biographies are incomplete in any one place and are presented in a piecemeal fashion, and to get the complete picture the reader will be obliged to fit together the pieces interspersed in different sections of the book, somewhat like a jigsaw puzzle. Fortunately these flaws are confined to only a few cases and to the individuals dealt with in the early chapters.

I found it impractical to completely rewrite and regroup the chapters in order to eliminate these few isolated instances of multiple treatment. I hope that it will not seriously inconvenience the reader.

There were, of course, many more prominent personalities of our sacred craft, with sufficient credentials, that would entitle them to be part of an all-star team of great cantors and whose pen portraits undoubtedly deserved to be included in this book. However, for several obvious reasons, chiefly lack of sufficient data and space, I had to confine myself to the most outstanding figures of preeminent stature and then only to those, whose blissful activities fell within a certain, admittedly arbitrarily chosen, limited time period. The epoch covered in the following pages runs roughly from about the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the

present century, in the course of which time span Chazzanuth really came of age. I included some episodes of human interest, candid camera shots of the men with their guards down. These revealing instances may help the reader understand better the motives behind the actions of the individual.

In choosing my subjects from among the great galaxy of eminent representatives of the cantorial fraternity, I applied but one criterion. I was persuaded that I could not possibly do better than to be guided in measuring greatness by the yardstick recommended by our sages of the Talmud, who advised, "Pouk chazy mah amo d'var," (Go out and see what the people are saying).

The same thought is expressed in the adage "Kol Hamon k'kol Shadday", the voice of the crowd is the voice of the Lord.

In deciding who was to be considered a truly famous chazzan, I had to assume that it was the one whom John Q. Public, the masses, selected for their idol and upon whom they heaped their adulation. This may not always be a very just procedure or an incontrovertible evaluation. In many cases, it tends to discriminate against a better qualified but unostentatious, modest and therefore unheralded individual in favor of one, who does not possess nearly as many virtues but far from being a shrinking violet is flamboyant and aggressive.

I read somewhere, that life is a lottery. Only very few are winners. Among the losers there are many, who possess much greater virtues and merits than the lucky acclaimed winners, but they remain unknown, due to the quirk of chance, fate, hard luck and unfavorable circumstances. Whereas people often gloss over the flaws of the lucky individuals, nobody seems to notice the virtues of the "shlemazel." But by and large, in this far-from-perfect world, the instinct and opinion of the plain, unsophisticated folks the "vox populi" has proven to be a pretty reliable barometer. The general public may be a capricious and fallible arbiter, but it is probably the least fallible of any kind and in the long run the only one that really matters.

As to the sequence, I found it practical to employ the method of grouping the cantors according to the large Jewish centers, where they functioned and where they gained fame. This supplied me the excuse for writing about a cantor more than once, if he touched several bases.

This then admittedly is far from being a perfect work, but it is the fruit of a labor of love and not biased, slanted, retouched or doctored in any way. I present it in unvarnished form, warts, pockmarks and all. Nobody can of course muster Olympian detachment, but I tried my best to treat the material herein presented objectively.

I'm launching this first volume with humility and trepidation, knowing full well my limitations and shortcomings, fully aware of the inadequacy of the material that I had managed to acquire and of the manner in which I made use of it.

There is a Chinese proverb which says, that a journey of even as much as a thousand miles begins with a lone one step. Similarly it is true, that the largest edifices are built one brick at a time. And as a Hebrew proverb has

it "Kol Hascholos Koshos" (all beginnings, start-ups are difficult), it is the first initial pioneering step that is the hardest to take. I made bold to take that first step by attempting to contribute a few bricks to the structure yet to be built.

Someone has to start the ball rolling. Someone has to go in and set a spark. Others will usually follow and drop a log on the fire.

I can only hope that others, better equipped for the task will by my hesitant step be encouraged and induced to carry forward the project, by making a more exhaustive study of the subject matter and proceeding to write a comprehensive all-embracing work, that will do full justice to the memory of the great stars of liturgy, whose genius gave a spiritual uplift to countless souls of their contemporaries and the waves of whose precious contributions keep exerting their fruitful influence to this day.

It is my firm belief, that the great virtuosos of chants who streaked across the horizon like brightly shining comets, the glowing lustre of which so brilliantly lighted up the sky of the world of Chazzanuth did possess within them the sturdy potentiality of continuing to illuminate and enrich it for all times to come, if only we and the generations of the future will do our bit to keep fresh and alive their blessed memory.

In conclusion let me cite the wise words of Reb Nissen the Scribe. One day his wife Miriam Channah sent him to the marketplace to buy a milk-cow, preferably a Holstein or a Jersey.

After shopping around at the country fair, the great scholar finally settled on a seemingly suitable cow and having thus duly fulfilled the assignment entrusted to him by his better half, Reb Nissen in a self-satisfied mood trotted home with the fine-looking animal in tow.

Losing no time Miriam Channah grabbed a pail and ran out to the barn, where the newly quartered tenant was already lustily munching hay in the trough, to milk her. But in no time at all she was back blazing with fury and dangling the still empty pail before the eyes of her nonplussed husband, "To hell with you both, you old goat and your damn cow," she was shrieking. "What is the matter?" asked Nissen. "Just look at him, the innocent lamb," she thundered in a shrill voice. "He is yet asking, what is the matter!" "Why! your precious cow doesn't want to give me even one drop of milk."

Shaking his head in disbelief, the puzzled Reb Nissen pondered the problem and finally meekly suggested: "Maybe you don't know how to go about milking her. Let me have a try."

With this he took the pail and went forth to woo the reluctant cow. But he too met with little success, returning with the pail in his limp hand, empty as before.

But far from being apologetic, he rather went on the offensive, sternly rebuking his wife, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Miriam Channah," he was lecturing his mate. "How could you say that the cow doesn't want to give any milk? Believe me my dear, to give she wants but poor thing, how can she, when she hasn't got any?" The same goes for me. If this small contribution of mine falls short of the expectations of the

kind reader, it is not, believe me, for lack of willingness on my part. I would've been only too glad to present a more adequate work, if only I could've done so.

THE AUTHOR

CHAPTER 1

YOSSEL BASS

Do you know Yossel Bass of the world of Chazzonut? He was a "meshorer" *(choirboy) under Rozumny, Minkowsky, Nisi Belzer and Yeruchem Hakoton — For a time he was also a cantor — Yossel Bass is an inexhaustible well of reminiscences, a gifted raconteur.*

I do not know about you, but I love to listen to anecdotes about the legendary cantors of Russia, Poland, Bessarabia, Galicia, Austria, Germany and Hungary, who lived fascinating lives and were in the center of pulsating activity primarily during the 2nd half of the nineteenth and the first half of the 20th century, when the cantorial art was thriving and prospering in those regions as well as in the new world. As no doubt have many others, I, too, heard in the course of my years in the profession scores of tales about these giants of "Tefilah" (prayer) and "Neginah" (song).

According to the wondrous descriptions one hears, it would seem that to these outstanding figures could also be applicable the relative appraisal and comparative estimate of the "amorah" (latter day sage) Rabbi Zeyra in the name of Rabbi Rovoh Bar Timonah, who declared: "Im rishonim b'ney malochim, onu b'ney anoshim, v'im rishonim b'ney anoshim onu k'chamorim, velo kechamoro shel chanino ben doso oh kechamoro shel pinchas ben yoir." (Talmudic tractate *Shabos* 112) "If our predecessors were descendants of angels, we may consider ourselves human beings, but if they were only human beings, then we are nothing but asses and not even as clever as was the ass of Chanino Ben Doso or of Pinchas Ben Yoir." In other words, listening to the extraordinary attributes, which these enthusiastic old-timers ascribe to the great cantors of yore, one comes to think of them as supermen, who were endowed with unbeliev-

able, wondrous or even quasi-magical powers.

In most cases, these stories may not be wholly objective and credible, being that they do not come from first-hand knowledge. One usually recounts what he heard from another, from his father or grandfather, and in the process of handing down recollections much is added to the original version, its authenticity thus becoming highly questionable. It is very seldom that one hears unadulterated and entirely dependable episodes from the life of the great masters from the mouths of individuals who knew them personally and had intimate contacts with them.

Such a rare opportunity was afforded me on the past Passover festival. I spent this holiday of redemption in a hotel of a resort village on the Atlantic Ocean in the State of New Jersey. Among the singers of the choir, which assisted me in leading the devotional services and the "Seder" ceremony, was also Yossel Bass who is a fixture of our liturgical world and a raconteur of note of cantorial lore. His leonine booming sonorous voice was the envy of all singers. He could have made a great career in opera, but he chose the synagogue.

It is perhaps entirely superfluous to introduce this veteran and to describe him. I doubt very much that there could be found anyone among the cantors, choir leaders, synagogue-singers, and Jews generally who have any kind of connection with music, and particularly vocal music who would not know him or of him. Is there a cantor of any consequence, a leader worthy of the name, with whom Yossel Bass at one time or another has not been connected? Is there a synagogue or a temple in the whole of New York and vicinity, and cities in other states within a radius of hundreds of miles, where the thunderous booming voice of "Yossel" has not yet been heard? Years back it really was something to behold, a phenomenal instrument of rare proportions. But even today when he is already way past the proverbial age of three score and ten and his voice had inevitably lost some of its gleam and sheen and his eyes also do not serve him so well any longer, he still has enough of the mighty power and lustre left in his voice to make him one of the best bassos of the cantorial world.

In short, Yossel Bass, is a well-known figure in Jewish life. With his heavy, bear-like strut and his tall, broadboned, heavyset figure, he strongly reminds one of "Chone Der Bavuster" (Chone, the well-known). In years gone by, this odd character played the role of a public nuisance, a disturbing interloper at public assemblies, who took himself seriously and used to make things lively with his repeated loud interrupting critical remarks and caused outbursts of laughter with his droll antics at Zionist conferences and congresses.

But in contrast to the rough, outspoken and unpolished manner of the latter, Yossel is of a mild, modest, retiring, unassuming nature, a learned, pious and observant Jew. With his unusually large facial features and wide dark large dreamy eyes and bushy brows, he looks like a relic out of the past, left behind from ancient generations, a ghost, who has just come to life and walked out from the picture frame that is hanging on the wall.

In our hotel, Yossel soon became very popular. He immediately attracted general attention with his patriarchal appearance. Many among the guests recognized him from having seen and heard him in their respective houses of worship. Wherever he was sighted, there invariably people would gather around him. Yossel, reveling in the limelight, did his best to entertain the men and women, who listened eagerly to his interesting stories and songs.

The weather happened to be not very cooperative. The sky was overcast and it was too cold to take a stroll on the boardwalk or to sit in the rocking chairs, which ringed the veranda and were also placed around the deserted swimming pool, and wait for the sun to emerge from under the clouds and infuse with its rays a little color into the pale faces of the vacationing big city dwellers. Even when the sun shone, it was only for a few fleeting moments and the warmth which she radiated was like that of a stepmother's. No wonder therefore, that the guests preferred to stay indoors and spend their leisure time in the well-heated lobby.

People sat around for hours at a time, bored and restless. There was nothing much to do but wait for the sound of the bell, which was signaling that it was feeding time again, for a change, and the esteemed public is requested to begin another march to the beckoning dining room.

Like all the other guests, I was also sitting on the comfortable, soft sofa in a corner of the spacious lobby at a loss to know what to do next. I was resting up after I had put away a seven-course (or was it eight?) meal, and from sheer boredom and under the influence of the relaxing, lulling, pleasant heat that pervaded the air, my eyelids drooped. I was in a state of semi-consciousness, alternately napping and awakening, when Yossel, in search of an audience, sat down near me and began his droning narration, talking about some of the high points of his life. He recalled, with nostalgic sighs interspersed now and then, some incidents about the great cantors of yore, in whose choirs he used to sing.

And when Yossel starts to narrate his tales and warms up to his topic, you are not likely to feel sleepy any longer. You cock your ears, for there is plenty to hear. He not only repeats hearsay information, what he heard at second hand, but mostly he reminisces about episodes and happenings that he himself was a part of, which he himself had experienced, saw with his own eyes and heard with his own ears.

In the course of his long and colorful career, he spanned several generations and crossed several continents. From the earliest days of life, he was very active, making the rounds as the sidekick of the different cantors, being constantly the pawn in the tug-of-war going on between them. One cantor stole him away from the other. Luckily for them, in those years there was no law prescribing the death penalty for kidnapping, as we now have on the books.

But before we recount the interesting tales which Yossel Bass related with such gusto, let us first enumerate the names of the numerous famous cantors under whom he served his apprenticeships. The long list includes nearly all the great masters of world renown of that era. A native of Kar-

patch, Bessarabia, he began his singing career by enlisting in the chorus of Shmuel Shreiber of Yedinetz. There followed periods of extensive service under the tutelage of Itzikel Shkolnick Kamenitzer, Avrohom Kalechnick in Kishinev, and Moshe Achler, who was a traveling cantor and who wandered all over Galicia with his choir.

Yossel finally landed in Berditchev as a soloist in the chorus of Yeruchem Hakoton, who was so impressed by his talent that he nicknamed him "Yossel Solaway" (canary). Some years ago, a Yiddish theatre in New York produced a play entitled "Yossele Solaway" based on a story of "Sholem Aleychem", which had a plot resembling his life story.

At the insistence of his parents who lived in Belz, he returned home and sang in the choir of Isser'l Belzer. Soon, however, he was called back to Berditchev, this time to join the opposite camp of Nisi Belzer, who managed to keep Yossel for three years.

But the inevitable happened again. Yossel was known to be an outstanding singer. Being a "rare bird," he was the target of covetous eyes and was bound to be lured away eventually. Needless to say, he was kidnapped and brought to Wilna, where he became a member of Cantor Kahan's choir. But the cavalcade of larceny did not stop there. From Wilna he was stolen and brought to Lemberg to join the choir of Boruch Shorr and, in turn, to complete the circle, he was abducted once more and was on his way back to his old boss and master, who was constantly on the road, Moshe Achler. After a tour de force along the lanes of the countryside, Achler succeeded in landing a steady position in Zsalkow, where he was at last able to rest on his laurels.

Yossel's voice was now at the stage of undergoing the physical changes of puberty that put him out of commission. He went into the produce business and was entrusted with the task of accompanying a transport of grain-filled wagons to Odessa. Taking advantage of the opportunity of having managed to reach the big city, which at that juncture enjoyed the distinction of being regarded as the main center of Jewish liturgical music, he forgot all about the mission, which brought him to Odessa in the first place and he auditioned for Yakovkin, the choirmaster of Rozumny, who engaged him immediately.

He was lured away from Rozumny by Yankel Drohobitcher, who brought him to Kremenitz. After tarrying with this cantor for a short while, he decided that it was about time for him to strike out on his own. He set out on a tour, singing here and there, making guest appearances in the synagogues of different villages and hamlets, earning a few rubles in the process, but he was not accomplishing anything. No congregation would think of taking on a young man as their cantor, as long as he was single.

Since there was no prospect of his landing a cantorial position soon, he went back to Nisi Belzer and asked him to give him back his former place in his chorus. The master was reluctant to grant his request, saying that since he was already a cantor, he did not belong in a choir any longer. Yossel, however, did not give up easily. He persisted in expressing his

determined desire to be taken on by the great authority in the cantorial art. He asked only to be allowed to take part in a single Sabbath service, after which he would abide by his former mentor's decision. Nisi relented, agreeing to let him sing on the following Sabbath. When Yossel sang the solos of "Rosh Chodesh bentchen" (the blessing of the new moon), the worshipers were visibly stirred and deeply impressed. Nisi gave it as his opinion, that Yossel was a second "Nochum Matenko", who in years gone by had been the most brilliant gem in Nisi's choir. Needless to say that after such an auspicious debut, there was no question of him letting go of such a great acquisition. Yossel remained a fixture of Nisi's choir for the next six years, right up to the last moments of the famous cantor's life.

Even the death of the master did not cause Yossel to sever his connection with the choir. When a successor to Nisi was chosen in the person of Meyer Pisack, one of his former pupils, who was brought from Yelisovetgrad to take over the orphaned pulpit of the old-city synagogue of Berditchev, Yossel continued in his post and served for a time under the new cantor.

But once again the strong lure of Odessa finally overcame his loyalty to Nisi's choir. He transferred his activities to the Broder Synagogue of that city. He sang in the choir of David Novakowsky and in addition also filled the role of assistant cantor to Pinye Minkowsky right up to the outbreak of World War I, in 1914.

After Yossel left his post he reverted again to the role of independent cantor. By this time, he not only was a married man but also a father, so no handicap stood in the way of getting appointed to a regular, steady position. Berditchev, Belz and Bucharest were his next stations where he held down cantorial positions successively. But as things were getting rougher and conditions were deteriorating day by day in the aftermath of the world war what with the outbreak of pogroms and the constantly brewing revolutionary upheavals, he saw no point in staying in the devastated and impoverished countries where, to make matters worse, danger and hunger stalked the streets.

As soon as he was able to make the necessary arrangements, he grasped the opportunity to emigrate to the golden land. He arrived in America in 1922. It was a time when cantors were at a premium and it was no problem for him to get placed. He accepted a cantorial position in Providence. For a while he served in the same capacity in other cities, but once again he switched over to the role, in which he always had been most comfortable, that of part of an ensemble. He became a chorister in the singing group under the baton of Oscar Julius and Cantor Yossel reverted again to Yossel Bass.

His family name is Sternberger but nobody ever calls him by that monicker. Two of his sons, Harold and Sam Sternberg are members of the Metropolitan Opera Chorus.

Harold is married to Freydele Oysher, a well-known singer of Yiddish, Hebrew and Cantorial chants. She is the sister of the famous late Moyshe Oysher, actor and cantor.

Their daughter Marilyn Michaels made it big on the stage both as a singer and mimic, copying the style of well known musical personalities.

Having thus given the main outlines of Yossel Bass's own life story, we can proceed to relate what he had to say about the world famous cantors, whose life path he was privileged to cross in the course of his career.

CHAPTER 2

BERDITCHEV — THE CRADLE OF CHAZZANUTH

The first stop on our stroll down memory lane in which to join us, we would like to invite you, is Berditchev, a small town in the Wholin Gubernia of Ukraina.

Originally it was an integral part of Poland's Eastern Galician province. Not until the third and final dismemberment of Poland between the great powers of the holy alliance in 1792 and the subsequent division of the spoils of war, was Ukraina incorporated into Russia and along with it Berditchev too fell under the heel of the Tsarist regime.

At first it belonged to the Gubernia of Zsitomir, but later it became part of the Gubernia of Kiev. A great boon for the city were the fairs. As early as 1765 great county fairs were held in Berditchev, in accordance with ordinances of the Polish government under the jurisdiction of which regime the city belonged at that juncture as part of Eastern Galicia.

Farmers, merchants and consumers from far and wide would converge on the town to display and peddle their wares and to acquire some essential new supplies with which to restock their depleted inventories.

Berditchev could of course not compare with cities like Odessa, Kishinev, Warsaw and Wilna in size or population. But what it lacked in "Kamuss" (quantity) was amply compensated for and complemented in her case by the measure of the spiritual values, the "Yiddishkeit," the genuine Jewish atmosphere that reigned in her midst in contrast to the above mentioned large cities which, even though their Jewish population was considerably larger, were "Butel B'shishim", got almost lost in the "goyish" environment. Berditchev was the archetype of an overwhelm-

ingly Jewish town.

The prestige of the city was in no small measure enhanced by the stroke of good fortune of having been privileged to have had as its spiritual leader the great "Meylitz Yosher", protagonist of his people, the untiring advocate of justice, Reb Leyvi Yitzchok ben Soroh, who made Berditchev famous with his arguments and disputes with the Lord on behalf of his flock.

Saintly rabbis stated that Reb Leyvi Yitzchok's soul was the gilgul, the reincarnation of the martyr Rabbi Akivah.

Prior to coming to Berditchev and gracing the pulpit of the synagogue adjoing the central old city House of God, he occupied the rabbinical post in the city of Zselichov, where however he was shabbily treated allegedly because of his chassidic views and perhaps also because of his outspoken nature practically driven out of the town by the unbearable chicanery of evil men. In their blind hatred and wickedness they let a rare jewel slip out of their grasp. Their foolish mistake and blunder resulted in an immeasurable gain for Berditchev.

Reb Leyvi Yitzchok Berditchever vowed that when he'll die and his soul will ascend to heaven he'll refuse to enter the "Gan Eyden" until his plea that the Messiah shall come and redeem the Jewish people from the bitter "Galut" will be answered. However, his resolve availed him nothing. On arrival at the portal he was by force pushed into the Paradise by the angel standing guard. In reply to his demand, he was told that the time was not yet ripe for the coming of the "Moshiach."

And lastly, and by no means leastly, for it is of the most interest to us, Berditchev was the hothouse of the unadulterated tradition-true "Chazzanut." In its fertile soil and favorable religion-saturated atmosphere it was nurtured, it blossomed and bore richly flavored fruit. A city so greatly dominated by Jews (and in the overwhelming majority pious Jews), naturally was bound to have a great number of houses of worship. Each such holy edifice had to have a cantor.

To mention but a few, there was the "Zagrabelner Shule", the "Klatke Shule" and the Synagogue of the "Stolyares" (carpenters) and several 'Kloizes'.

But the two largest and pre-eminent sanctuaries were the Old City Centrə[1] Synagogue and the Choralna Synagogue of the new section of Berditchev and it was naturally these two Houses of Worship where reigned the great masters of the liturgical chants, whose blessed activities set the tune and whose influence was felt not only throughout the land but far beyond its boundaries.

There was a legend going the rounds about the origin of the central synagogue of the old section of Berditchev, which was generally called "Reb Liber's shule".

The story goes, that the saintly Reb Liber, one of the disciples of the "Baal Shemtov", the founder of "Chassidism" would, seeking "Hisbododot" (solitude), habitually go out into the forest, where he would be able to concentrate and meditate, without any likelihood of be-

ing disturbed.

One afternoon while strolling in the fields immersed in his thoughts, he suddenly woke up to the fact that the hour was getting late, the sun was about to set and it was time for him to recite his "Mincha" (evening) devotional rite.

He proceeded at once to say his prayers. He was in the midst of the "eighteen blessings" (Shmona Essrah) when the equipage of the Count Radzivil, to whom belonged the whole region, rolled by the spot, where he was standing and fervidly praying.

Intrigued by the sight of the lone character with his eyes closed swaying back and forth, oblivious of the world around him, the nobleman descended from his carriage and addressing the bearded stranger he demanded to know, what he was doing in that out-of-the-way surrounding.

Unperturbed, Reb Liber continued to pray as if he didn't hear the question. How could he give any reply to the "Poritz" (magnate) when he was at that moment standing in the presence of the most powerful "Poritz", his father in heaven and addressing him? He was reciting the "Shmona Essrah", during which it is strictly forbidden to utter any unrelated secular word, let alone idle chatter.

Incensed by the unheard of "Chutzpah" of the "Pirshivi zsid" who did dare to ignore him and not deign to even give him an answer, he ordered his driver to administer to the insolent Jew thirty lashes on his bare behind, with his "Nagayka" (whip with tails).

But no sooner did the count arrive at his palace, than he fell ill with a strange malaise, the nature of which eluded all the called-in physicians. Even the most expert specialists were unable to diagnose what ails much less cure the patient.

As he grew weaker by the hour and the suspicion that the doctors had given him up made him feel already as a goner, the thought flashed suddenly through his feverish mind, that the misfortune that had befallen him might perhaps be in punishment for the cruel act, which he had committed against the pious Jew.

More and more the thought became an obsession with him. He now felt for sure, that the only person in the world who could take the curse off him was the man whom he had so badly mistreated.

Emissaries were dispatched to find Reb Liber and bring him to his bedside. "Forgive me saintly Rabbi", the count implored him. "It was a dastardly crime on my part to have you mishandled in my anger. I deeply regret it and I am saying 'mea culpa.' I'll do anything to atone for my cruel act. Whatever you want me to do, just say the word and it'll be given to you. Anything at all and it shall be done".

"I don't want anything for myself", humbly replied Reb Liber. "Vengeance is far from my heart and I forgive you sincerely. All I would like from you would be, that when God Almighty will answer my prayers, send you a "Refuah Sheleymu" (complete healing) and you will become fully recovered from your ailment you shall in your kindness have a house

of worship built at the very spot, where I suffered the indignities of being whiplashed."

True to his pledged word Count Radzivil had the forest cleared and a holy edifice erected, around which soon a whole large and ever growing Jewish settlement sprang up, which became known as the city of Berditchev.

CHAPTER 3

YERUCHEM HAKOTON AND NISI BELZER, TWO OF THE GREATEST CANTORS OF THE LAST CENTURY

The versatility of their art and the colorful traits of their personality — How Nisi became a cantor — His wife's uncle, Yeruchem, insulted him — How their feud began — Facts and legends from their lives.

In the introductory chapter, I related how a chance meeting and chat with a veteran chorist inspired me and gave me the incentive to attempt setting down some of the interesting characteristics and historically significant episodes from the lives of the renowned cantors who lived and labored in the vineyard of the Lord in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Actually I toyed with the idea for years that it would be worthwhile to acquaint the Jewish reader with the personalities and the far-reaching accomplishments of these eminent figures of the liturgical field, but although I could not abandon the idea, I did put it off time and again, primarily for the simple reason that I lacked sufficient first-hand information of the kind which only men like Yossel Bass, who lived many decades in intimate contact with these legendary leading lights, were able to give me.

He supplemented my skimpy store of knowledge and, so to say, filled in to a certain extent the gaps in the meager treasure of pertinent data,

which I had managed to acquire about the past of our cherished holy profession and about its representative practitioners, in the absence of any kind of adequate literature on the subject.

This fresh source broadened my horizon and furnished some missing information which supplied the needed impetus to realize and at long last carry out my planned project. I will endeavor to present a more or less rounded and comprehensive picture of the sacred calling, as it appears to have been in vogue in those eras, as far as I'll be able to reconstruct its faded outlines on the basis of the extremely scant recorded history, almost dry wells, that have come down to us from the ancient times.

In spite of the long-established fact that "Chazzonuth" is a time-honored, very ancient "meleches hakodesh" (sacred craft), we know very little about its origin. So let us concern ourselves only with the not so distant past.

In the course of the years, there arose and crystallized out of the ferment two cardinal systems, distinct schools of thought, that differed from each other in method, line and characteristic approach, the main representative centres of which were on the one hand Berditchev and on the other, Odessa.

Berditchev, a city of pious and strictly religious, observant Jews, where the great "Meylitz Yosher," (advocate of righteousness) the apologist for the Jewish community, Reb Leyvi Yitzchok Berditchever, held his famous disputes with God Almighty and so eloquently pleaded on behalf of his flock, became the cradle of the traditionally hallowed, heart-felt, genuinely Yiddish "Gefeel Chazzonut" (tender, meaningful mode of cantorate).

Odessa in decided contrast created and was the advocate of the more modernized, choral cultural style of synagogue liturgical art. But even the Odessa chazzonuth had its roots in traditional soil and was firmly based on time-honored, general principles handed down from one generation to another. It was in essence more faithful to the mainstream of Jewish traditional spirit than the line taken and the path followed by Zultzer in his musical investiture of the prayer book.

An interesting fact is that the pattern adapted and fostered by Berditchev was really born and had its origin in Odessa where Tzalel Odessa'er and Nisi Blumenthal reigned. It was they, who were the fathers and founders of the line, which was later taken over and put into general practice by Berditchev.

Nisi Belzer, the most typical representative of the Berditchev school of thought, was a disciple of "Tzalel Odessa'er," and "Yeruchem Hakoton," the other mighty pillar of the Berditchev system, was the pupil of both Tzalel and Nisi. First, Yeruchem served his apprenticeship under Tzalel Odessa'er. But with his prankish behavior, he incurred the displeasure of his master.

Tzalel had the curious habit of pressing his thumb to his throat when chanting the services. This gesture of the cantor tickled the funny bone of the youngster and made him giggle. Once when on the podium of the

synagogue with the other chorists, he was unable to suppress this merriment and suddenly burst out laughing. This scandalous show of disrespect aroused the raging wrath of Reb Tzalel, who thereupon threw the offender out of his choir.

Yeruchem then joined Nisi Blumenthal's choir and having learned his lesson, took great care to henceforth give no cause for complaint or reproach. Nisi sensing in the tiny youngster tremendous potentialities, gladly took him under his wing and greatly encouraged him to develop his innate talent. He imparted to him generous doses of the rich treasure of his knowledge and experience.

Nisi Belzer drew from the equally rich and precious store of Tzalel's fountain of knowledge. These two bright sagacious disciples of the great Odessa masters, in turn, brought with them and transplanted the "Chazzonuth Haregesh," the cantorial style of intense fervor, which they had learned from their respective teachers, to Berditchev when they made their headquarters there.

But they not only followed the doctrines and fundamental principles as laid down by Tzalel and Blumenthal, they further developed and improved upon them. That is why this particular brand of "Chazzonuth," although not born there and only adapted by that city, is called "the Berditchev line," for it was there that it fell upon fertile soil and blossomed forth in its full splendor.

In the meantime, Odessa became a large, modern metropolis, a significant port town on the shores of the Black Sea. Its Jewish inhabitants became prosperous. With the change in their status, wealth and social position, there was also a shift in customs. They felt the need for adjustment to the new currents.

The original old-fashioned ideas, the styles, customs and schools of thought, which prevailed in the Middle Ages would not do any longer. New winds were blowing and affected all walks of life, and in the synagogue, too, the need for change was sensed. The forms and methods of the chanting of the ritual were considered to be too antiquated to suit the requirements of the new times. Very little remained in printed form anyhow or even in manuscript, of the past to be of any great use. A fresh approach in the direction of modernization seemed to be the answer.

The initiative toward such a development came during the latter part of the first half of the nineteenth century, when Shlomo Zultzer and some of his contemporaries undertook the task of bringing some order into the chaotic state of affairs in the field of liturgical music. They endeavored to place the cantorial craft upon a firm cultural, systematic and orderly basis and to give a reputable form and status to the Jewish religious service in the liturgical literature.

They carried out this ambitious plan with commendable vigor and energetic tenacity. However, in their enthusiastic determination to clean up the long neglected field of wild grass and hack away the brushwood and weeds, which had grown around it in the course of the years, they went too far and uprooted also some precious flowers, planting in their

place some undesirable seeds.

Like Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, they too, brought "Eysh Zoro," a strange fire, into the sanctuary of the Lord. In the process they introduced, together with some wholesome innovations, also profane, assimilatory, churchlike influences into the holy chamber of synagogue music. The disciples of Zultzer and his colleagues, who became the leading cantors and occupied the most prominent positions in the countries of Western Europe, naturally kept on fostering the cause and cult of the Zultzer-kind, modernized liturgical system which was considerably weighted with themes borrowed from alien sources. There was lurking the serious threat, that the traditional "Nuschuos" (modes) would be violated, crippled, watered down to the extent that they would become unrecognizable by the infusion of operatic arias, folk songs and church music.

And who can tell how far the process of radical transformation of the old but still untarnished typical Jewish motifs would have gone, if not for the counter-revolutionary activities of the East European stalwart representatives of the "Chazzonut Haregesh," who stood their ground, like bulwarks manning the ramparts, determined to preserve the precious treasure which had been handed down from the past from being swept away by the new forces that claimed that there was urgent need for a change and that their radical cleanup was the panacea, the wave of the future.

Tzalel Odessa'er, Nisi Blumenthal, Yeruchem Hakoton, Nisi Belzer, and others, of a similar school of thought, while admitting the desirability of bringing up to date the chants of the synagogue, of effecting certain changes and improvements in form and vestiture of the musical interpretation of the prayers, insisted on preserving intact the essence and the purity of the innermost, by tradition hallowed content.

It was thanks to their tireless efforts in their primitive, home grown conservatories, in which countless disciples received their indoctrination, that there was developed a definite renaissance, a rejuvenation of the time-honored brand of liturgical art. By their labor of love, they managed to infuse a new breath of life into the almost forgotten and nearly eliminated old typically Jewish melodies, which had their roots in and drew their elevating and spiritually exhilarating themes from the rich fertile soil of the ancient sacred Jewish tradition. With the addition of just the right dose of modern flavor, they succeeded in effecting a happy synthesis, uniting in the resulting creation the best elements of both the East and the West.

They uncovered and adopted from the achievements of Zultzer and company the valuable kernel, the culturally and scientifically advanced musical investiture of the prayers and psalms. But, at the same time, they would not slavishly follow the carts of the reformers on the strange uncharted roads, into which they had strayed and got stuck in the marshes knee deep, unable to extricate themselves.

To the Berditchev way of thinking, such adventurous excursions,

straying too far afield into alien territories were fraught with danger and were liable to have serious and undesirable consequences. They preferred to walk the straight "derech hamelech," the golden path, and to sing the authentic chants, whose worth had been proven, had withstood the test of time, the melodies that have throughout the generations with their magical power evoked new hope in the hearts of the suffering Jews. They had brought out a new, somewhat changed, version, an improved edition of the age-old liturgical art, more in tune with the modern world of enlightenment and intellectual progress.

As for Odessa, it took its position in the center between the extremes. It was not as consistent in its strict adherence to the dictates of tradition, as was Berditchev. But neither was it ready to go as far as Vienna in its abolition of most traces of the old styles and the substitution of brand new artificial services. In short, Berditchev occupied the right wing, Central and Western Europe the left wing, with Odessa straddling the center.

This, we must admit, has turned out to be a rather lengthy introduction, but we thought it advisable to go into a detailed exposition of the evolvement of the fundamental differences among the various doctrines, techniques and systems, in order to furnish a suitable background for the real theme of our dissertations, which is to picture the personalities and the colorful public images, as well as the private lives of the great cantors of the past.

Having thus arrived at the point where it is time to begin our real task, allow us to introduce you, with the proper respect, to the world-famous cantors, Yeruchem Hakoton Blindman and Nisi Belzer Spivack.

Oh, we beg your pardon. Having just declared our deep respect and dignified regard toward the towering masters of yore, our pen immediately slipped and tripped over a word, that not only does not add to the high esteem which we owe these luminaries of the cantorial history, but which even might tend to distract from their glory. The characterization "world-famous" has become so overworked and misused by some that it has become almost an insult to be thus addressed and introduced. So, correction please. Yeruchem and Nisi do not need any kind of adjectives. Their names, pure and simple, speak volumes.

What sort of human beings were these gifted virtuosos, who reigned in Berditchev and placed the uneradicable stamp of their individualistic brand of art on the evolution of liturgy?

Yeruchem was of very small stature, with a long, broad and dense beard and a big lyric tenor voice of rare quality. Veterans who remember him claim that his vocal organ possessed the extraordinarily tremendous range of four full octaves. The power of his voice was matched by the unusually rich color which it generated and the ease with which he was able to manipulate it. His tones seemed to be endless and boundless.

To put the cherry on the sundae, he was in addition a very gifted and fertile composer, who created many works that attested to his faithful, uncompromising, adherence to the traditional "Skorbover" (somber, largely minor keyed) "Nusach" (sanctified modes of chants).

His extemporaneous improvisations bore the mark of a phenomenal genius, whose rich phantasy soared with unmatched rapture into the highest spheres, enchanting the worshipers and lifting them up to a state of ecstasy.

All of Europe was agog with the tales about his remarkable feats. From all corners of the globe, people used to make pilgrimages to Berditchev for the sole purpose of being privileged to hear the wonder-cantor of the nineteenth century.

Nisi Belzer, on the other hand, was just the opposite of Yeruchem in almost every respect. The dissimilarity between them was so pronounced, that it seemed almost as if it had been deliberately planned by nature, so that they would complement each other, one possessing and contributing what the other lacked.

Nisen Spivack was born in a small village of Lithuania by the name of Moosh, a son of poor parents. At the age of eight, he already evinced great promise and interest in music and being that in Lithuania at that time Chazzonuth did not play a great role, and outstanding figures of the cantorial art could surely not be found in the land, his father brought him to Zsitomir, Southern Russia, where Yeruchem Hakoton took him in as a "meshorer." At the same time the young choirboy buckled down to the study of the Torah, which he pursued with such diligence that when he became "Bar Mitzvah" the Rabbis wrote about him that he was "Bokiy," conversant with practically the whole "Shass" (Talmud).

At the age of fourteen he became a "Choson" (engaged).

A few years later, still a "choson bochur," he was chosen as Cantor in Belz, Bessarabia. But even though he stayed in that town only one year, the tag "Belzer" stuck to him for life. His next position was in Kishinev, where he tarried for 25 years. From there he transferred to Yelisovetgrad and after a stint of six years in that post, he accepted a call to Berditchev, where he really came into his own.

In sharp contrast to his older colleague, Nisi was a stocky man of average height, with a thin little beard, which did little to enhance him facially. His voice, whatever there was of it present in his half-paralyzed chords, was of little consequence, as the tones, which he was able to bring out, had a hoarse, choked, hollow, dull sound. His musical education was scant and he had little knowledge of harmony and counterpoint. However, he was blessed with a natural, strong instinct, intuition and an ingenious innate sense of musical perception, which, together with practical experience, compensated in generous measure for the paucity of his formal education.

In his youth, he was entrusted by Yeruchem, who at the time was connected with a Zsitomir congregation, with the leadership of his choir. As an extra bonus, he also entrusted to Nisi's tender care the future of his niece, the daughter of Moshe Shochet of Teleneshtsh. After their wedding, Nisi tried his luck in business but success eluded him. Things went from bad to worse. His every attempt in business seemed to be doomed from the outset and destined to inevitable failure.

After two dowries had slipped throught his fingers with nothing to show for it, the exasperated father-in-law said to him, "It is clear, like the sun at high noon, that you are not cut out to be a businessman. As a former choir leader, trained by my brother-in-law, I take it that you have some knowledge of music. Why don't you try composing? Make an effort, jot down something on paper and I'll show it to Yeruchem. 'Ulay Yerachem' (A word play: Perhaps there is hope after all.) Maybe all is not lost and something will come of it."

When Yeruchem, the perfectionist, looked over the fruit of Nisi's labor, he became enraged at the clumsy mistakes which he found in it. To demonstrate how little he thought of the ability of his niece's husband, he tore up the manuscript and threw it into the waste basket.

When Nisi learned of Yeruchem's insulting and humiliating act and his scornful opinion of his compositions, he became enraged and in a challenge to Yeruchem, he made a vow to "davke" (to spite him) embark on a cantorial career, so as to irritate his wife's uncle by showing him for how little his judgment counts.

Nisi was as good as his word. His debut as a full fledged cantor took place at the "Kloiz" (informal house of prayer of the chassidic sect) of David Leyb of Belz. Knowing full well that with his poor vocal equipment, he was not likely to get very far in the cantorial field, he concentrated his efforts on surrounding himself with a selected group of chorists with good voices and musical ability and with hard work and perseverance he succeeded in bringing his chorus to a high degree of competency.

The Jews of Belz soon became aware that the young cantor and his well-trained choir were very good. Nisi made a name for himself among the music lovers of the city and its immediate vicinity and they began to call him Nisi Belzer, by which name he was to be always known.

In that city resided the famous Rabbi Reb David'l Tolna'er to whom the cantor became very attached, and he often used to come to the court of this Rabbi, together with his whole kapelle, (ensemble) and chant for the assembled chassidim.

The story goes that Reb David'l once inquired of Reb Nisi how much the choir cost him. When the cantor informed him that his yearly expenses for the singers amounted to as much as three thousand rubles (Kerblech), the surprised Rabbi wondered aloud, "If you have to shell out so much money for choir boys, you might as well spend an additional few hundred Kerblech and hire a cantor also." Nisi took this taunt goodnaturedly, knowing well how much Reb David'l thought of him. It was this Rabbi who sent him, with his recommendation, to Yelisovetgrad where he was appointed to his second cantorial position.

When Yeruchem Hakoton left Kishinev for Berditchev, Nisi succeeded him and he remained in the Bessarabian capital for fifteen years.

Yeruchem, in the meantime, was getting older, and the members began to complain. When the harmony that had existed between him and the trustees dwindled and was replaced by frequent clashes, Yeruchem left his post, headed for Vienna, where a professor of voice culture transform-

ed his tenor voice into a heroic baritone that spanned nearly four octaves. Then he dyed his beard black and accepted a call to Tarnopol in Galicia. The first candidate who was invited for an audition with a view of succeeding Yeruchem was Velvele Shestopol. He entrained on his way to Berditchev but en route he became ill and passed away. After that tragic event, the most serious contender for the vacated pulpit of the old city of Berditchev was none other than Nisi Belzer who had already earned an enviable reputation in the course of the years which he spent in Kishinev. He officiated at four consecutive Sabbath services and after the multiple auditions he was confirmed as the chief cantor of the congregation and given a contract for thirty-five years. For the second time, consecutively, he thus managed to replace his uncle, who thought he had no talents in the liturgical field. Nisi showed him indeed how mistaken he was. He took over the former post of Yeruchem in 1884.

Yeruchem, from his new location in Tarnopol, made frequent excursions to Vienna to the studios of the famous local teacher, who in the course of the cantor's musical training changed his tenor voice to that of a baritone.

Meanwhile reports from Berditchev told about the great success of Nisi. When these glowing accounts reached the ears of Yeruchem, they rankled and made him very jealous. It irked him to such an extent that he wrote to some of his friends in Berditchev, "Don't stuff yourself with garlic and borsht or you will be unable to eat and enjoy the tasty cutlets, which will soon be served up to you."

It did not take long before he was back in Berditchev to take up the challenge of his successor. This time, Yeruchem was called to the pulpit of the synagogue in the new section of the city and the contest between him and his nephew was on.

Yeruchem, in spite of his advanced age, was still the great master and his voice was still a phenomenal instrument, a baritone with a thunderous high "C".

But Nisi had his own brand of appeal to the masses. His principal stock in trade was the meticulously trained large choir consisting of the best singers available, whose ensemble singing was brilliantly executed. It was something novel and it proved to be a powerful drawing card. In his favor was also the fact that he was privy to the complete repertoire of his great teacher, Tzalel Odessa'er, whose compositions he presented with great skill to the enormous delight of the Jews of Berditchev.

The two antagonists locked horns. What was the outcome? According to Yossel Bass, Nisi was more successful than Yeruchem. He was more popular and drew bigger crowds. I heard a different story from a resident of the old folks' home on Jefferson Avenue in downtown New York. A native of Berditchev, his recollection was that Yeruchem towered over his competitor, dwarfing him decisively.

There is no doubt that as a cantor, Nisi could not begin to compare with Yeruchem. On the other hand, Yeruchem's choir could never hope to equal Nisi's. So it would seem that it all depended on what one was more

fond of, the artistic chants of the cantor or the harmonious ensemble singing.

Yossel Bass conceivably could be biased in favor of the master, under whom he had served for many years. Neither would the size of the crowd in attendance at the services necessarily be any valid indication as to which of the two was entitled to the trophy of the victor. Most of the staunch lovers of liturgical music and frequenters of synagogues lived in the old city, so that in this respect Nisi naturally had the advantage. We would probably come nearest to the truth by venturing the guess that the contest was a draw. They were both, each in his particular specialty, equally great and popular.

CHAPTER 4

THE BITTER FEUD WHICH TWO FAMOUS CANTORS CARRIED ON THROUGHOUT THEIR LIVES

It was between Yeruchem Hakoton and Nisi Belzer — one was a great cantor — the other was a genius as a conductor — Nisi had great singers in his choir.

If you have sometimes read the column of Walter Winchell, who incidentally comes from a cantorial family, in which he discloses sensational pieces of gossip about well-known Broadway playboys, prominent figures of stage and screen, and other fields of endeavor, with particular emphasis on their family and love life and the relations between the sexes, you probably came across a brand new expression of his by which he tries to imply that there is little love lost between two persons. He simply raises a warning finger and volunteers the good advice, "Don't invite so and so, and so and so, to the same party." He does not say why you should refrain from doing so. He leaves that for the potential host to figure out for himself or to take Winchell's word for it, that to ignore the warning could turn out to be dangerous, for anything might happen if they should come face to face at the same party — a scandal, a fight, or even something worse.

In issuing the "caveat," Winchell most likely has in mind something similar to the story related in the Talmud about a man who to celebrate a joyous family event, gave a party in his house. Among the invitations which he sent out, one was addressed to a friend of his by the name of "Kamtzo," but either because it was wrongly addressed or for some other

eason, it somehow was delivered to an enemy of his named "Barkamtzo." Upon arriving at the party, the enraged host threw him out. Barkamtzo swore revenge. He went to the Roman authorities, who were then the rulers of that region, and made serious accusations of treason and gave false, slanderous testimony against his own people — whereupon Rome ordered its legions to raze the city of Beitar, which was the scene of the confrontation at the party.

Walter Winchell's new feature comes to mind, when I hear people tell about the famous feud and the mutual vehement dislike of each other without any valid reason (Sinass Chinom), which existed between the "shney hameoros hagdolim," Yeruchem Hakoton and Nisi Belzer, the two great stars and lights of the cantorial sky, who reigned supreme in Berditchev. They could not divide between themselves the kingdom. Each claimed for himself the "Bechoro" (preference right of the first born). Their jockeying for position of preeminence paralleled the first case of a bitter wrangle at the time of the creation of the world.

Our sages relate in explaining why the Torah calls both the Sun and the Moon the two great lights that when created both were equal in their light-giving power. The story goes that the Moon was dissatisfied with having only an equal status with the Sun, complaining to God, "How can two Kings share one crown? One of us has to be superior and the other inferior." The Almighty's answer was to give the order, "Then Let It Be So. You Moon will shed part of your light and become inferior."

Yeruchem and Nisi also were unable to co-exist. According to trustworthy witnesses, the relationship between them was so tense and bitter that to even mention the name of Nisi was taboo in the house of his adversary and vice versa. A constant continuing conflict raged between their respective admirers. It was much more than the usual professional envy. In time, it degenerated into a bitter fight.

So just try to imagine the dilemma of a member of the Berditchev Jewish community, who happened to have a "Simcha," a joyous event, in his family. He had to be very careful not to invite these two enemies to his house at the same time. This was not as easy as you might think, for in the contract of Nisi, the text of which is available to us, there was a clause to the effect, that it was the duty and privilege of the Cantor to attend and to be invited to all private celebrations of the members. According to authentic sources, Yeruchem's duties and privileges were substantially the same. So it took quite a bit of diplomatic tact on the part of the hosts who arranged a party. It required the possession of an adroit sense of maneuvering to avoid giving offense to either Yeruchem or Nisi, and, at the same time, make sure that they would not meet each other anywhere, for fear that they might quarrel and ruin the celebration.

Oddly enough, Boris Tomashevsky, the famous Thespian, who was a "Meshorer" (choir-boy) of Nisi's, tells of having once witnessed a face-to-face meeting of the two adversaries which was quite peaceful. It was on a frosty day in the wintertime. A terrible snowstorm had fallen and a bitter wind howled in the streets. Nisi was saying his morning prayers in his

private chamber and the choir was busy rehearsing a new number for their repertoire in the outer room and foyer. Suddenly, the street door swung open and in strutted Yeruchem, bundled up in a long heavy "Peltz" (coat with fur lining) with a fur collar, his throat swathed in a large wide shawl. The choir stopped singing. Yeruchem began to take off his coat and to ask the singers something, but before he had time to finish the sentence, the door of Nisi's room opened up and there stood Nisi garbed in a large "Talis" (prayer shawl) with the phylacteries (Tefillin) on his forehead and on his left arm. When he saw the unexpected visitor, he remained motionless and visibly surprised. For a long minute, which seemed an eternity, the two rivals just kept staring at each other, as if they could not grasp the situation. Both were trembling and shaking.

Suddenly, Yeruchem grabbed his coat, turned on his heels and was about to run out into the street, when Nisi ran after him and taking him gently by the hand, ushered him into his private chamber. They sat there talking for a long while, and when at last the door opened again, Nisi accompanied Yeruchem to the door leading to the street. The choir singers heard distinctly Nisi taking leave of his visitor with the words, "Auf wider zehen, Feter" (goodbye, see you again, uncle). There is no record by which to establish whether or not they ever did see each other again. But one thing is certain, the reconciliation, if it was that, did not last long. It was not a peace agreement, but only a temporary truce which did not end the war. The wide schism between them was far from being healed.

Despite all his human weaknesses which manifested themselves in his relationship to his nephew by marriage (Nisi was married to Yeruchem's niece), Yeruchem was a wonderful man, a great scholar, a very pious, observant Jew, yet at the same time a "Maskill," well-versed in philosophical and scientific literature. He was a master of improvisation and equally outstanding in singing solo, as well as with the choir. He was 93 years old when he passed away in 1891. He officiated at the pulpit to the very end. His last service of the High Holidays was so magnificent that to those who heard him, he sounded like a young man of 30.

As his successor, he had recommended to his congregation Zeidel Rovner, who was previously a cantor in Kishinev. (It is interesting to note that both Yeruchem and Nisi came to Berditchev after they had served in Kishinev.) In advising his congregation to engage Zeidel to take his place, Yeruchem expressed his hope, that after listening to Zeidel and his choir, the Jews of Berditchev would forget the Litwak (Nisi).

But Zeidel's compositions at first did not appeal to the Jews of Berditchev because there were too many Polkas and Mazurkas (dances) among them. Not only did Nisi not lose his following, on the contrary, after the appearance of Zeidel on the scene, people began to appreciate even more the high quality and artistic nature of his style. To show their high regard, Nisi was granted a raise in salary. Zeidel was not able to make a dent in his popularity, which grew rather than diminished. The public was bewitched by Nisi and simply deified him.

Naturally the question arises: what was the secret of the unbelievable

hold which this cantor, who possessed almost no voice to speak of, had on his admirers? It was in the quality of the singers whom he gathered into his "heymishe" (private) conservatory. They were the finest singers that were to be found anywhere and he paid them the largest salaries. In contrast to other cantors of that era, who being penniless devils were constantly behind in their payments to the boys of their choirs, Nisi would have pawned his pants rather than let his singers wait for their wages. He was always prompt and punctual, and that was one reason why he was able to attract the best available singers to his choir.

Among his famous chorists, the most outstanding one was doubtless "Nochum Matenko." He was the mainstay of Nisi's choir. People used to say that if it were not for Nochum, Nisi would not be a cantor. It was said that when he began to sing, the windows of the synagogue rattled. Nisi allegedly tried to avoid giving him long solos, for fear that if Nochum sang with the full power of his voice, he might break all the windows of the synagogue and Nisi would be liable for the damage.

How high Matenko stood in Nisi's estimation and how much he valued his contribution to the ensemble can be gleaned from the fact, that even though Nisi exerted strict discipline, was unaccessible to all his singers, kept them at arm's length and none of them were allowed to enter the master's private chamber without an appointment, Nochum was the only privileged character, who could call on Nisi any time he wished.

One night, it was the one following on the heels of the day of atonement (Yom Kippur), Nisi was resting up, after having stood on his legs all day long and chanted and directed at the same time the chorus in the praying session of "Mussaf" and "Neelah". Suddenly there was a knock on Nisi's door. "Who is it?" he asked. "It's me, Nochum." "What brings you so late at night?" wondered Nisi. "Oh, I brought you some present." Nisi opened the door and there, standing with a telephone pole on his broad shoulders, was Nochum.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Nisi in wonderment. "It's my latest invention," replied Nochum, "an eleven foot pole for people I wouldn't touch with a ten foot pole. Well, you know, Reb Nisi that it is a Mitzva [good deed] to begin building the 'Sukkah' [tent] right after the conclusion of the Maariv [evening] service of Yom Kippur, so I brought you this pole with which to enable you to start the work at once for the erection of the 'Sukkah' by driving in the first spike."

When Nochum Matenko's sister Tzir'l got married, Nisi with his whole chorus traveled all the way to Dubassor where the wedding was scheduled to take place, to grace the festivities with their chants — and Nisi would not accept a kopek even to cover his or the ensemble's expenses.

Nochum's father, Yossel Osher at first served as confidential secretary (Meshamesh) of the "Tzaddik" Rebbe Reb Mordchele of Dubassor, Bessarabia and was eventually chosen by the wonder Rabbi, Reb Dovid'l of Tolna as his "gabbay" (factotum). He was strongly opposed to his son embarking on a career of "Meshorer" and eventually cantor in Moscow.

Chorists were frowned upon by the ultrapious chassidim for the reason that as a general rule they were thought to be "Kalim", not very observant Jews, who usually were taking the tenets of religious law lightly. However Nochum's persistence and his argument that his God-given talent was too valuable to be wasted, finally overcame his father's objections.

Another of Nisi Belzer's sweet voiced tenors was Dovid Mordche'le. When he said a solo, he caused a furor among the listeners. With his melliflous tones and artistic rendition, he evoked ecstatic response from the worshipers. He became a cantor in Budapest, Hungary, in one of the major synagogues. However he contracted pneumonia and passed away in the bloom of his life.

Still another disciple and graduate of Nisi's cheyder who made it big in the world of music was "Meyer'l", the son of the Rabbi of Rikitna, Gubernia of Kiev, where he was born in 1858.

In time he was catapulted into the eminent status of leading tenor on the roster of the Royal Operahouse of St. Petersburg.

We have of course reference to none other than the phenomenal opera star M. Medvedyev, whose name became a universal household-word as one of the greatest singers of classical music. His unusual voice drew to him the attention of influential secular musical circles. He was granted a scholarship at the Royal Conservatory of Moscow, where he was the favorite pupil of Professor Nolwan and from which institution he graduated with top honors.

He made his debut under the patronage of Pyotr Tchaikowsky on the stage of the Imperial Theatre of Moscow. Having been hailed as a rare find and vociferously acclaimed by audiences for his brilliant voice and consummate artistry, he was soon called to St. Petersburg, where he thereafter reigned supreme as the leading tenor of the Royal Operahouse. He was the toast of the town, the recipient of great honors from the Russian nobility and the Imperial court.

Poets vied with each other in composing odes to the virtuoso of the opera stage. The people carried him on the palms of their hands in triumph after his performances.

However his bohemian nature and loose mode of life eventually took its toll, ruining his voice and toppling him from his exalted position on the Olympian heights. He wound up seeking employment in the Yiddish theatre, where he occasionally would land small roles. The great charismatic star of the opera was on the skids and had become a small fry thespian bypassed by the parade.

He had a penchant for practical jokes and was what in Hebrew or Yiddish parlance is called a "Letz" (a mocker).

One time his route took him through Berditchev. Reminiscing with a nostalgic feeling about the years which he spent in that town, sitting at the feet of "Nisi", he suddenly realized that his train would pass through Berditchev on "Erev Yom Kippur", the day preceding the "Day of Atonement."

Even though he was by that time already almost an agnostic, the

"Pintele Yid" (the dormant Jewish conscience) in his heart made him decide to interrupt his journey and spend the holiest day of the Jewish calendar in the synagogue, where at one time he was the beloved soloist of the ensemble and listen to the chanting of his great teacher.

The sudden appearance of the famous opera star in the old synagogue naturally drew to him the attention of all the assembled worshipers. All eyes were focused on the unexpected visitor.

The congregants were surprised, but at the same time however also gratified and the officials escorted him to the front pew, where they gave him the seat of honor.

When the holy scroll was taken out from the Ark at the "Mincha" (afternoon) devotion, he was given an "Aliyah" (was called up to the reading of a portion of the Bible).

Here we must interpolate the information that it is customary (nay, definitely expected) for the person thus honored to make an offering, a donation for the upkeep of the synagogue.

The reader accordingly after having finished reading the chapter and reciting the "Mi Sheberach", turned to Meyer'l with the questioning words "baavur shenodar" (in return for which blessing he is donating) cocking his ear nearer to the visitor, to hear what the great star of the opera will offer.

But just imagine his surprise, when in answer to the question put to him by the expectant reader the guest of honor blurted out the unheard of words "Chaay (eighteen) bushels of oats." "What?" The poor devil recoiled in astonishment, being almost sure that he must have misunderstood him. "Yes, you heard me right" was the repeated answer from the slyly smiling Meyer'l, "Chaay bushels of oats."

The reader, speechless, looked at him with glazed eyes. He could not possibly bring himself to utter such ridiculous words from his mouth. But Medvedyev kept urging him to proclaim to all and sundry his generous "Shenodar" until the embarassed "Baal Koreh" did his bidding.

There was a great uproar in the synagogue. People crowded around the opera star demanding an explanation for the crude sacrilege. They were not amused by the joke, rather were all of them furious. "Who ever heard of making a donation of oats in a synagogue on 'Yom Kippur?' ", they reproached him.

But Meyer'l calmly held forth, explaining the meaning of his offering thus, "I noticed that all the worshipers minus their footwear (shoes of leather are taboo on Yom Kippur) have all day been standing on the hay, which had been spread out all over the synagogue to cover the cold cobble stone floor.

"Now I know that livestock animals, that are being fed hay, like to have once in a while also a little variety in their diet. They appreciate delicacies occasionally, like oats. So seeing only hay around me, I thought I'll let you have also some oats."

Among the members of Nisi's chorus were Meyer Pisak who became the Cantor of Yelisovetgrad and eventually the inheritor of Nisi's post in

the old city synagogue of Berditchev. Two other candidates, Kalechnik of Kishinev and Bauman of Radomishl were eliminated in favor of Pisak, who was familiar with his teacher's repertoire.

Yankel Stolyar Drohobitch, second tenor, became Cantor of Kremenitz, Gubernia of Wholin. Ahrele Feintuch, tenor, became the Cantor of Kovel, Gubernia of Wholin. Yehoshuah Eliyahu Feintuch, second tenor, became the assistant Cantor of the "Choralna" Synagogue of Berditchev, Eliyahu Kreitburg, tenor, became the Cantor of Minneapolis, Minn. Yisroeil Cooper, tenor, became the Cantor of Bialystok, Bucarest, Wilna, London and New York.

Other chorists in Nisi's ensemble were Boris Tomashevsky, tenor, Hershele Weitzman, 3rd tenor and Velvele Adelman, basso. Tomashevsky became one of the most famous actors and directors of the Yiddish Theatre in America. A son of his, a well-known writer for films in Hollywood and his grandson Michael Tilson Thomas is hailed as a rare find of an orchestra conductor in Boston. Adelman became a cantor in Odessa, where he also made a name for himself as an excellent teacher of fledgling cantors.

Cantors A. B. Birenboim of Chenstochov and Edward Birnbaum of Germany, Yitzchok Kaminsky and Choirmasters and Composers Saminsky and Leow were at one time or another members of Nisi's choir. So was also Pinye Minkowsky. Birenboim of Chenstochov founded a reputable music school for cantors and gave also courses by mail. Kaminsky became a well-known cantor, composer and choir director in New York.

Saminsky, a composer of note, became the musical director of the prestigious Temple Emanuel of New York. Leo Leow made a great career as composer and one of the most famous choir leaders. He said that he learned the secret of how to most effectively conduct a chorus from Nisi Belzer.

These disciples of the great master were all valuable singers. However Matenko towered over all of them.

Suddenly, Nochum decided to quit and strike out on his own as a cantor. He left Nisi and went to Odessa first and then to Moscow where the well-known magnates, the Poliakoffs built a new synagogue for him. However he passed away. The Jews of Russia spun all kinds of legends around his name. One of them was that the Russian opera singers saw in him too great a threat to them so they invited him to a tea party and poisoned him.

To Nisi, the defection of Nochum was a great blow. He suffered much from the irreplaceable loss of his champion basso. Nisi began an intensive search, traveling all over the country, in the hope of finding a singer of comparable quality and stature to replace the departed Nochum. He listened to and tried out dozens of candidates, but to locate a second Matenko was not in the cards for him. Having no other alternative, Nisi solved the problem by promoting the second in line to take the place of Nochum as leading basso of his choir. In later years, Yossel Bass inherited Matenko's place.

Another very talented chorist of Nisi's was the heroic tenor Elkono Primaslavsky. They called him the "Golden Floken" (stick) and people said that with his mighty voice he was able to extinguish the flame of a large lamp from a distance of ten meters. With the thunder of his voice he was able to cover the combined sound of the whole choir and under its impact the heavy brass chandeliers that hung down from the ceiling of the synagogue used to begin swaying back and forth, like the swinging pendulum of an old-fashioned giant grandfather's clock. He was the main soloist of the choir, singing the cantorial solos sometimes together with Nisi, but more often by himself to the great delight of the listeners. In later years, he occupied cantorial posts in Dubno and then in Brod. At the beginning of the 20th century, he and many other famous cantors emigrated to the United States, and he was active in his profession as the cantor of several New York congregations.

In the declining years of Nisi's life, one of his outstanding tenors was Mordechay Hershman. Nisi predicted for the young man with the golden voice, a brilliant future, which, as we well know, he indeed had in both Europe and America. At the time of his being accepted as a member of the famed choir, he was given the place and standing of the third tenor, but his advancement was unusually rapid and in a very short time he was assigned top roles. With this rise in rank went also an increase in his salary to 24 rubles a month, which for a member of Nisi's ensemble was a great deal of money. After Nisi's death, he for a time sang in Pisak's choir. Then Leybele Urkes took him together with his brother Shlomo to Balta. When he was inducted as a soldier in Krementchug, he sang in the choir of Aryeh Leyb Rutman. When his division was transferred to Charkov, where Shlomo Rabetz was the cantor, he became the tenor in his choir. His first position as cantor was in Zsitomir, from where he was called to Vilna and eventually he emigrated to America.

Nisi used to go on tour with his choir and give concerts of sacred music. Upon arriving in the border twin town of Novoselitz, he caught a cold and was not feeling at all well. Sensing that his days on earth were running out, he proceeded to Sadegore to his Rabbi. Being that he was a chassid (devotee) of this holy grand Rabbi, it was his last wish to spend whatever time would still be granted him by the Almighty near the saintly Rabbi, and that if he was fated to die, it should occur there. It was apparently decreed in Heaven that his last wish be granted him. Upon arriving in Sadagore, he became very ill. He was rushed to the presence of the holy man and there he gave up his pure soul. He passed away in the year 1905 at the age of eighty.

The whole world, and particularly the cantorial world, mourned the loss of the great master. Zeidel came especially from Berditchev for the funeral. He had great admiration for Nisi and lavish praise for his mastery. He always admitted that singing of such eminent quality and precision as Nisi was able to produce with his ensemble, he had not heard anywhere else.

From Sadagore the choir, like orphans without a father, returned to

Berditchev. When Passover came around, the choir took their accustomed place at the pulpit and the solos usually sung by the cantor were entrusted to Mordechay Hershman, and so the services were conducted by the singers on a temporary basis until Meyer Pisack arrived from Yelisovetgrad. He was a former pupil of Nisi's and knew the repertoire of his teacher backwards and forward, and that was the decisive factor in his favor. That was what the members of the congregation were looking for in a cantor, one who could carry on the tradition in the way and spirit of the great departed. So from among the many applicants, Pisack was chosen to fill the post left unoccupied by the universally adored Nisi.

It is impossible in the limited space of a chapter to enumerate all the famous chorists who in the course of his long and colorful career sang under the baton of Nisi. But from the few cited above, one can readily draw the conclusion that the unusually high caliber of Nisi's meshorerim (singers) was one of the most weighty and important reasons for the never diminishing, but rather ever-increasing power and hold he had on the public. They were not ordinary chorists, but full-fledged, wonderfully-equipped cantors, who possessed great, powerful, rare voices, uncommon coloratures and inborn eminent talents.

But even though he would have had the finest singers in the world at his disposal, nobody else could have accomplished what Nisi did. His great, unmatched genius was the main factor in his immense success. He was an incomparable master as a conductor and instructor of a choir. His presentation of ensemble singing was a veritable symphony.

He had a sharp "Gemore Keppl" (Talmud brain) and absorbed with a rare grasp and facility everything that he heard and had learned from his great teachers: Zalman Constantiner, Tzalel Odessa'er and Yeruchem Hakoton. Even before he knew how to read notes, he began to compose works of his own. When he lived in Belz (that is where he got the tag Belzer), he had his first chance to get some musical education, and there he began to conduct small orchestras.

True, it was a shrewd move on his part to surround himself with first class material, but his main virtue was that he was able to take the raw material and knead it and form it into an image that reflected his own virtuosity and taste. In his choir, a forte and fortissimo, a piano and a pianissimo, were exactly what they were supposed to be. His shadings and nuances were as manifold, varied and colorful as those of the rainbow. "Heavenly" was the popular adjective applied to the singing of his choir. It was in fact not just singing only, but more precisely "gezogt" (saying, reciting). The entire large choir executed ingenious "Zogechtz." Like well-trained dancers swaying in unison and thereby forming a perfect straight line of vision with their rhythmic movements. Nisi's singers, too, executed highly complicated and difficult coloratura passages without a flaw in such a disciplined manner, that is sounded as if it were a solo, the voice of one singer.

To bring the choir to such a state of perfection required much effort and a great deal of work, a great number of endless tiring sessions of

rehearsals. But no difficulties or handicaps could deter the perfectionist Nisi. The compositions that were to be sung at the services of the High Holidays had to be rehearsed and practiced for as long as was necessary in order to know them by heart. On those Holy Days, Rosh Hashono and Yom Kippur (New Year and Day of Atonement), the singers were not allowed to hold a single piece of music in their hands.

Nor did Nisi ever use a pitch pipe or any other instrument to determine the key in which a composition was to be sung. He probably was blessed with absolute pitch and could without having to resort to any instrument, measure and give the choir the key and tone with which to begin.

In his personal life, he was sincerely pious and God-fearing and conducted himself in a deeply religious, moral way. When leading the services, he would draw the big woolen Talis over his head, no matter how hot it would be in the overcrowded synagogue. His midriff was always tightly drawn in and girded by a gartel (silken sash).

Nisi often complied with the custom of the ultra-pious of fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, the thus saved up money came in handy at choir-payday. In spite of the fact that there was an "Eyrov" (a pole erected for a religious purpose) in the city, which made it permissible to carry things on the Sabbath, he still followed the old custom of winding his fire red "fatcheyle" (handkerchief) around his throat when venturing outdoors. (It might have been done for the additional purpose of protecting his voice to avoid catching a cold).

When he ventured out on the road, he never failed to take along the obligatory and most important, two kinds of pairs of tefillin (phylacteries), Rashi and Rabeynu Tam, several volumes of "Mishnayos" (early scholars of the Talmudic era), a folio of "Gemoro" (Talmud), and a holy book of "Zohar" (mystic cabalistic teaching). Whenever he had a spare minute in the course of his travels, he could be found reading one of these books, lost in thought and studying diligently.

Before ascending the pulpit, he never failed to immerse himself in the water of the "Mikva" (ritual bath) no matter how cold the weather, and he never failed to do this also before "Slichoth" (the midnight service ushering in the High Holiday season).

On the mornings of the High Holidays, all the members of his choir were honor-bound to go along with him and also take the plunge into the ritual bath, before going up to the balustrade.

He did not begin the Slichoth service at midnight, as has become the custom in modern times, but at three o'clock in the morning. It lasted three hours, so that when it was concluded, it was time for the first minyan (ten people) to begin the morning service. On Rosh Hashono, the mussaf service conducted by Nisi lasted until four o'clock in the afternoon. When it ended, the whole congregation went first to the river for the ceremony of "Tashlich" (throwing the sins into the water) and only after that home for the festive meal.

His choir boys were not garbed in any special gowns or robes and yar-

mulkes (caps) as is the custom nowadays, but they wore their regular festive clothes and hats, which each and every Jew naturally saved for Sabbath and "Yomtov" (holiday). But there was nothing special in their appearance to distinguish them from the congregants until, of course, they began to sing the elevating and inspiring music. Then, they became ten feet tall, and towered over the congregation, figuratively speaking.

Nor did all the singers wear "taleisim" (ritual shawls) as was the custom of other choirs. Only those of the singers who were married were accorded that privilege. Everything was simple, unadorned and unaffected. Nisi had no need to embellish his presentations with cheap, superficial and artificial effects and to cover himself and his assistants with impressive, resplendent outfits. To employ such methods would have been out of character for him. In his book, only the content, the inner essence, the inherent worth of the art, were of prime importance.

One of Nisi's outstanding specialties was the chanting of "Oz Bayom Hashlishi" (on that third day), a lengthy "Piyut" (poetic appendum) which is being recited on "Shevuoth" (Feast of Weeks).

There were also in the partituras (notebooks) of Nisi Belzer several compositions for "Kiddush Levono", the ritual for the open air sanctification of the appearance on the horizon of the new moon.

In thousands of Jewish homes of Southern Russia people would hum the tunes of Nisi Belzer's compositions, that went the rounds by the grapevine route. A new "Yechadsheyhoo," "Ato Yotzarto" or "Kedushah" of his was hailed with such enthusiastic acclaim that one might've been led to presume, that some momentous great "Yeshuah" (relief, redemption) had come to the beleaguered house of Israel. Such was his hold on the people to the very end.

With the passing of Nisi Belzer, the heart of Jewish liturgical art also died. With his death died also and fell into limbo the oldest and foremost Jewish home conservatory, the outstanding one-man institution for authentic Jewish art, from which emerged many generations of erudite, well-trained famous cantors. A gloriously rich chapter of cantorial history was concluded. An era came to an end. Finis was written to a meritorious, fruitful life, to a colorful career of an upright, ingenious man of unusual talent, whose blessed memory will live on for generations and be revered by Jews of all times.

(More about Nisi Belzer and Yeruchem Hakoton in the Kishinev section)

CHAPTER 5

ODESSA, THE CITY OF CANTORS

If Berditchev was the cradle, the hothouse, where Chazzonuth as we know it today, was nurtured with fond care and loving kindness, Odessa was destined to play the role of the generous patron of the liturgical art. There it found a warm hospitable home, a fertile breeding ground, in whose soil it was enabled to blossom forth in its full bloom, where it ripened into colorful, glorious flourish and came of age.

Conditions were much more favorable and suitable for its growth and development in the prosperous city situated at the shores of the Black Sea, than in the rather poor Jewish settlement of the Ukraine.

Originally inhabited by Greeks Odessa had only later come under Turkish domination.

As late as in the final quarter of the 17th century, Odessa was still a Turkish colony under the sovereignty of the Ottoman Sultans, who considered that pivotal landmark of such paramount strategic importance, that, already in the 16th century they thought it imperative to considerably strengthen the defenses of the city, with a heavily reinforced garrison and bristling fortifications, thus transforming Odessa into one the best equipped bastions of their farflung empire, a mighty fortress, which they named "Chadzi Bey".

These elaborate precautionary military measures were taken for the reason that they had become urgently required, so as to thwart the threat, which loomed menacingly from across the border.

For a long time the Russian Tzars had been casting covetous eyes on this port city, upon which they looked as an essential keylink for their expansionary plans, that had as their ultimate aim the opening up for their empire of a warm water route southward to Asia and Africa.

After two disastrous campaigns launched on behalf of the two associate reigning Tzars, her son Ivan and stepson Peter by the Regent — Empress Sophia, wife of Alexis and led by Vasily Galitsyn against the Turks, who successfully used their faithful clients, the Tatars of the Crimea to block Russian access to their port, Peter the Great, after the death of Ivan and his accession as sole rule to the throne made another attempt to achieve the long cherished goal and in the course of the campaigns 1695-1969 succeeded in wresting from the hands of the allied forces of the Turks and Tatars the Sea of Azov.

However he could not hold on long to this key to the Black Sea and in 1711 after repeated setbacks suffered by his troops, he was forced to relinquish it. It was not Peter's destiny to complete his fervently desired triumph of breaking through to the Black Sea. That was left to his second wife and heiress to the throne, Catherina the Great.

Even though it was bristling with heavy fortifications and thought by its defenders to be unconquerable, the citadel of Odessa proved vulnerable. It could not withstand the ferocious assaults of the Muskovite hordes, who equipped with a wide assortment of irresistible weapons, stormed its walls. Eventually these crumbled and the city fell into the hands of the invaders in 1789.

Having at long last succeeded in capturing the juicy plum, the Russians rebuilt and modernized the city and after having been transformed into a model city, it was incorporated into "Matushka Russay" (motherland Russia), a bright diadem in the crown of the "Tzarina", which was destined to become one of the most important outlets for the commerce of her sprawling realm.

It proved to be a very valuable prize. Ships were sailing from Odessa to all corners of the world, carrying in their bellies the produce, hides and various raw materials of the vast Russian mainland and they returned to the port laden with gold, silver and other precious stones, ivory, rare animals, spices and various other valuable products of the lands, which they had visited. In the process Odessa became one of the principal centres of world trade.

The newly acquired region was renamed "New Russia." The city of Odessa was also nicknamed by the Russians "Yezsne Palmira", the Palmira of the south, probably because of the wealth of palm trees, that lined the streets which were laid out straight in meticulous order in their length and breadth, according to a plan by Richlieu.

Under Turkish rule the inhabitants consisted of Turks, Greeks, Tatars and Armenians. Now that it had become Russian territory, St. Petersburg was intent on bringing into the region as many of its own people as possible, so as to lend the new province a Russian character or, at least as a starter present a facade of a Slavic image to the world. They considered it imperative to import post haste a substantial contingent of citizens, on whose loyalty to the crown they could rely and thus to make the possession of the annexed region secure.

Accordingly the "Ukaz" (directive) went out to the "natchalstvo"

(bureaucrats) to persuade thousands of provoslavno muziks (Russian Orthodox farmers) to leave their homes and go south, where the grass was greener and where in addition to the gratitude of the fatherland there are waiting for them unlimited opportunities for improving their lot, and even for the acquisition of great fortunes. By hook or by crook masses of uprooted families were transplanted and resettled in short order. Being herself of German lineage, Catherina the Great distributed land grants around the periphery of Odessa primarily to Germans, who were lured and exhorted to come and settle down there.

In their eagerness to transform Odessa into an at least partly Russian city, the ruling circles of the empire suppressed even their innate hatred toward those Jews, who showed willingness to play along with their urgent scheme.

Not only did they not apply the age-old custom of discriminating against the Jews, but the powers in charge of the project went even so far as to parcel out several acres of tillable land to each Jewish family in the adjoining region of Cherson, where they settled down as farmers.

Among the imported newcomers there were a great number of "Katzap's", roughnecks, members of the underworld, who were constantly on the prowl. They were the ones, who mainly responded to the call, being that they had no solid roots anyway anywhere. This element was always ready for a promising adventure and St. Petersburg was not choosy, as long as they were instrumental in helping the central government achieve its set goal of introducing into the newly annexed region as much proportion of Russian color as possible in a hurry.

Jews saw their chance and took full advantage of the opportunity. They had nothing to lose but the "Tzoores" (troubles). A great exodus of Jews began principally from Lithuania. In the course of the three occasions beginning with 1789, when Poland was divided among the three member countries of the "Holy Alliance": Austria, Germany and Russia, the latter grabbed as its share of the spoils also great chunks of Lithuania and in 1814 she swallowed up the remaining few cantons, thus completing incorporation of all Lithuania into its empire.

As a consequence of this act of grand larceny, which in power politic parlance is called "liberation", in 1862 the Jewish inhabitants of Lithuania had already been Russian subjects for quite some time.

Their lot had not undergone much of a change under the new regime. The struggle between the nations and the quarrels of world politics, in which they were but passive pawns had scant bearing on their fate. There was not much basic difference as far as they were concerned, whether they were under Polish rule or the Tzar Batyushka took them under his "protective" wings.

Suppression and harsh treatment was meted out to the "Parshivi" zsidi no matter whence the regulations came down to the local Natchalstvo (administration). If anything, the heavy hand of the oppressor became still harder to bear under the new regime, than heretofore. All the cruel antisemitic ordinances that were promulgated against the Jews of Russia ap-

plied also to their brethren in Lithuania, Reissen and that whole region, which had formerly belonged to Poland.

In June of 1862 however there did, "mirabile dictu", occur a change for the better. Whatever the motives behind the move were, the Russian Regent of "Crown Poland" (the part of it, which by now had for some time already been an integral colony of Russia) Count Vielopolsky on the directive (Ukaz) of the Tzar granted the "Israelites" regular citizenship and the "rights" (prave's) that went with it.

This partial emancipation of the hitherto voiceless and rightless segment of the population seemed to be an augury and a probable harbinger of a more sympathetic turn in the relationship of the authorities vis-a-vis the Jewish inhabitants of Russian-Poland and elicited a kind of envy in the hearts of their co-religionists in Lithuania, where "Fonye" (the Tzar) did not deem it necessary to order the same change for the better for the "zside".

Even though Lithuania was just as much under the thumb of St. Petersburg as the robbed third of the extinct Poland, here nothing has changed. The old regulations remained in force. The old cruel order continued to reign and ride roughshod over the Jews and quite often the keepers of the law and occasionally even the Cossacks, "Nagaika" in their hands, put the cursed "Zsid" in his place and as if that state of affairs wasn't yet bad enough, the economical squeeze, to which the Jew was subjected from all sides in all fields of endeavor in a country, the soil of which was anyhow mostly barren, was surely by no means very conducive to make him love his habitat too much to part with it.

To say that the living in Lithuania for "acheynu b'ney yisroeyl" (our brethren) wasn't easy, is putting it very mildly. No matter how hard they toiled, they were unable to provide even the bare necessities of life for their families.

Is it then any wonder that when the news of the opening up of the new region reached the ears of the miserable creatures in Lithuania and they learned that it was open season even for Jews to join the endless caravan of prospectors trudging southward to the haven of limitless possibilities, that they too packed their "heckle and peck'l" (bags and valises) and with a glimmer of hope for a brighter tomorrow beckoning, set out in droves on their way to Odessa, where according to the grapevine and the widely circulating rosy rumors new hands were at a premium, the demand for workers was insatiable and anybody with ambition was sure to make a fortune.

There was undeniably a grain of truth in the glowing reports and so it came about that a pretty large Jewish community of Lithuanian origin was the first to get a foothold in Odessa.

In their effort to quickly augment the number of Russians in the conquered city, St. Petersburg in the early years of its hegemony over the new territory did not even care how many and what kind of Jews were sneaking in illegally into Odessa. They looked the other way. The motto was: the more the merrier, as long as it served their purpose, which was to neutral-

ize the old settlers, whose loyalty to the alien conqueror was very doubtful and at best tenuous.

The calculation of the ruling bureaucracy went like this: Why! Let the shrewd, agile and capable Jews establish business connections with the large centers of the world, carry to foreign lands the name and fame of the great port, popularize its worth and importance to world trade and then when "the Moor will have fulfilled his assignment, the Moor can go."

It simply meant that in due time, when their further contribution won't be needed any longer, when the Muskovite will be able to get along without them, they'll know how to get rid of that "gezindel" (rabble). Some excuse will be found to push the Jews out or even to banish them as an undesirable element from the city altogether.

However Jews are a tough breed and not easily dislodged from positions once gained.

But whatever sinister plans were hatched against them in the meantime, around 1862 the Jewish newcomers dominated the scene. They organized the commerce, busily engaging themselves in all fields of endeavor, bringing about a rejuvenation of the sleepy city and making of it a bustling beehive of activity.

In the port ships were constantly coming and going. Produce, flour, sugar, hides, wool and logs of wood were exported to nearby and distant lands and incoming ships returned laden with textiles, tea, machinery, tobacco, cement and silk.

Being surrounded by hordes of various nationalities: Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Muskovites, Tatars, Cahcols (Ukrainians), Moldavians and Gypsies, the Jewish merchants had to contend with the open hatred, envy and competition of particularly, the Greeks, who being of the same "pravoslasno", religious faith as the Russians, enjoyed in an especially large measure the protection and favoritism of the Camarilla of the Russian Capital.

Forty years before, in 1821, the Greeks of Odessa had even gone as far as launching a well-organized pogrom against their Jewish neighbors, looting and burning down their stores and homes and physically assaulting men, women and children.

Blood was spilled in the street by roving bands with murder in their eyes and the hooligans could not wipe away the Cain sign that stuck forever to their foreheads.

The plunderers and murderers, mainly Greeks, had a ready made and slickly prepared "Hechsher" (lawful approbation and irrefutable reason) with which to justify their action — They claimed that Jews were involved in the plot, which was hatched to assassinate the Greek Patriarch of Turkey, who resided in Constantinople.

According to their version, Jews allegedly assisted the Turkish conspirators in the murderous attack, that liquidated the saintly archbishop of the Greek community in Turkey. There were, to be sure, no concrete proofs to support their accusation. But what does that matter? Did "pogromchik's" ever bother about presenting proofs of wrongdoing allegedly com-

mitted by their victims? It was enough to invent a pretext. It was quite sufficient to circulate the suspicion, the rumor that Jews had a hand in the dastardly assassination to let loose a bloody revenge on the hated sect.

But since then forty years had elapsed and as is the soft-hearted nature of Jews, they forgot and forgave or what was perhaps more likely the case, they thought it more advisable and practicable to forget and forgive. For after all what good would it do to hold a grudge forever or even for only decades?

Thank God the present was pretty good and the future even more promising. Business was good. Not only did they make a fine living, but a number of their brethren became affluent and quite prosperous. "So" they rationalized "why worry about the morrow, when what it may bring no mortal being can divine. Let's live for one day at a clip and let the future take care of itself."

It may be of interest to interpolate here some relevant, albeit later occurrences. Being the eternal optimists the Jews were inclined to write off the outbreak of vandalism and violence of 1821 as an unfortunate isolated incident, the like of which could not conceivably ever occur again. But they were to learn otherwise.

In 1871 they were hit again and this time by an even bloodier pogrom. To give the devil his due, it must be said in all objectivity, that unlike the repeated dastardly assaults on Jews that swept the realm of the Tzar from one end to the other in 1881-1882 and again in 1903-1905, not sparing Odessa either, which were systematically organized by the "Ochrana" (secret police) and lackeys of the Petersburg regime, the above mentioned onslaught on the Jewish inhabitants of the City was kindled by local hooligans recruited by the Greek colonists, who saw in the successful and affluent Jewish merchants too formidable competitors to their hegemony in the business world, which they had exerted and enjoyed until the advent of the foreigners. Unable to cope with the shrewd rivals, their jealousy and envious greed sought release in the use of violence against these "intruders" into what they considered their own bailiwick.

But to return to the period with which we are dealing at present, following hot on the heels of the Jews, that were flocking to Odessa from Lithuania came into the port city that had only recently been annexd to Russia an influx of a great number of immigrants from Galicia, that third of the former Poland which was inherited by Austria and principally did these newcomers hail from the city of Brody.

The Jewish colonization in parts of Galicia began in 1785 under the regime of King Joseph the second. One of the foremost Jewish communities which played an important role in the economic life and cultural development of Galicia was the city of Brody. In the course of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century it grew to the stature of a great industrial and business centre, through which flowed the exchange of goods between Eastern and Western Europe.

Concurrently with its emergence as a thriving centre of commerce it had also become a prominent seat of spiritual values, a center of the "Has-

kalah" (enlightenment) movement and "Lomdoth" (higher learning). Brody could boast of having in its midst some of the outstanding brilliant minds, to whom the Jews from far and wide were looking for guidance.

To mention but a few, in Brody lived and functioned such profound thinkers as Mendel Leppin, Yitzchak Erter, Nachman Krochmal and numerous other lights of the "Haskalah", whose works had a marked impact on the Jewish masses everywhere.

As for great personalities of the Rabbinic fraternity, the Jewish community of Brody had the prestigious distinction of having had at the helm of its religious organization no less talmudic giants of world renown than Rabbi Yechezkel Landau, better known as the "Nodah B'yehudah" and Rabbi Shlomo Kluger. There were noted saintly scholars in Brody, who were knowledgeable in the secrets of "Caballah", the occult science, even prior to the era of the "Baal Shem Tov", the founder of Chassidism and the famous "Chachamey Kloiz", headed by Reb Chayim Sandzer dominated the religious and cultural life of the city.

Merchants of Brody did business on a large scale maintaining trade connections and lively export and import relations also with, among others, the steadily growing Jewish Ukrainian centre of the port city on the shores of the Black Sea: Odessa.

In time a gradually increasing number of the inhabitants of Brody, chiefly the more affluent layer of the wholesale tradesmen of the Galician city found it more convenient to transfer the locale of their business activities to Odessa.

The colony of immigrants from Brody in Odessa kept growing and following on the heels of the businessmen came also an influx of a goodly contingent of the giants of thought and learning, who were instrumental in transplanting the seeds of Jewish culture, which they brought with them from their Galician homeland, into the soil of their new environment.

The news reports about the unusually swift and steep upswing of the fortunes of Odessa reached also the cities and villages of Crown Poland (which had been subjugated by and was groaning under the heel of the Tzar). It evoked there also great excitement among the populace. It was the topic of the day in Jewish circles.

Frequently lengthy discussion and hot argumentation ensued among the differently oriented factions. In the course of the colloquies divergent points of view were aired by the participants. The ultrapious Jews and the "chassidim" in particular, were of the opinion, that to judge from the rumors emanating from the newly acquired (by Russia) city, Odessa has become the haven for "apikorsim" (atheists, freethinkers) and the adherents of loose living. "All the lowlifes gravitate there, where anything goes." Even the stones in the streets are "treyfe" (unclean).

It is allegedly even worse there, than in America, according to people in the know. The Galicians of Brody who managed to make the deepest inroads in the city comport themselves in the manner of the assimilationist German Jews of Vienna and Berlin. They are wearing high top silk hats on their heads and are ignoring the commandments. All they are interested in

is money, high living without any restrictions and the Litvaks (Lithuanians) are imitating them. A Litvak even if he is a learned Talmudic scholar (and the great majority of them are) if he does not have faith in the "Tzadikim" (sages) he easily falls prey to the "Haskalah" (enlightenment) and with that he is finished as far as religion is concerned. You can count him out.

He begins by reading the Hebrew booklets of poetry and secular literature and from there to apostasy (apikorsus) to "treyf-posul" is only a scant distance. One doesn't even realize that he has strayed from the golden path. But there is no way back once he has embarked on the road, which leads to throwing off the yoke of religion. That is how the "Gan Eden" (paradise) of Odessa looked from where the pious Chassidim were sitting.

But for the general public Odessa conjured up the image of the charmed wonder-city, which evoked great curiosity all over the Tsarist imperial realm. In Wilna, Kovno, in Warsaw and in Lodz as well as in Bialystok the eyes of the masses were looking with longing toward the city on the shores of the Black Sea. In spite of the fact, that in Crown-Poland the Jew had only recently at long last been granted "prave's" (rights), the soil under their feet had already become burning hot. There was no gainsaying what it was, that distressed them so much. But there was definitely something disturbing in the air and they had the distinct feeling, that a new stormy upheaval was in the making, which bodes no good for them.

"Is that right?" was heard everywhere. "Did you hear the latest news? Odessa is making such giant strides, has grown to become such a great booming metropolis, a place where fortunes are being made overnight, that Jews from all corners of 'Russia' are migrating to the city of great promise? Well, what do you know!"

In Poland the clouds were gathering. Ominous signs, the harbingers of troubles to come, could be detected by shrewd observing eyes (and sure enough in 1863 the revolts of the Poles against the Tsar caught the Jews in the middle and caused the eternal scapegoats untold suffering).

So those Polish Jews who felt it in their bones, that something untoward was brewing not only cast covetous eyes on their brethren in Odessa, the early settlers from Brody and Lemberg, who made it big in the burgeoning port city, but did something about it.

"Better later than never" as once said a man, who had just missed his train, they reasoned and taking the bull by the horn they too took to the road, destination: Odessa. And to wherever Jews are journeying they invariably are taking along with them a most generous quota of their spiritual leaders, Rabbinical authorities, giants of intellect, the nucleus of the "Chachamey Odessa" and first and foremost would they never think for a moment of leaving behind their most cherished public officials, the "Chazzanim".

So it was only natural that simultaneously with the enormous growth of Odessa as a Jewish community, there grew up in the new environment outstanding representatives of the art of liturgical chanting so much so

that in time Odessa became known as "the city of cantors."

The Jews played an ever increasing role in the growth of the industry and commerce of the city and thanks to their business acumen Odessa prospered.

The great and elegant Jewish business establishments of Odessa, that served not only the city and its environs but whose tentacles also reached out all over Southern Russia, greatly dominating its commerce, were centered around the so-called "Passage", a great plaza with a roof hanging over it, which was flanked on one side by the Diribasovski Avenue, the Fifth Avenue of Odessa (where one walked on wooden planks) and on the other side by Provrezsenski Ulitza.

The Alexandrowski and Rishelevski streets led to the Black Sea but to reach the pier one had to still walk down several hundred steps after having negotiated the whole length of the street.

Among the poorer Jewish sections were the Peresep (mound), the Tolchok (fleamarket section) and the Moldovanka, the latter had an unsavory reputation, because it was allegedly the residence of tough guys and members of the underworld.

CHAPTER 6

BETZALEL ODESSA'ER, THE "ZEYDE" (Grandfather) OF CHAZANUT IN ODESSA

He started out as a Shochet — the Rabbi of Savran advised him to change his profession and become a cantor — The difference between the cantorate of Berditchev and that of Odessa. The great fortunes which the cantors of that era made.

In a previous chapter we mentioned, parenthetically, that we possessed the authentic text of the contract which the community of Berditchev made with Yeruchem Hakoton when they first engaged him after having imported him from Kishinev, where he was the cantor of the central synagogue.

It would be worth while for the cantors of today, who are inclined to regard their lot at their congregations with self-pity and to complain about the "groyse glicken" ("mammoth" fortunes) which they are making plying their craft, to read this interesting and instructive document. They would learn how much gold Yeruchem was coining and how lucrative an agreement a great genius like him was able to make with his congregation.

Yeruchem was paid not less than twenty rubles a week but lest such an unusually generous sum spoils him and make, God forbid, a spendthrift out of a pious man or allow him to put any money in a savings account, it was stipulated that out of that, he should also furnish a choir at his own expense. It had to be not just any kind of choir but, as was expressly specified, should consist of "Meshorerim rooyim unechonim" (suitable, worthy and qualified) singers. There was no question in their minds that the cantor would have ample funds left for the expenses of a most compe-

tent choir, after providing for all possible needs for himself and his family.

True enough, besides his salary there was also some kind of side income, like gratuities on Erev Yom Kippur, and on the day preceding the Day of Atonement, there was placed in the "polish" hall at the entrance to the synagogue a table with several plates on it. Among others, there was one designated for the cantor, and as people passed by on their way into the main auditorium for the "Mincha" service, they dropped into the plate some change or even a whole bill, as a contribution to the expenses of the choir.

The cantor also had the exclusive concession at the cemetery to chant the dirge of "Eil Moley Rachamim" (God of compassion), the prayer for the dead for the period of the busy season which lasted from the beginning of the month of Elul until after the High Holidays. However, he had to divide the proceeds from his chores at the cemetery with the other employees of the congregation, keeping as his share only one-third of the income.

It was one of the duties of the cantor to officiate at weddings and births, and to also sing and entertain the guests at the repast that followed thereafter. But he could, at his option, allow the assistant cantor to make the "Mi Sheberach's" (guests customarily asked the cantor to chant a blessing on their behalf for the young couple for which they rewarded him) and to go around with the plate to collect the donations from those who ordered the chants. He was then obliged to hand over half of the collected sum to the chief cantor. It was the cantor's task to write out the "Kesooba" (marriage contract) for which he usually was given a silver coin. So you can readily see that after a wedding, he had to go straight to the bank to unload his earnings for safekeeping.

The leaders of the congregation also made the cantor swear at the signing of the agreement that he would faithfully fulfill all his obligations and that he would stay on the job for the duration of his life. This latter provision expressly stated in the document is quite puzzling, for we know for a fact that Yeruchem did indeed leave his post and went away first to Tarnopol and later to Poltawa. Is it conceivable that such a pious, God-fearing man as Yeruchem would break his oath? There can be only two possible explanations. He may have been dismissed by the congregation, for although they made him swear that he would never of his own volition quit the post, there was not one word in the contract, which would oblige the congregation to keep him all his life and prevent them from sacking him anytime they so desired. This would seem to indicate that only the cantor's hands were tied but not those of the trustees.

There can also be another method of accomplishing the same end. If the congregation wanted to get rid of him, they could have accomplished their goal in a more subtle manner. Instead of simply firing the cantor, they could have given him a bad time, so that he would be able to decipher the cryptic writing on the wall and surmise that the trustees would not be offended if he should drop a hint that maybe it would not be a bad idea if they were to part company.

But no matter how the separation came about, the parties, it seems,

could not stay apart for very long. Yeruchem was too valuable a personality and too great a cantor, for Berditchev to be able to get along without him. So he was finally prevailed upon to forget the recriminations of the past and return, and he obliged.

I do not deem it necessary to go into all the details of the provisions contained in the agreement of Yeruchem with the congregation of Berditchev. The few paragraphs which I cited should, in my opinion, suffice to give a clear enough picture of the conditions that prevailed in that era. They give ample and convincing evidence that the compensation of the cantor was gathered together piecemeal and collected from several sources in the demeaning manner similar to that of going around and asking charitable donations for the dowry of a penniless bride. It justifies the conclusion that in the good old days, the cantor "did not lick honey" either from the hands of his bosses.

In spite of the great number of sources and the many wells from which his synthetic income was supposed to flow, you can rest assured that after a hundred and twenty years (if he was lucky enough to live that long on this deficient diet), he left his children an inheritance of somewhat less than six digits and maybe you could even get some change from five numbers. The wells which were supposed to yield the money to sustain the cantor and his family were to a considerable degree dry holes.

But enough of that. We proved our point which should be a comfort for the dissatisfied cantors of today and make them contented with their lot. What they have to put up with is nothing compared to what a Nisi or Yeruchem had to bear.

And now let us say farewell to Berditchev, take leave from the friends we have made in this renowned center of Jewish life and take a trip to Odessa. But for the big city toward which we are headed we must don our Sunday (or Sabbath) best. We must be properly dressed and garbed in our festive clothes, for we must not forget that Odessa is not Berditchev. Small town ideas and customs are out of place there.

It is quite a distance from Berditchev to Odessa, not only in the physical sense, but also in matters of the spirit and mind. Not only was Odessa quite far away, as measured by the number of miles or by kilometers by which they used to count distance in those localities, but they also were quite apart and different in regard to point of view, culture, worldly education and their estimates of religious values.

Berditchev was a relatively small town populated almost exclusively by Jews. If they did allow a small number of gentiles to reside among them, it was probably only so that there would be someone on hand to turn off the lights on the holy Sabbath. (It is not permissible for Jews to do it themselves.) In 1878 for instance out of a total population of 54,000 more than 51,000 were Jews.

Odessa, on the other hand, had an entirely different appearance. Wherever you went, you bumped into gentiles. There must have been tens of thousands of them residing in that city, although why the few thousand Jews of Odessa needed so many Shabes Goyim (Sabbath gentiles) remains

a puzzle. Even Yossel Bass, who was familiar with all aspects of these cities, having lived there for many years at a time and even knew what was cooking in the "cholent" (Sabbath dish) of every baleboste (housewife), could not explain what need the Jews of Odessa had for that many goyim. Surely not all of them were needed just to turn out the lights on the Sabbath. To take again the year 1878, the considerably larger city of Odessa had only 55,000 Jewish inhabitants.

The fact remains, however, that Berditchev and Odessa were two different worlds. The Jews of Berditchev lived together in a natural, primitive, simple fashion with their pure, unadulterated Jewish traditional, religious, unpolluted atmosphere. They were unhampered, not hamstrung by outside influences and could give free expression to their feelings as if they were romping in the vineyard of their own father.

Not so the Jews of Odessa. They lived in a house of glass, an insignificant minority scattered among the great masses of their gentile neighbors. They were obliged to take always into consideration what the goyim would think. They had to be constantly on their guard. They were always self-conscious. All their activities were designed and fashioned in such a manner, so as to be favorably accepted by the gentile community and to make a good impression on their neighbors.

No wonder, therefore, that even as far as Chazzanuth is concerned, there was also a difference between the tastes of the two Jewish communities and their requirements for a cantor. But while it is a fact that the distinction between what Berditchev considered essential and what Odessa thought to be imperative was clear enough and that the schism between their points of view grew wider as time progressed, these differences were only superficial and by no means deep-rooted and unbridgeable. They could not have been of such deeply conflicting nature, if only simply for the reason that countless mutual interests and strong ties bound these two cities together in the matter of cantorial affairs.

To illustrate the close and intimate relations and constant intercourse which existed between them and their respective cantors, we need only point to the well-known fact, that a goodly number of the cantors who became famous in Odessa had served their apprenticeship in the all-Jewish surroundings of Berditchev, had their cantorial roots in her soil and drew their inspiration from the town made famous by the sainted Reb Levi Yitzchock. The same can be said of many of the Berditchev cantors. More or less intimate bonds linked them with Odessa.

Nisi Blumenthal officiated for quite a while in Berditchev before he was brought to Odessa to occupy the pulpit at the Broder Synagogue. Pitze Abrass, who was chief cantor of the main synagogue at Yevreysky Street in Odessa, was a native of Berditchev, where his father functioned in the capacity of cantor and where the young Pitze learned the craft. Jacob Bachman, who together with Pitze served alternately in the great synagogue of Odessa, was born in Berditchev and for a time held down a cantorial post in his native city. Yankel Soroker, too, served in a Berditchev synagogue before he was elected cantor of the Shalashna Synagogue

of Odessa.

Pinye Minkowsky, who took Bachman's place in the great synagogue of Odessa and later became the successor to Nisi Blumenthal as chief cantor of the Broder Synagogue, served as a choir boy under Nisi Belzer in Berditchev, in whose home-conservatory he received the best available preparation which any cantor could have wished for.

On the other hand, Yeruchem Hakoton and Nisi Belzer, the great shining stars of Berditchev, received their cantorial education, their experience and practical knowledge in Odessa under the tutelage of such great masters as Betzalel Odessa'er and Nisi Blumenthal.

There was constantly an exchange between the two cities. A steady communication went on between them, back and forth. They had a mutual influence on each other and each was ready to supply what the other lacked and wanted.

But inasmuch as cantors have a predilection for the larger cities, it may be safe to say (and this is borne out by the available data), that the road leading to Odessa was more clogged with members of the cloth than the one going in the opposite direction toward Berditchev.

In time, the Jews of the two cities drifted asunder in their religious views. They differed regarding the manner in which the services in the House of God should be conducted. It was not a question of essence but of method: in other words, what facade the service should present to the world.

Odessa was rather partial to elegance, ornamentation and to the cultured, academically regulated way of praying and presenting the liturgical chants called "Chazanut Haseyder" (orderly cantorate). Berditchev, on the other hand, indifferent to superficial embellishment, put the emphasis on and was inclined toward the rather primitive, but instinctively true, often improvised on the spur of the moment, so-called "Chazanut Haregesh" (inspirational, feelingful chanting).

But, fundamentally, in content, in principal and essential characteristics, there was not much to differentiate one system from the other, for they both shared the identical basis of traditional origin. The old melodies (nusach) that were handed down and bore the stamp and patina of centuries were left unadulterated by any radical alterations inspired by assimilatory tendencies.

Odessa was, however, apt to stress more the role of the cantor than that of the accompanying choir. The singing of the ensemble was, of course, a very enjoyable interlude, but it was the cantor who was expected to be the dominating factor throughout the joint presentation with the choir. After the ensemble finished the composition which was assigned to them, the worshipers were usually ready for the "piece de resistance," when the cantor had his opportunity to show his mettle in a solo, with an occasional background murmer and accord contributed by the choir.

Such a curious phenomenon as Nisi Belzer, a practically mute cantor who conquered Berditchev with the superb singing of his choir, could never have been accepted in Odessa. When Nisi once ventured into Odessa, he

was appropriately received with the great respect which was his due but the general verdict was, "All right, the choir sings beautifully but where is the cantor?" And the Jews of Odessa did not think much of Zeidel Rovner either for the reason that they did not have a very high opinion of his mediocre and very limited voice. As for his compositions, they thought that they contained too many Hopkes (jumping melodies), dance music, and "Mazurka" imitations, which did not appeal to them at all. They dismissed this important craftsman, who was so revered everywhere else with a slighting movement of the hand.

Odessa was the cradle of the development of the so-called star system which found the best expression and personification in Rozumny, who was perhaps the most representative, most characteristic, almost classic example of the personal cult. He was considered the glamorous matinee idol of the cantorial profession, who bewitched audiences and remains a legendary figure to this day.

But to begin at the outset, there was no cantorial art to speak of in Odessa until the arrival on the scene of Betzalel Shulzinger, known under the name of "Tzalel Odessaer" for that very reason, namely for having been the originator of Chazzanut in Odessa. At first, he was by profession a Shochet (person authorized to slaughter fowl and cattle according to Jewish ritual). As was usually the case, every Shochet was also a Baal Tefila (reader of the prayers). The two jobs, in most instances, went together for the reason that smaller communities were not in a position to pay adequate salaries to two employees. Therefore, they chose one man who was able to fulfill both religious functions.

Our hero, too, was such a dual personality, who wore two hats. In addition to slaughtering the poor animals, it was also his duty to conduct the services. True, envious individuals made the cynical remark that at the pulpit he also slaughtered the texts and the melodies but there was no basis whatsoever to their by jealousy inspired insinuations. Just the opposite was true. For a Shochet, Tzalel was a pretty good Baal Tefila, but he did not entertain pretentions to a high standing in the cantorial field.

Once he came before the Rabbi Reb Moishe'le of Savran, Gubernia of Podolia, under whose supervision stood the region of Tzalel's activity, to submit to the prescribed periodic examination of his Chalef (ritual knife used by the Shochet). The Rabbi went over the sharp edge of the blade with his nail to make sure that there was no sign of a notch over the whole length. After a while, he turned to the sweating Shochet and said, "I see in the mirror of the steel of your Chalef that it is your fate to become a famous cantor, a 'landschazzan' of the country. Give up 'Shechita' and concentrate on your true calling, Chazzanuth." "Tzalel" took the advice of the Rabbi and became one of the most famous cantors of all times.

According to another less charitable version of the story, it was not what the Rabbi saw in the reflection of the steel but rather what he felt with his finger that prompted him to volunteer to Reb Tzalel the advice that in his opinion he ought to give up the bloodletting. It seems that in going over several times the length of the sharp edge of the blade, the finger

of the Savraner Rabbi got caught every time in the same groove, indicating to him that there was something wrong with the qualifications of Reb Tzalel for the ritual task of a Shochet. So to spare him the embarrassment of giving him the unvarnished, shocking verdict that he would be obliged to revoke his license, he wrapped what he had to convey to him in a more sweetened pill, in the form of advice to concentrate on the only other profession for which he was suited, which was the cantorate.

That he succeeded beyond all expectations, and that the mishap to the tool of his craft which cost him his job, turned out to have been a blessing in disguise, was one of those quirks and caprices of fate, that reminds one of the uneducated Jew who applied for the job of sexton (shames) in a synagogue, but was rejected by the president because he did not know how to write or even how to sign his name. Left with no other alternative, he went into business, prospered, and in time became a millionaire, but he still could not sign his name. All he had learned was to affix an "X". On one occasion he completed a big transaction with a businessman and had to issue a check for a sum in five digits. When the businessman placed the check before the analphabet and asked him to sign his name, he made the usual "X", saying, "My dear man, if I could sign my name, I would still be the Shames of the Chevra "Ozeir Dalim" (help to the poor) today."

For many years, Tzalel was the cantor of the Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol. His prayers had charm and style. His voice was a powerful baritone of a very good, pleasant quality and he was a master of improvisation. He was a great Talmudic scholar who kept on studying until there was nary a folio of the volumes prescribing the laws of conduct that he had not read.

His forte was composing, in which he revealed originality of thought and approach and great versatility. He possessed a rich imagination and created new melodies for texts which never before had been musically treated by any of his predecessors. He created novel ideas which were incorporated into the liturgy and he can justifiably be called a pathfinder of great merit.

He conceived the idea of composing music for the prayers which are prescribed for the ritual of "Chidoosh Levono" (renewal of the moon), and presented them with his choir under the open sky. He himself had no academic musical education but his pupils, and particularly "Nisi Belzer", wrote down and annotated his compositions later and made them accessible to cantors everywhere.

Tzalel had a peculiar method of composing. For quite a while he did a lot of spade work on a new theme. He used to sit at the table and all his choir boys would be seated in a circle around him. He initiated the singing by presenting a new melody to a certain text of a prayer. The singers chimed in, each with his own idea of a suitable accompaniment or accord of harmony. Some of these were accepted and others rejected by the cantor. The approved version was then repeated several times until all were sufficiently familiar with it. Tzalel now proceeded to put on the table the following section of the text, with his musical interpretation. Again the singers

caught the ball from the master and carried it further. If their improvised accompaniments did not find favor with the cantor, a different variation was tried out. Something was added here and omitted there. It was repeated time and again until it sounded well enough to put aside and go on further.

It was a long and laborious process. The sessions which were held quite frequently lasted for hours at a time. Even after the pieces had been put together and the composition as a whole had been put to bed and committed to memory by all members of the choir, Tzalel was still not content. He kept on polishing and smoothing out the rough edges and adding new substance to the places where there was left a gap which had to be filled in. The masterpiece in its new perfected form had then to be brought once again before the plenum for another few sessions of intensive rehearsals.

Tzalel was by nature a musical genius, a born singer and composer. Although he never saw the inside of a conservatory and had not learned the rules of theory, harmony and composition, he knew by instinct how to distinguish between the right and the wrong way. He had an unerring, perfectly attuned ear. He was a pioneer and the cantorial art, as we know it today, was originated by him. The improvised recitative, the so-called "Shteyger Zogen," as practiced to this day by cantors everywhere, had its roots in ancient tradition, but was formulated and perfected, molded and handed down by Tzalel Odessaer, who, for that reason, is called the "Zeyde (grandfather) of Chazzanuth."

Always remembering the prediction of the Savraner Rabbi that he was fated to become a famous "Landschazzan" (land cantor), he often went out on the road, making guest appearances all over the country. One time in 1826, when he was visiting Berditchev, people flocked to the synagogue to hear the famous guest. No cantor worthy of the title would think of missing the opportunity to hear this renowned colleague. One of the local cantors, who was also a Hebrew teacher named Abrass, brought along his 6 year old young son, who had a beautiful alto voice and was helping him at his religious services, delighting the listeners, who sat throughout the services enthralled, listening intently to the chanting of the visiting Chazzan.

On arriving home, the boy kept on singing and repeating the melodies which he had just heard, to the great surprise and delight of his father, who thereupon decided to take him to Tzalel. The famous cantor was astonished at the way the youngster had managed to catch his phrasing and style just by listening to him once. He was also impressed with the fine sweet voice of the boy and prevailed upon the father to let him take his son with him to Odessa as a choir boy by offering to pay him out on the spot the agreed upon compensation for the next four years in advance.

Well, who could resist such a tempting proposition? Besides Pitze too pleaded with his father to let him go to the big city, where he would become part of a real choir, and have the opportunity to learn at the feet of the great master the art of liturgical chanting. So Tzalel got his way and soon all Odessa was agog with the little soloist, who made people sit up

and marvel.

The youngster proved to be a precious find. He developed into one of the best singers in Tzaiel's choir. His ability brought him quick promotion. He made such rapid progress, that the cantor made him the main soloist of the choir. He was a sensation and people came in droves to listen to the marvelous boy's solos. They could not get over the unusual prowess of the "Pitzele" (tiny) child. He was young and small in stature, so they tagged him with the designation "Pitzele," which in time was shortened to "Pitze," and even when he later became the famous cantor of the great synagogue of Odessa, the tag stuck to him and he was called Pitze Abrass.

All the other cantors of Odessa envied Tzalel who was lucky enough to have gotten hold of a gold mine, which the tiny boy of Berditchev proved to be. They vied for his services and offered him a larger compensation, than Tzalel was able to pay him. The result was that finally one of them succeeded in luring him away from Tzalel and Pitze went over to Cantor Rothouse, who officiated in the large city synagogue. He managed to get hold of the coveted youngster by following him home, when Pitze went for his vacation to visit with his parents. His bid to the father was thirty gold ducats yearly, also paid in advance. He did not last long in his new post (scarcely four years) as mother nature intervened.

He had by now grown up, had passed his Bar-Mitzvah and it was time for his voice to undergo the changes of the period of transition from childhood to puberty. He was not able to sing any longer and as if that wasn't bad enough, fate had an additional blow in store for him. His beloved father suddenly passed away and he had to become the provider for his mother and the whole orphaned family.

Pitze thought it might be advisable to concentrate on some other line of endeavor. So he enlisted as an apprentice in the workshop of a goldsmith.

Years went by and Tzalel Shulsinger had lost track of his former pupil, for whom he had entertained such great hopes. One day as he was walking in the street, strains of a particularly sweet voice caught his sensitive ears. They seemed to emanate from a nearby open window. The timbre of the voice possessed some distinguishing quality, that sounded familiar to him and reminded him of his favorite disciple of years ago. He was curious enough to find out who it was, that sang so beautifully. On entering the room he was glad to discover, that his instinct had been right and the singer was none other than Pitze Abrass, sitting on the work stool, and while hammering away on the various precious metals, was entertaining himself and his fellow apprentices by humming popular tunes.

The goldsmith was happy to see his teacher who was also very glad to have found the young man again and what particularly pleased him was to learn, that in the process of mutation, and as a result of it, Pitze had acquired an adolescent's voice of excellent quality with great promise.

It turned out that after having served his apprenticeship for two years Pitze had mastered the craft well enough to pursue his new vocation on his own. Weighing the problem where to open up his shop he concluded that

the logical place would be Odessa. Besides the fact that the city evoked fond memories of the happy days of his adolescence, in his heart, he entertained and nursed the hope that the people would still remember him, lend a hand and be of help in establishing himself in his new endeavor. And sure enough his old acquaintances of the halcyon days were glad to patronize him and he had more work than he could handle.

Things were indeed looking up for him and he had all but forgotten about the illusions and dreams of his boyhood. Of course some memory still lingered on and occasionally he felt the urge to break out in song, but that was just for his own amusement to relieve the monotony of the long hours he nowadays was obliged to put in at work in his shop.

"I'm making out very well", he told his unexpected visitor "and I'm quite content". Reb Tzalel was, however, not very enthusiastic about his former disciple's newly chosen profession. "Throw away your overalls, your tools and the dirty menial labor," he counseled him. "It is not a life calling suitable for a young man endowed with such natural gifts and precious talents. Do not waste your time and energy in the workshop, where you don't belong. You are destined for a more exalted task: to serve your people in the sacred service of the Lord. I'm confident that in time your voice will possess a mightier sound than even that of your sledge hammer on the anvil." Tzalel's repeated eloquent arguments finally had the desired effect.

Pitze took the great master's advice. He began concentrating once more on developing his innate artistic inclinations and devoting his time to the pursuit of music. He closed up shop and went back to his beloved teacher, singing in his chorus as baritone. After two more years his voice had greatly improved. But essentially he had still remained a "natursinger". Magnanimous cultured friends of his, like school principals Stern, Leon Derblich and "Oberlehrer" (high school teacher) Pinsker got together and decided to send him to Italy for further musical study. Armed with several letters of recommendation and a regular monthly stipend from a generous patron of the arts, Abrass, delighted at the great opportunity that opened up before him, left for Milan, Italy.

On the way to his ultimate destination he stopped off in Brody for the purpose of paying a visit to the home of the banker and philanthropist Moses Kalir and deliver to him a letter of recommendation from one of his friends in Odessa.

The banker received him with gracious hospitality and before letting him leave, he asked him to sing something. Pitze of course was glad to oblige.

By a strange coincidence there was also another guest present at the home of the banker at the same time. He was a visitor from Tarnopol, Michael Perl, by profession a pharmacist. Just as was the host, he too was enchanted by the young man's voice and artistic rendition of the chant, which he had just presented.

Deeply moved, he declared that their chance meeting was apparently heaven-ordained. "For it so happens", he continued "that in Tarnopol

my congregation has decided to introduce a modern, consistent with musical principles regulated divine service and I was given the assignment to look around for a suitable cantor for our religious association."

Abrass struck him as the right man for that post and entreating him to cancel his plan of traveling to Italy, he urged him to leave instead at once with him for Tarnopol.

Moses Kalir also seconded the motion. Pitze too liked the idea and it didn't require much coaxing on the part of the pharmacist assisted by the banker to overcome the young man's reluctance to scrap the contemplated trip for a postgraduate course in Italy.

As was predicted by Mr. Perl he was unanimously engaged on the spot as the chief cantor of the choir synagogue of Tarnopol, Galicia.

After a two year stint in that post, he was called to Lemberg, where he was installed with great fanfare to preside over the cantorial "Omud" of the central community synagogue, in which capacity he served for the next sixteen years adorning his pulpit with ever growing authority.

By then the name of Pitze Abrass had already acquired a glittering sheen as one of the rising stars on the cantorial horizon. However the best was still to come. The crowning achievement of his upward spiraling career was his appointment to the position of chief cantor of the great Yevreysky Street synagogue in Odessa. He filled this prominent post with great distinction, gaining world fame in the process both as an outstanding master interpreter of the prayers, as well as a composer of note of liturgical works. For a quarter of a century he stood at the altar of the largest house of worship of Odessa, until he breathed his last in 1884. He was barely 64 years old when the end came, to the great loss of his own community and all Jewish communities of the world. Among the members of his bereaved family was also the famous singer of the Imperial Opera, Borisov whose wife was the daughter of Pitze Abrass.

Abrass was a prolific composer, a great number of whose musical interpretations of prayers have withstood the eroding effect and passed the test of time, as witness the fact that they still form part of modern day repertoires of synagogue choruses as well as cantors.

However when Nisi Blumenthal, the cantor of the Odessa Broder Synagogue, was asked what he thought of the compositions of Pitze Abrass, that had been published in a volume under the title "Zimras Yoh", he gave it as his considered opinion that this was a "misnomer."

"The work," he said "should've more properly been entitled 'Zimras Neyn'" ("Yoh" in Yiddish means yes, and "neyn" means no).

Cantor Joseph Singer of Vienna, in writing in the "Kantoren Zeitung" was also critical of the work. His negative evaluation, he claimed, was based on the fact that "Abrass employed melodies that were akin to ballads, that the solos of the cantor were exercises in acrobatics and the compositions seemed to him to have been written not for a house of worship but for the concert stage." This was, of course, only one man's opinion.

Pitze, quite understandably, wrote primarily in a way that suited him-

self, the power and range of whose voice was astounding. He was a baritone by nature and timbre. He also possessed an excellently developed chest falsetto with which he was able to execute remarkable feats of virtuosity, which mesmerized his audience and in a refreshing change of pace he would occasionally also use the device of what is called "dibber", reciting the text "parlando" (Sprech-stimme).

When the Cantor of Budapest, Denhof, passed away, Abrass too gave an audition, but even though he made a big hit with the crowd, the solons were less enthusiastic. Taking their cue from the criticism of Blumenthal, they too voiced a similar opinion by characterizing Pitze's audition as"Zimras Neyn".

Tzalel Odessa'er had the peculiar habit of placing the palm of his right hand on his cheek bone while singing and simultaneously pressing his thumb tightly upon the region of the frequently protruding glottis, the mouth of the windpipe. People used to wonder about the significance of this characteristic funny pose of his but naturally nobody dared to embarass Reb Tzalel by bringing up the delicate subject and questioning him about it. However, some one finally did on the occasion when Tzalel who had retired, was about to leave for the Holy Land to live out his declining years there. A great crowd of his friends and admirers came to the port to bid goodbye to the beloved religious dignitary. Among them was his intimate friend and close supporter, the prominent banker Osias Chivass.

The story goes that in the course of taking leave from the veteran master, the financier turned to his old friend and addressing him in a jovial manner said, "Before we part, I wish you would clear up a matter which has for a long time been on my mind and intrigued me but which I always somehow forgot to ask you about. What is the reason for your using thus your hand and thumb when you sing? In what way does that assist you in the chanting?"

It was a ticklish question but Tzalel was not one who could be put on the spot by an unexpected teasing query. He had a ready answer for his pal and confidante, "You are indeed like the 'Chochom,'" the wise guy of the "Haggadah," (the story of the Exodus from Egypt) "I have been doing it for the past fifty years and I myself do not know why so you want me to tell you the reason in one minute when I have already one foot on the ship?"

He was known for his sharp wit, deep human understanding, shrewd mind and quick repartee about which many illuminating episodes were circulated.

A great number of his disciples and friends came to the ship to bid him farewell. Yielding to their insistent requests that he leave them as "letzt-gelt" something to remember him and the occasion by, Reb Tzalel as a parting loving gesture, chanted for his assembled admirers his version of the prayer "Ato Noseyn Yod" (Thou stretchest out a hand to sinners) which is the highlight of the "Neelah" (concluding) service of "Yom Kippur," the Day of Atonement.

With the strains of this brilliant composition of his, a figurative warm

handshake, he took final leave from his devoted wellwishers.

It was the most cherished present he could've rewarded their loyalty with. For this musical interpretation of Tzalel Odessa'er of the "Neelah" prayer, ranks as one of the most valued lasting pearls of his inventive genius among the timeless works of synagogue chants.

One of Tzalel's most notable feat was his ingenious musical interpretation of "Ato Hivdalto", the prayer of the closing ritualistic session of Yom Kippur.

He concentrated primarily on the "Tfilos" of the Day of Atonement. Excellent examples of his creative versatility are "V'al Anshey Hashoron", "Umeshechorav Beys Mikdosheynuh" and "Ato Noseyn Yod," all part of the Yom Kippur devotional litany.

But his "Ato Hivdalto" was considered superior to all of his works. Only scraps of it survived. The practical unavailability of this liturgical gem was exploited by an old timer cantor Bloomin.

As he related the amusing story, he on one occasion showed his own composition of "Ato Hivdalto" to Aryeh Leyb Rutman, who always spoke his mind bluntly. Not only was he not impressed, but as Bloomin went on with demonstrating his opus, he kept saying "bloteh" (it's slush). When Bloomin nevertheless continued, Rutman made an even more devastating assessment of what he was offered, calling it "Bloteh sh'be-bloteh [the worst crap]".

Bloomin ostensibly took Aryeh Leyb's criticism goodnaturedly. But when they met a short time later and were talking about famous cantors of yore, he glibly threw in, the name of Tzalel Odessa'er, naively asking Rutman's opinion about him. "One of the topnotchers,", replied Aryeh Leyb, "why do you ask?"

"Oh! leafing through my library", said Bloomin, "I found a yellowed sheet of faded music, which seems to be a manuscript to the text of 'Ato Hivdalto' and in hardly legible letters it alleges to be a copy of the original from the pen of Tzalel".

"What?" jumped up Rutman, "You have such a precious gem in your possession and you are keeping it under your hat? It is your duty to let the world know about the great find. Quickly go home and bring it to me." Everyday thereafter he came to Bloomin's house requesting to see the manuscript.

The latter put him off with the excuse that unaware of its great value, he had not paid any attention to it and left it where he discovered it and now has to go once again through the great mass of old music to locate it, but as soon as he'll find it, he'll bring it to Aryeh Leyb.

He picked up some place an old crumpled dirty yellowed piece of discarded music paper and he began putting down on it in ink that he had first diluted with water, his own version of "Ato Hivdalto" that had been labeled bloteh and bloteh sh'bebloteh by Rutman. It was arduous work but by the time he was done with it, it looked like a relic from medieval times.

When he phoned Rutman that his long search had been crowned with

success, having finally located Tzalel's "Ato Hivdalto", he begged him not to waste a minute but come over with the treasured gem. As he began reading the hardly distinguishable notes from the crumpled sheet of music, his eyes shone and as he continued singing, ever so often he interrupted himself with exclamations like "marvellous", "heavenly", "a real masterpiece", "celestial music". Bloomin had the satisfaction of seeing how completely a great expert reversed himself in the appraisal of his composition once he was led to believe that it had been written by a recognized authority. Imagine Rutman's embarassment when Bloomin admitted the trickery.

It reminds one of the story of the bet which Enrico Caruso once made with a fellow opera singer. The world famous star was of the opinion, that the audience applauds a popular singer not so much for the quality of his rendition, but even more for his fame. He contended that even if another not so universally popular singer would on some occasion render the same aria better than the acclaimed star, he would not receive the justly deserved thunderous cheering. His counterpart held the opposite view, namely that the public considers the performances, not the performer.

Soon the opportunity came to find out who was right. The opera to be presented was *Cavalleria Rusticana* and as chance would have it, the tenor who was announced was indisposed and Caruso was asked to take over his role. It happened too late to even print the slips advising the changes in the cast.

The opera opens with Turiddu singing "La Siciliana" behind the curtain. Caruso delivered the love serenade in his inimitable style and incomparable voice — but the audience, believing that it was the scheduled tenor who was singing responded only with the lukewarm applause with which he was usually rewarded.

It was only when Caruso emerged from behind the curtain, and they realized that it was he who sang the aria that they belatedly gave him the enthusiastic ovation due such a celebrated star. The incident proved beyond a doubt that the audience listens with different ears to the performance of an established star and to that of a less famous singer. "Unfair," you say? Well, it's an old story. "Life is unfair." Most people get less than they deserve while the more fortunate ones receive more than their fair share and there is no appeal from the ruling of "Destiny".

CHAPTER 7

THE GREAT CANTORS WHOM TZALEL ODESSA'ER INSTRUCTED AND TRAINED

"Yankel the Heyzeriger" (the hoarse one) — The competition between him and Nisi Belzer, another pupil of Tzalel — His sudden tragic death at the altar — Boruch Shorr was also a disciple of the great master — Because of a slur he quit Lemberg in favor of New York — An apology from Lemberg brought a reconciliation and made him return to its fold — Pize Abrass a great talent with scant knowledge — The clashes between the Galician and the Russian Jewish inhabitants of Odessa.

In the previous chapter, we took leave of Tzalel Odessa'er as he boarded a ship headed toward the Holy Land with the intention of settling there. With tears in their eyes, his fans sent him away with their heartfelt bon voyage wishes.

He hoped to live out his twilight years in the peaceful serene atmosphere of the holy city of Jerusalem. Unfortunately, it was not destined for him to enjoy his sojourn in the holy city for long. A fatal illness befell him and no sooner was he taken to the Bikur Cholim Hospital than his condition was diagnosed as critical. Every effort by the doctors to save his life was of no avail.

Feeling that the end was near, Reb Tzalel sat up in bed, washed his hands and recited the "Viduy" (confession), swan song of the great master of liturgy.

With song on his trembling lips, exhausted from the exertion, he sank

back onto his pillow and gave up his pure soul to his Maker. He passed away in 1860.

With his lamented passing from the scene, the Jewish world lost the beloved "grandfather of the sacred craft." He was the architect of the structure of our "Nuschuos" (certified melody treasure). It was he who laid the solid foundation for the future flourishing of the cantorial art. It may be stated, without fear of contradiction, that he struck the key note and drew the lines for the further development of Chazzonuth, not only in Odessa and the whole of Russia, but throughout the Jewish world.

He was irreplaceable, but his great spirit and the fruits of his blessed, tireless activities remained and did not cease exercising a continuous and far reaching influence upon the Jewish musical life of future generations. He left behind a very rich legacy: his great disciples who continued to spin the silken and golden threads of the wondrous creations of their departed master.

About one of them, Nisi Belzer, who was among the most important, we have already written in previous chapters. Now let's turn our attention to some of the others of his great numbers of pupils who went on to great accomplishments, and get acquainted with some pertinent data of their interesting lives.

Yankel the Heyzeriger's real name was Gottlieb and he was a native of Odessa and the son of the chief shochet (ordained ritual slaughterer) of the city. From his earliest youth on, he sang in Tzalel's choir, advanced steadily and was finally elevated to the important status of soloist. With his pleasant alto voice and his skillful, adroit manner of executing the solos, he was a big success with the worshipers.

In the course of his extensive apprenticeship under the tutelage of Tzalel, he learned the essence of his master's style of chanting the ritual. One day, the bright thought occurred to the youngster that he knew already all that Tzalel could teach him and it was time for him to strike out for himself.

But first, he had to have an opportunity to show what he could do at the pulpit. What gabbay (trustee) would allow such a young whippersnapper to lead a religious service? But the shrewd Yankel knew his way around and managed to solve this problem. He used to bribe the sextons of the different regional houses of worship by slipping them a slab of liver, an occasional sweetbread, a derma or a spleen, which he succeeded in stealing from his father who used to bring these delicacies home from the slaughterhouse. In return for these handouts, the beadles, failing to enforce strictly the rules, would look the other way and let the ambitious little fellow slip through and ascend the pulpit. In this way, he managed to chant the services each Sabbath in a different synagogue, with the result that soon he became pretty well known.

People all over town took note of his apparently considerable talent and fine qualities. The general comments were very laudatory. Tzalel, himself, gave as his considered opinion that this pupil of his had the making of an artist, who could go very far and make the world pay him homage.

He was not yet nineteen years old when he was elected to the cantorial post of one of the larger synagogues of his hometown. It was indeed an auspicious beginning for his career. From Odessa, he proceeded to Yelisevetgrad, where he served as chief cantor of that prominent Jewish center with distinction for several years. His star was rising.

Suddenly, he was stricken with a severe case of chronic hoarseness. There circulated a rumor that some of his own colleagues, driven by jealousy and envy, allegedly tried to poison him but succeeded only partially and damaged his vocal cords.

It goes without saying that there was nothing to substantiate any such suspicion. The actual cause of the malady was that during his tenure in Yelisevetgrad there broke out a bloody pogrom, which lasted for several days. Yankel Gottlieb fled into a dark closed cellar, where he remained hidden during the whole time for fear of his life. The cramped place where he had lain in a crouched position, choking and coughing, was damp and moldy, and when he finally emerged from the dusty hole into the fresh air, he at once became aware of a disturbing fact. He had the feeling that something had happened to his voice. He had contracted an odd ailment. It somehow had lost its brilliance and its former timbre.

Nevertheless, he kept on singing and his congregants remained greatly impressed by his prayers and appreciative of his masterful recitatives. Some listeners were even of the opinion that his hoarseness added an extra dimension, a certain special charm, sweetness and characteristic quality and appeal to his voice. There are many such cases of American crooners, whose skyrocketing fame dated from the time that their voices acquired a husky and hoarse quality as an aftereffect of a throat malady.

Before long, Yankel proved conclusively that the prognosis of Tzalel Odessa'er was accurate. His progress was remarkably swift and pronounced. He made tremendous strides in his artistic development. His religious services evoked fervid, emotional storms in the hearts of the worshipers, who showered him with concrete tokens of their deep gratitude and adulation.

But not content with the accolades and hozzanahs of his immediate circle, Yankel, "feeling his oats," was yearning for tribute and recognition from the world at large, figuring that this was his due. So after mapping out an extensive tour, he took to the road with his choir. In the course of their travels, they covered almost all of Lithuania and Poland, and they gathered up considerable new laurels as they went along. Yankel the Heyzeriger had every reason to be gratified by the reaction to his guest appearances, which were invariably most successful and exceeded even his most optimistic expectations.

One of the principal targets of his campaign for winning world acclaim was Berditchev. It was considered axiomatic in liturgical circles that if a cantor was able to get the stamp of approval from the seasoned mevinim (authoritative experts) of that city, he was established. Yankel, too, felt the need to court their favor and he made frequent trips to that Ukranian center of Chazzonuth, where Nisi Belzer was riding high.

There began a lively rivalry between him and the intruder who proved to be pretty stiff competition to the local master. Nisi's perennial antagonist, Yeruchem Hakoton, received the visitor with open arms, ceding him with warm hospitality his own pulpit for a Sabbath service and heaping on him unusually lavish praise afterwards.

It certainly must have taken quite a bit to impress and surprise a liturgical giant like Yeruchem to such an extent that he was induced to impulsively exclaim, "He ought not to be called Yankel der heyzeriger, but rather 'Yankel der Koyler' (the killer). That surely would be a more apt characterization in view of the undeniable fact that with his superior talent, he towers so high above his colleagues so as to kill off all competition."

And then abruptly just when everything looked so promising, he was felled by a tragic strike of fate. It happened in Kiev in the midst of a religious service. The synagogue was jammed with worshipers who were hanging on every sound that issued from the mouth of the famous cantor, who stood at the altar putting his heart and soul into the chanting of the "Long Av Horachamim" (the Sabbath morning service contains also a short Av Horachamim prayer) when suddenly, without any warning, Yankel Gottlieb slumped to the floor, his voice silenced and his career terminated by the cruel bony hand of the angel of death. His span of life was cut off in his very prime, after a mere forty-eight years.

In equally tragic fashion ended the life of another famous former disciple of Tzalel Odessa'er, Boruch Shorr, who also gave up his pure soul while standing in the house of the Lord, and praying for his flock, but with the difference that unlike Yankel's, Shorr's demise occurred after he had lived a full fruitful life and had reached the patriarchal age of eighty-one.

The scene in this lamentable case was the capital of Galicia, Lemberg, to the service of whose Jewish community Boruch Shorr had devoted a lifetime of faithful and tireless effort. The time was the last day of the Passover festival, and the venerable master, chanting with a vigorous, powerful and fiery temperament belying his advanced age, was in the midst of his recitation of the prayer "Umipney chatoeynu" (on account of our sins) when his heart stopped. The stunned congregation of the central synagogue saw the beloved servant of God gasp his last and his lifeless body fall into the arms of some worshipers, who rushed up to the altar just in the nick of time.

He was born in 1823 in Lemberg, Galicia. His father, Chayim Moshe was the grandson of the famous author of the Seyfer: "T'vooas Shor" and a great Talmudic scholar in his own right and a "chusid" of the Rizsiner wonder rabbi. His mother Channa Yoota, was the business woman, who provided the necessities of life for her family while her husband devoted his time to spiritual pursuits.

Boruch'l was only nine years old when Tzalel, on one of his tours, came to his native city, Lemberg, in 1832 for a guest appearance. As was his custom, when he arrived in a strange city, he inquired where he could

get some talented boys for the purpose of assisting him at the religious service.

Boruch'l had already evidenced great promise and had gained a reputation in the musical circles of the city as a very gifted child. So it was natural for his name to have been suggested to the visiting celebrated cantor as that of a suitable singer, who ought to be recruited for the improvised choir. Nothing could have pleased Boruch'l more than to be given the rare opportunity of singing, even though just temporarily, with such a great master. When Tzalel found that the little fellow with the sweet alto voice possessed a remarkable innate inclination and endowment for liturgical music and enormous potentialities for great achievement in that field under proper direction, he persuaded his parents to let him take the boy with him to Odessa to join his permanently-based choir. He took the talented youngster under his wing, paying him special attention and indoctrinating him with the fundamental principles of the traditional chants of the synagogue.

After having spent two years under the supervision of the most expert cantorial educator of that era, he served his second tour of apprenticeship in the choir of Yeruchem Hakoton, who himself was formerly a disciple of Tzalel, where he served his apprenticeship together with Peyse Chotiner. From such rich fountains did he draw his inspiration and his spiritual nourishment. Under the tutelage of the two great masters, whose inexhaustible reservoirs were at his disposal, Boruch'l made such rapid progress that when he became "Bar Mitzvah" (thirteen years of age) and returned home for celebration of the significant milestone of his young life, he was considered ready and competent enough to lead the Sabbath devotion at the pulpit of the great central synagogue of his native city. The young celebrant acquitted himself with aplomb, displaying in the execution of his difficult task such rare genuine talent that all of Lemberg Jewry were agog with the extraordinary success of the prodigy.

Next, a new change of scenery was in store for the teenager. It is not clear why Boruch'l chose a city in Roumania of all places as his next destination. But if we believe that the movements of an individual are directed from above, the logical explanation for this step becomes very clear indeed. The girl who was destined to become his partner in life happened to be born in Roumania, so what else could her poor destined bridegroom-to-be do but betake himself to the land of "mameliga" and "brinza" (corn mush) in an effort to find her.

Needless to say, Boruch'l had nothing of the kind in mind, when he journeyed to Yassy. He became a member of the choir of the local cantor, intent on adding to his knowledge of the craft, which he had chosen as his life-calling. Here, too, he excelled, towering over the other assistants of the cantor, with his superior ability and quality of his voice.

He soon attracted the attention of the president of the congregation, who by virtue of his wealth and influence was one of the outstanding pillars of society. Sensing that the brilliant chorist had a bright future, he saw in him a desirable prospect for a son-in-law. Luckily, his daughter

seconded the motion, so that even if the young Meshorer (choirboy) had demurred, he was outvoted, three to one (the mother included) but as it happened he also gladly voted with the majority, making it unanimous. So they married and lived happily ever after.

It proved to be a distinct advantage to have a rich father-in-law and not be obliged to earn right away a living. The young "balebeysel" (husband) still felt keenly the need of broadening his musical knowledge before embarking on his career as a professional cantor and the parents of his bride readily volunteered to finance his praiseworthy endeavor.

With this generous backing, Boruch Shorr was enabled to spend several years in diligent study under some of the best teachers, thereby stocking his arsenal with new precious tools of indispensable knowledge and familiarity with the principles of theory, harmony and counterpoint.

The result of this thorough preparation was that at the age of twenty-three, his first position was as the full-fledged cantor of Chotin (Bessarabia). Shorr undoubtedly was one of the best-equipped, best-tutored and, in addition, one of the best musically endowed cantors of his time.

Two years later, in 1848, he accepted a call from the community of Kamenetz Podolsk. But there, too, he did not tarry for a very long time. His in-laws did not look favorably at being separated from the young couple by such a distance and they proceeded to remedy the situation, and when a president who is a rich mogul to boot sets his heart on something, he usually gets his way. In 1851, a vacancy having occurred in his synagogue, his father-in-law got the consent of the hierarchy of the congregation to dispatch an invitation to Boruch Shorr to return to Yassy, where he not so long ago had served as a chorist, this time as the "Chazzan D'moso" (chief cantor).

Now the family was reunited, but not only were they happy with the new turn of events, but so were all the Jewish inhabitants of the city. What at first looked like nepotism, turned out to be agreat, inestimable acquisition and an unfathomed blessing for the whole community.

By the time he had come back to Yassy, he had immeasurably grown and advanced with giant strides. He had gained in stature and had already to his credit a goodly number of compositions, which had been well received by the professionals, who detected in the young cantor a remarkable skill and a rich imaginative power of musical creation.

This period of his life in the Roumanian city was the most fruitful and productive phase of his career. Here he turned out gems of liturgical chants in greater abundance than ever before or afterward. His "Lechu Neranonu" (Oh Come, Let's Exult) from the "Slichos" (Forgiveness) service; his famous "Omnom Keyn" (Ay 'tis Thus) from the "Kol Nidre" (All Vows) atonement service, which to this day is a standard classic feature of synagogue repertoires all over the world; his "Od Yiskor Lonu" (He Will Yet Remember) from the High Holy Day services, which also has been adopted universally and is being sung by cantors and choirs everywhere with undiminished appeal to the lovers of liturgical music,

spread his name far and wide.

The name "Boruch Shorr" acquired a considerable significance and importance in liturgical musical circles, as well as in the councils of the leading elders of congregations. Whenever the question of choosing a cantor was on the agenda, his name invariably used to crop up among the principal and most desirable candidates considered.

Even in Hungary, people became well aware of the new star rising on the cantorial horizon and when a vacancy occurred in one of the principal temples of the Budapest community, the famous "Rombach Temple," a call went out to the cantor of Yassy whose praises were sung by professionals. It was a considerable step forward in every respect and Boruch Shorr filled the post with great distinction and competent authority to the delight of all the Jews of the Hungarian capital.

Although he was beloved, feted, adored and generously rewarded by his congregation, he did not remain long in this important position. He longed to return to his home town, his native city of Lemberg, and his heart's desire was fulfilled eventually. In 1859, he was appointed chief cantor of the great central synagogue of the Galician capital, where he had officiated when he became Bar Mitzvah. Here he at last really felt at home and it was his firm intention to continue to serve for as long as he lived at the pulpit of this house of God.

But it was not meant to be. The Jews of Lemberg were extremely happy when they finally succeeded in bringing back to the fold their "landsman," who in the course of the years of his absence had managed to achieve world renown. Boruch Shorr reigned supreme. His name became a byword, the pride of all Galicia. His religious services were the high point of the week to which people looked forward with great pleasureable anticipation. So it went on for thirty-one long years. During all that time, not a ripple disturbed the blissful harmony and mutual high regard between the adored, revered and esteemed cantor and his grateful congregation.

Suddenly, a storm broke out. Not content with the world-wide reputation which he had gained as one of the most ingenious composers of liturgical works, the chief cantor of Lemberg was led by his ambitions into a strange territory far afield from his own metier. In an effort to extend his horizon, he decided to try his hand at the alien craft of writing an operetta and he composed the music to a libretto entitled "Shimshon Hagibor" (Samson the Mighty). At the premiere of his operetta that took place in 1890, which incidentally was a big hit, there were insistent cries of "author" and Shorr was obliged to take several curtain calls on the stage of the Yiddish Theatre.

The ultrapious sect considered such conduct on the part of a religious dignitary unbecoming and downright condemnable, and demanded his removal from office or that he at least be disciplined, for his unpardonable behavior. He was brought before Rabbi Reb Itzeniyu Ettinger and fined by depriving him for four weeks of the privilege of ascending the pulpit. In retaliation for this insult to his pride, which he felt was entirely undeser-

ved, the miffed Boruch Shorr resigned from his post and sailed away to America, where he adorned the altar at the Dukler Mogen Avrohom Synagogue on Attorney Street in downtown New York.

In spite of his advanced age, Shorr's exceptional faculties had remained unimpaired. He still was the great, immensely gifted master, the sensation of New York, whom the Jews of America quickly took to their hearts and showered with concrete tokens of their affection and esteem. But their joy in the new cantor was shortlived. The Jews of Lemberg missed very much their beloved cantor, who for over a generation had been a fixture of their communal life. They missed the familiar voice and prayer and they were determined to do something about it. They dispatched peace envoys to New York, bearing apologies and peace offerings for the unjustly and grievously mistreated cantor, importuning him to reconsider and heed the request of all the Jews of Lemberg to forget and forgive and come back home.

The soft-hearted Shorr relented, and when the delegation returned with the sorely missed prodigal son, the cup of joy of the populace of the Galician metropolis overflowed. There was dancing in the streets. Boruch Shorr was greeted with music and the fans carried him on their shoulders in triumph through the streets of Lemberg.

Once again, he was reunited with his orphaned pulpit, to which he henceforth remained faithful until he breathed his last on that fateful Passover festival, when he was summoned to join the heavenly chorus.

Another outstanding pupil of Tzalel Odessa'er who, in addition to the fact that they were both disciples of the same master, had something else in common with Boruch Shorr, was Pitze (Yehoshua) Abrass. Like Shorr, he too, occupied a cantorial post in Lemberg at one time. From there, he drifted to Odessa, the seat of his great teacher and mentor, who, as mentioned in the last chapter, expended much effort and hard work on this pupil in a determined endeavor to develop his potentialities, which in Tzalel's estimation were considerable enough to warrant his special attention.

Later on, when he arrived in Odessa, from Lemberg, to occupy the position of chief cantor of the great central synagogue located on Yevrevsky Street, he was already well known in his chosen field.

Pitze's voice was a lyric baritone of rare beauty and quality, soft and mellow, and it had all of the finest nuances that could enhance the charm of a human voice. In addition, he was blessed with a remarkably flexible, natural coloratura, with which he was able to execute the most complicated, highly artistic, breathtaking roulades, florid vocal passages, trills and runs. He was also considered one of the most gifted exponents of "Shteyger Zogechtz," tradition-true improvisation. His handling of the cantorial solos in ensemble singing with the chorus showed keen musical intuition, refined taste, vision and imagination rarely equalled by any of his colleagues.

As for his personality, Pitze outwardly presented the image of a veritable magnate. With his elegant, well-groomed appearance, his aristo-

cratic bearing, his bushy long hair, that was fashionable in artistic circles, together with his ever-present, characteristic silk hat, he was a fascinating sight that never failed to attract the attention of passersby.

In harmonious conformity with his personal facade, this cantor's home was also in a literal sense his castle, a palatial residence, every nook and corner of which glittered and shone with opulence and affluence. He acted and looked the part of a matinee idol and lived in the style to which a famous star would usually be accustomed.

Despite all his brilliant musical virtues and phenomenal qualities which stamped him as an outstanding singer, there still was one important ingredient, one very essential element, in woeful short supply. Our hero was pretty deficient in Hebraic education. He lacked a solid Talmudic background and this often resulted in his mispronouncing words in the text of the prayers, and joining or separating them in the wrong places.

Pinye Minkowsky relates that when Abrass was auditioning for a position in the great synagogue of Odessa, Tzalel came to hear his former pupil. The assembled congregants naturally watched the great master intently in an effort to gauge his reaction and were puzzled when they noted that during the services conducted by Pitze, Tzalel ever so often got up from his seat and bowed his head in the direction of the reader. After the conclusion of the devotional service, he was asked what the meaning of his curious gesture was. Tzalel explained, "It is very simple. One of the precepts of the Bible is that one should rise when he meets a 'greis'. (In German, greis means old man and in Yiddish it means error, blunder, mistake.) I only followed the prescribed procedure and stood up before each and every 'greis,' paying my respects." But that was in the early phase of Abrass' career. As he matured, there was a noticeable marked improvement in this respect too.

He grew consistently in his art and in time earned universal recognition as one of the towering pillars of the cantorial fraternity. Not only was he an eminently able interpreter of the holy prayers, but also a very talented composer who created a number of valuable liturgical works, in which he demonstrated ingeniousness and versatility. Many of his chants have withstood the erosive effect of time and have retained their freshness, as proven by the fact that they continue to form a part of the musical repertoire of synagogue choirs.

Before Pitze Abrass was elected to his post in Odessa, Nisi Blumenthal was on the scene and for a while they shared the same pulpit. But to clear up the somewhat complicated situation that existed originally, we must add a footnote and go back to the time when the Jewish communal life of the city had its real beginning.

The impetus for the growth and expansion of the city and for the steady influx of Jewish immigrants was given by the conquest of the maritime region encompassing all the cities situated on the shores of the Black Sea by the Russian army under Marshal Potemkin as a result of his victory over the Turkish garrison. At the same time, the Russians occupied the nearby island on which was to eventually rise the mammoth port city

of Odessa. As the city grew at a rapid pace to unexpected proportions, more and more Jews poured in from Galicia. These were mostly well-educated, intelligent people with a cultural background, who because of their ability, knowledge and experience prospered in the new environment into which they had been transplanted and established themselves as the elite and upper strata of society.

On the other hand, the newcomers, who kept streaming in from various regions of the Russian empire, were largely ultrapious members of the Chassidic sect, well-versed in the sacred scriptures, with no secular education and no practical worldly knowledge, or simple, unskilled laborers and coarse merchants without culture and refinement.

Understandably, a deep chasm separated the two camps. The two different groups had very little in common and went their own separate ways, ignoring each other and even hating each other in many instances.

The Galician fraternity, a great many of whom had originally come from the city of Brody and vicinity, organized themselves into a religious association. They hired a provisional building and converted it into a temporary house of worship, naming it the "Broder Synagogue." As their cantor, they engaged Nisi Blumenthal.

The Russian Jews were split into two extreme camps, the scrupulously observant Chassidic followers of their respective wonder Rabbis on the one hand and "Amcho," the religion-wise indifferent, common people on the other hand, were scattered about the town and used rented locations for their devotional practices. They did not, however, as yet possess a cantor of note.

That this primitive state of affairs was unwholesome and that in the long run it was bound to become unbearable was inevitable. The growing community could not forever remain divided into two hostile camps. An attempt was made to bring about some sort of cooperation between the dissident factions.

Beset with the bickering, wrangling rivalry for position that went on ceaselessly between the different groups of Jewish inhabitants, the city fathers and governmental authorities took the initiative toward unification by proposing to help in a project designed to build a central large synagogue. This welcome news electrified all parties, inducing them to vow their whole-hearted cooperation in seeing the matter through. It was to be a joint undertaking with maximum contributions from all concerned. The common interest worked wonders and the long-absent unity became indeed a reality, but it only lasted as long as the work of erecting the holy edifice was in progress.

No sooner did the magnificent, huge house of prayer take shape and no sooner was the festive dedication ceremony of the sanctuary over, than the superficial harmony and cooperation evaporated and flew out of the stained windows of the sacred dwelling of the Lord.

And what would you venture to guess was the primary stumbling block which triggered the renewal of strife, quarreling and skirmishing? Of course, nothing else but the question of cantors. The members of Gali-

cian origin naturally brought along with them their own cantor Nisi Blumenthal, who had served them at their temporary synagogue and who in their opinion was the best one. The Russian members, while conceding the right of their counterparts to install their holdover cantor into the reader's post of the new synagogue, at the same time asserted their right and privilege to choose an additional cantor of their own, so after a protracted process of elimination, Pitze Abrass was declared the winner in the contest. He took over his duties, alternating with the incumbent Nisi Blumenthal in conducting the prayer sessions.

The arrangement cannot be said to have been an unqualified success. The natives of Brody could not abide Pitze's patent ignorance of the meaning of words which, however, did not bother their Russian co-religionists, as they themselves too, possessed very little education. On the other hand, Blumenthal's modernism, low-keyed style and radicalism in religious matters did not suit the Russian membership, who were more or less observant Jews.

Heated discussions which were the order of the day pointed up the divergence of views. Inevitably, matters came to a head. Unable to compose their differences, fights were bound to break out. The Russians, clinging more faithfully to traditional usage, insisted on having the "Bimah," the platform, in the center of the sanctuary, but the more sophisticated Broder landsleit preferred the modern fashion of placing the estrade in the front, near the ark. As the latter made up the wealthy, more influential group, they had their way and succeeded in pushing through their own ideas.

But the Russians did not give up the fight. At a stormy meeting, the question was re-examined and the decision reversed. But after the Bimah had been relocated in accordance with the latest instructions and safely erected in the center of the synagogue, the Galicians, determined to foil the project of their antagonists, raided the house of God in the middle of the night and hauled away the newly built Bimah, lock, stock, and barrel.

As the hate-filled, explosive situation was untenable and the barrier between the contending parties was unbridgeable, they had to come to the parting of the ways. The Russians were in the majority and it was clear that the Galicians would be obliged to cede them the synagogue and move on, and so they did.

Once again, they went their separate ways. In 1841, the Galicians erected their own temple, the Broder Synagogue, which was named "Heychel L'Neorim" (Temple for the Enlightened), taking along their own cantor, who henceforth reigned supreme in the new holy edifice, together with the famous Rabbi Schwabacher.

Pitze Abrass, of course, remained the sole chief cantor of the great central synagogue, but not for long. He was given another colleague to share his pulpit with, shortly thereafter.

The newcomer was brought to Odessa, just as was Pitze, from Lemberg and was none other than the great Jacob Bachman. A new chapter of lively rivalry began, but that is another and a far more suspenseful story.

CHAPTER 8

ADDITIONAL INTERESTING EPISODES IN THE CANTORIAL CAREER OF TZALEL ODESSA'ER

How he managed to feed his choristers — The reason he gave for preferring an offer from the butchers' synagogue to the one he received from the horse traders' — A capricious Gabbay squares accounts with Cantor Abrass — Two cantors at one and the same pulpit — Cantor Bachman goes to Budapest — Pinye Minkowsky succeeds him at the Central Synagogue of Odessa.

We still seem to have some left overs, some true stories, curious vignettes, taken from the colorful life of Tzalel Odessa'er, and we owe it to our readers to relate them before we turn back to deal with his successors in Odessa.

Tzalel and his chorus came to a town to officiate at a Saturday service. The post of cantor happened to be vacant in that congregation and several cantors had already been audtioned there on successive Sabbaths. On the following day, when he saw that none of the leaders of the community were making any attempt to pay him, he approached the president and asked him, "How about paying me for the service?" The president retorted, "For an audition we do not pay." In vain did Reb Tzalel argue that he had not come there for a tryout. He would not think of taking the position even if it were offered him on a silver platter. He was merely on a tour with his choir. But the official was firm in his refusal to compensate the itinerant cantor.

Tzalel with two of his helpers then went to the combination bakery and grocery store which was owned by the president of the congregation. They picked out the best of the various food items which they could find and loaded themselves up with as much rolls, cakes, strudles, milk, cheese, fruits and other goodies as they were able to carry. As they were getting ready to sneak out with the bags, the owner called to them, "Hey, Mr. Chazzon, you forgot to pay." Tzalel, who was near the door by this time, shouted back, "We're taking it only on a tryout. If we'll like it, we'll come back, buy more of it and of course pay. But you surely don't expect to get paid for samples."

On another occasion, Tzalel used a different gambit to requisition food for his hungry chorus. They were staying at an inn, but the owner would serve them no meals unless they paid in advance. He got his singers together and they began an impromptu performance, singing the prayer, "Answer us in the day of our fasting, for we are in great trouble." They kept repeating this passage until the mistress of the inn was moved to tears and gave the youngsters the remains of her meager food supply.

There was the time when Tzalel was negotiating with the horse traders about taking on the position in their synagogue. He was about to sign up with them, when the butchers contacted him and offered him better terms. So he left the horse traders flat and concluded a contract with the congregation of the butchers. The horse traders naturally felt cheated and chided him for having dealt unfairly with them by having backed out at the last minute, when they thought that they had arrived at an agreement with him. Reb Tzalel defended his action by assuring his critics that it was not the larger compensation offered by the butchers which prompted him to go over to their camp, but there was another much more important consideration that made him decide in their favor. "You see," he explained, "I reconsidered and came to the conclusion that I am not suitable for you. For I know that when you buy a horse, the first thing you usually do is open his mouth to examine his teeth. Well, I can tell you that I have very few of my teeth left and the ones I still have in my mouth are in a very poor condition. So what good am I to you? On the other hand, the butchers when they go to the market to buy a cow, all they are interested in is its weight. Well, in regard to weight, I'm not so bad, even if they would have to sell me for "treyfe" [unfit meat]." (If after the cow is slaughtered it is found not fit for dietary Kosher use, the butcher is obliged to sell the meat to a gentile butcher — of course at a great discount).

In his declining years, Tzalel became blind and a boy used to lead him. It was the custom that starting with the first day of the month of Elul and up to the Jewish New Year, the cantor used to go daily to the cemetery and chant the "Moley," the prayer for the soul of the dead, for whomever came to visit the grave of a dear one and requested him to recite it.

So it happened that a woman, who was stretched out on a grave crying bitterly, called the cantor and requested that he make the "Moley" for her dear departed husband. Tzalel asked the boy at his side to read the name on the tombstone so that he might include the name of the deceased

and that of his father in the prayer. In the middle of the chanting, when Tzalel uttered the name, the woman suddenly cried out, "Chazzon, that was not my husband's name. You are making the wrong 'Moley'." Tzalel, realizing that the woman must be lying on a strange grave retorted, "My dear lady, what I am making is right, but you are lying wrong."

When Nisi Blumenthal was elected to his cantorial position in Odessa, he came there from Yassy, Roumania. His first pontification took place on a Sabbath that fell on the first day of the Jewish month of Rosh Chodesh. On such a Sabbath, "Halleyl" (praise) is included in the service. In the course of his recitation of these psalms, Blumenthal was particularly emphasizing the passage, "Yasser yisrani koh velamoves lo nesonani" (The Lord chided and punished me but to death he did not put me.) When Tzalel was asked how he liked the Yassy'er cantor, he replied that King David in that psalm Yasser claims that he was not put to death, but this Yass'er, (native of Yassy) "almost put me to death."

It so happened that in this play of words by Tzalel, there was some prophetic insight, even though Tzalel was certainly no fool to qualify for visionary powers under the talmudic adage that since the destruction of the Holy Temple, prophecy was handed over to fools. For it is a fact that with the advent of Blumenthal began the heated arguments and vehement fights between the Russian and Galician members of the Synagogue. The two cantors were also involved in these strifes which resulted in the congregation splitting into two fragments. As related in the last chapter, the Galicians broke away and built their own house of worship and took along with them their cantor, Nisi Blumenthal.

In the central synagogue remained the disciple of and successor to Tzalel, Pitze Abrass. For quite a while, there was peace and harmony. Pitze reigned in the Yevreysky synagogue like a pasha, and Blumenthal took over the functions in the Broder Synagogue and was venerated and respected by his members.

But in a congregation that had been not so long ago the scene of constantly raging controversies, where differences of opinion were a way of life, the tranquility that for some time now reigned in its camp could not have been destined to last. The trigger-happy ringleaders were bound to revert to form and an eruption of pent-up energies was sure to come, so that they could let off steam of their emotions.

The peace and quiet atmosphere on the surface proved to have been only the calm before the outbreak of the storm. The spark that ignited the explosion was the tense relationship that evolved between the proud independent cantor and the dominating capricious president of the central synagogue. The latter decided to teach the cantor a lesson. In order to ram through his mischievous plan, he began to propagandize the idea that the present system of having a chief cantor and an assistant cantor was unsatisfactory. Experience had proved, according to his reasoning, that the largest and pre-eminent congregation of the city, which theirs undoubtedly was, had to have another prominent cantor, two cantors of equal rank. They would take their turn at the pulpit on alternate Sabbaths. Such an ar-

rangement would bring new life into the central synagogue because each and every Sabbath the congregants would get maximum spiritual enjoyment.

There would also come into play the factor of ambitious rivalry. Each cantor would try his utmost to outdo the performance of his colleague and the beneficiary of that contest would be the public. The worshipers would hear something new on each and every Sabbath, and the synagogue would always be packed to the rafters.

In theory, this sounded very logical and convincing and the president argued and drove home his point with such insistence that he gradually won over the majority of the other trustees. He was eventually authorized by them to acquire a name-cantor, who would be qualified to compete equally with their cantor, Pitze Abrass.

The president acted quickly, bringing over the famous young cantor, Jacob Bachman, from Lemberg where he had filled the post at the choir-temple as successor to none other than Pitze Abrass himself. Now he was to become his colleague and competitor.

It was supposed to be a friendly competition, but there is no such thing, at least not between cantors. What in theory seemed an excellent idea, in practice proved disastrous. It probably is not presumptuous and unfair to suppose that in making the suggestion with such tenacity, the president did not have the good of his congregation at heart but rather that his intention was to step on Pitze's toes, aiming to hurt him.

How did it work out in practice? You have only to recall the fights that went on endlessly in Berditchev between the two adversaries, Yeruchem Hakoton and Nisi Belzer, and that occurred at the time when each of them had his own separate bailiwick, where he reigned supreme. If such fierce enmity existed between them when all they had in common was that they functioned in the same city, you can imagine the extent of the conflict between these opponents if they would have had to share the same pulpit, with Nisi officiating on one Saturday and Yeruchem on the other.

What could have then be expected to result from the ingenious brainchild of the boss of the Odessa great synagogue? Two cantors at one rostrum. We were almost tempted to call it two cats in one sack.

As could have been foreseen and as the oily president most likely did envision, the two phenomenal cantors, and not so much they themselves as their devoted followers, carried on a regular war not only of inflammatory words but also of violent deeds, giving no quarter, which kept the entire city in a continuous uproar. The synagogue was the scene of degrading, sacrilegious and scandalous incidents and the congregation which held Pitze Abrass for eighteen years in great regard, once again was split wide open into two factions, Pitzeists and Bachmanists.

On the Sabbath when Pitze was officiating, the devotees of Bachman expressed their contempt for the cantor who stood at the altar by deliberately causing disturbances and criticizing in loud voices the manner of his chanting the liturgy.

The same thing, only in reverse, was sure to occur on the Sabbath

when Bachman was conducting the service. The enthusiastic coterie of Pitze's camp retaliated by placing themselves directly in front of the pulpit and laughing in Bachman's face and making fun of his style of reciting the prayers. Odessa had something to talk about. The situation became unbearable.

Suddenly, in the year 1884, Pitze Abrass passed away. The unexpected death of their idolized master infuriated the Pitzeists still more. They blamed his opponents for having brought about this tragic end by their unceasing harassment of the great exponent of liturgical art.

Consequently, the camp of the devoted fans of the deceased now started an even fiercer campaign against Bachman, escalating their attacks to such proportions that the latter grew tired of the fighting and soon afterward, in 1885, left the battlefield to his enemies and transferred to Budapest, Hungary, where he was called to occupy the cantorial position at the pulpit of the second largest synagogue of the "Cultus gemeinde" (cult congregation) located on Rombach Street. It was a fortunate change for him to make, because it was in this post that his star began to really rise and shine, gaining gradually until its rays reached the brightest glitter.

Bachman was an exceptionally gifted singer and his voice was a wonderful, remarkable instrument. To sing a high Do-Re-Mi (c-d-e) was child's play for him. Lying flat on his stomach, he was able to sound off with a high "Re" which is quite a feat and that "Re" was no squeak but full of resonances of the finest quality.

He was a disciple of Yeruchem Hakoton, and under his tutelage one was bound to become highly competent and fully familiar with all phases of liturgy. As a youth of eighteen, he went to St. Petersburg and succeeded in being accepted as a registered student at the royal conservatory. The famous director of that institution, Anton Rubinstein, became so impressed by the young student's apparent great potentialities, his innate talent and vocal endowment, that he made him his own personal responsibility and spent much time giving him instruction in the various branches of musical knowledge and training.

With this background, he became one of the best musically-educated cantors of his time. He combined profound erudition, a phenomenal voice and ingenious imagination with remarkable interpretative facility. He was a great "Zoger", a master of the improvisational recitative. In the twenty years of his reign and pontification at the altar of the Rombach temple, he gained for himself the sincere love, deep respect and adoration of not only the Hungarian Jewish populace, but of Jewry all over the globe. To this day, the name of Bachman is mentioned in Hungary and adjacent countries with great pride and veneration.

It was due to him that in his time Budapest enjoyed the rare distinction of being one of the most important and best known centers of "Chazzonuth." However, it was not destined for the capital of Hungary to remain in the limelight for very long. One unfortunate day its horizon became clouded, for the bright star in whose reflected glory it had been basking for two decades suddenly became extinct. The great master of

liturgical art was not destined to live long and to continue his creative activities. In 1905 at the age of fifty-nine, Jacob Bachman passed away. The entire musical world and particularly the community of Budapest was inconsolable.

When Pitze Abrass, the antagonistic colleague of Bachman died, the vacancy at the central synagogue of Odessa was filled with the appointment to that post first of Rozumny and then of Pinye Minkowsky, who was at that time the cantor of the Jewish community of Cherson. But complications hindered and prevented for a time the implementation of his election. The obstacles that stood in the way were of Pinye's own making. He had played on two fronts in the hope of winning at least on one. To his embarrassment, he did better than he had expected. He won on both sides and was the lucky possessor of two contracts.

Prior to his coming for an audition to Odessa, he had also tried out for the cantorial vacancy in Lemberg. He was successful and had signed with the congregation of the Galician metropolis a contract, which contained the stipulation that in case the cantor for whatever reason would not or could not comply with the provisions of the signed agreement, he would be obliged to pay a penalty of one thousand gulden.

Of the two positions, Pinye naturally preferred the more reputable one. Odessa was decidedly a bigger plum. But how to get around the matter of paying one thousand rubles? For a mere congregational employee to even scrape together in one lump sum that much money is not an easy task. But after having managed to accumulate it, to have to part with it and hand it over to the trustees of a congregation as a penalty for not fulfilling a contract, that was absolutely unthinkable.

Well, there remained only one way out of the dilemma. Pinye hoped that his prospective congregation would take care of the matter for him. He hinted broadly that it was up to them to cut the Gordian knot and sure enough they took the hint. They paid the fine and made off with the rescued cantor. The moral: When a congregation wants a man badly, they will go to any lengths to get him.

However, the trustees of the great synagogue had reason later to ponder the truth of the adage — act in haste and repent at leisure. The marriage they had contracted was not for better or for worse until death do them part. It did not take long for them to part company. The cantor they had bought off from Lemberg with a king's ransom was not, they concluded, so desirable after all, and as a consequence of their disillusionment neither was his position a "bed of roses."

After such giants as Pitze Abrass and Yankel Bachman, the flush of enthusiasm for Pinye soon wore off. It would have been hard for the frequenters of the central synagogue to get used to any new cantor after having listened for so many years to these great masters. Pinye was from the start hopelessly handicapped by the haunting shadows of his predecessors that lurked in every corner of the sanctuary. And these people had a long standing tradition and reputation of not hiding their feelings, but expressing their openly, even in the house of worship. Pinye found out, but too

late, that it had been a mistake for him to choose Odessa over Lemberg. His opponents were not annoying him with mere pinpricks but heaped abuse at him and made his life miserable. He became the target of endless harassments, demeaning invective and public insults.

Particularly the disgruntled admirers of Bachman attacked him. They still resented the unforgivable rude treatment to which their favorite had been subjected and which drove him away from the city. They could not tolerate the sight of anyone taking Bachman's place so they emptied the bitter resentment that had accumulated in their hearts on Pinye's head.

On one occasion, they openly attacked him, shouting in his direction in the presence of the whole assembly, "You pug-nosed, impertinent, wise guy, where do you get the nerve to mount the podium where once stood Bachman when you are not good enough to shine his shoes?"

That Pinye was sitting on a hornet's nest is putting is mildly. He kept a stiff upper lip as long as he was able to, but the fanned-up flames threatened to become uncontrollable. Luckily, he happened to receive an invitation from New York. It could not have come at a more suitable time. He packed his bags and was off to the golden land, where he was installed with great pomp and honor as the cantor of the "K'hal Adas Yeshurun" Synagogue that had just been erected on Eldridge Street in downtown New York and which at that time was considered the biggest and wealthiest congregation of the East European immigrants in America. He was engaged for five years with a yearly salary of five thousand dollars. He arrived in New York on the 16th day of September, 1887, which happened to be Friday, too late for Slichoth. The following Sunday evening, Sept. 18th, was already Rosh Hashono.

After a sojourn of five years in that post, Pinye Minkowsky once more changed course and returned to Odessa, but needless to say, not to that same congregation where he had such bitter experiences, but more about that in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 9

NISI BLUMENTHAL AND PINYE MINKOWSKY, THE TWO GREAT CANTORS OF THE BRODER SYNAGOGUE OF ODESSA

Blumenthal was a contemporary of Salomon Zultzer — His contribution to the elevation of Chazzonuth in Russia — Christians used to frequent his services — His sympathetic attitude towards the congregants — He fought against the efforts to retire him — Minkowsky succeeds him — Pinye's tragic end in America.

Nisi Blumenthal was born in Yassy (Rumania) in 1805. His parents gave him a thorough Jewish education hoping that in time he will become an ordained Rabbi. However the youngster, being the possessor of a fine voice and innate musical talent leaned rather toward a career as chazzan. He joined the choir of the local cantor and began taking lessons in music and voice production. His first position as cantor at the tender age of 21 was in Berditchev. He attracted attention with his melodic voice and his appealing interpretation of the prayers, which bore the individual stamp of his characteristic tradition-true style — which was hailed and earned well deserved recognition in all major Jewish centres.

From Berditchev he transferred to Yekaterinoslav where he remained until 1841. The crowning event of his career was his appointment as the cantor of the newly erected house of prayer in Odessa known as the "Broder Synagogue."

Nisi Blumenthal occupies a prominent place in the gallery of the enlightened, fertile and creative contributors to our modern liturgical literature. He lived in the time of Zultzer and it can be said that both had the same ideas and intuition. Blumenthal tried to do in Odessa the identical work that Zultzer undertook to accomplish in Vienna, namely, to place the religious liturgy upon a modern, regulated, systematic, academically consistent and musically mature basis, with the significant difference that Blumenthal adhered more faithfully to tradition and time-honored custom, in regard to substance and inner content than his colleague in the Austrian capital.

Blumenthal approached his task with great enthusiasm, courage and ambition and he fought for the attainment of his goal with inexhaustible energy and boundless determination. He considered it his holy mission and he brought to bear all ways and means at his command and all resources that he could muster to bring about the embellishment, the updating and purifying of the liturgical chants.

A native of Yassy (Rumania), he got his first musical instruction from the local cantor in whose choir he served his apprenticeship during his formative years. As a young man of twenty-one, we find him in Berditchev holding down one of the better cantorial posts which was no mean achievement in view of the fact that that city was one of the principal centres of liturgical art. From there he was called to Yekaterinoslav. Finally, he gravitated to Odessa where his career really began and where it kept zooming upward consistently.

He came to the central community synagogue where he shared the pulpit with Tzalel Odessa'er, each of them officiating on alternate Sabbaths. The congregation had among its members a goodly number of immigrants mostly from Galicia, who hailed predominantly from the city of Brody, with a scattering of Rumanians and other nationals. In contrast to the natives, these foreigners had more modern leanings. It was as a concession to their more liberal and enlightened views and taste that Blumenthal was appointed to the post.

Still there frequently arose differences of opinion and running quarrels which centered primarily around the two cantors and which ultimately led to a split up. As they were not able to get along with their coreligionists in the leadership and management of the central community synagogue, the Jews of Galicia and other alien origins decided to go their separate way and to erect a synagogue of their own. They naturally took along with them their favorite cantor, Nisi Blumenthal, who was in full accord with what they represented and believed.

The dedication and consecration of the newly built house of prayer which they named "the Broder Synagogue," was attended by many distinguished personalities, public figures, members of the intelligentsia, and representatives of the four hundred, the uppermost stratum of Jewish society of Odessa. Among those who honored the significant community occasion with their presence were also the general gubernator, Count Varontzoff, and his entourage of high officials. Blumenthal presented a

program of appropriate psalms and chants, the music to which he had composed specially for that grand occasion, and his presentations made a highly favorable and deep impression on the select and discerning audience. At the conclusion of the festivities the governor sought out the cantor to personally express to him his appreciation of the beautiful musical program which was the highlight of the ceremony.

Blumenthal's voice was a lyrico spinto of good quality. It possessed a pleasant, ringing sound and natural sweetness. He was a master of "bel canto." He did not overwhelm his audience with thunderous sounds and take them by storm, rather was his delivery quiet, deliberately toned down, serene and soft. According to Minkowsky, Nisi's singing and phrasing resembled that of the famous French diva and prima-donna Adelina Patti, with the difference that he was even more musical than she was.

He was the author of a whole series of wonderful compositions, which were distinguished by the close relationship and harmonious affinity that was apparent between the text and its musical vestment and interpretation. In his liturgical creations, as well as in his presentation of his well-rounded, artistic chants, he endeavored to merge the cold western logic and erudite, astute musicianship with the eastern sentimentalism, and feeling into a happy most suitable synthesis. This effort of his was crowned with a considerable measure of success. He was the first one to pioneer and to introduce a rich, choral, modern-style synagogue ritual in Russia and thereby earned for himself the reputation of being one of the greatest liturgical masters of his time.

The Broder Synagogue became a model not only for all the Russian communities but even for Jewish congregations of other lands. From far and wide, cantors used to journey to Odessa to listen to Blumenthal conduct a service and to observe the manner in which he combined the new with the old. They also tried to get from him his ingenious compositions and when they returned home they copied his cantorial style.

Similarly all directors of choruses made pilgrimages, even from the farthest corners of the European continent, to the great port on the shores of the Black Sea for the sole purpose of hearing the choir of forty sing with magical enchantment under the baton and expert direction of David Novakowsky. He exerted great influence in liturgical matters in Odessa for over fifty years as conductor in charge of all musical activities at the Broder Synagogue. Even presidents or trustees of congregations from many cities used to come to Odessa, intent on observing the order and decorum, the novel customs and the unusual discipline which reigned in the Broder Synagogue, for the purpose of adopting similar methods in their own communities.

The lively interest and appreciation of the innovations and praise for the notable results were not confined to the narrow circles of the co-religionists. It was noticed and commented upon even by a high ranking member of the Russian ministerial cabinet, a powerful figure of the Tzar's court who, after having attended a religious service of Blumenthal on a Passover holiday, remarked with grudging admiration, "What a remark-

able people these Jews are! In spite of all vicissitudes, handicaps, misfortunes and persecutions which have been their lot and which they have endured in the course of their unhappy history, they have always recovered.

"When one enters their sanctuaries, he cannot but be deeply impressed, seeing before him a clean, well groomed, disciplined public, civilized in the best European sense, with good bearing and conduct. And as for their devotional rituals and practices, they are much more interesting, inspiring and elevating than the ones we find in our own churches."

On the nobleness and high mindedness of Blumenthal's character and the trend of his life philosophy, an illuminating light is shed by the following episode, as related by his successor, Pinye Minkowsky. One Sabbath morning on a bitter cold winter day, when the streets were covered with knee-deep snow and a biting wind was howling through the city, Blumenthal, on entering the synagogue, found there only a small number of congregants, all of them of the poor lower class. Discussing afterward with the choir master, as was his customary routine, which compositions the choir should present that morning, the cantor expressed his wish that on this occasion they should sing something particularly beautiful and especially elaborate from their repertoire. The choirmaster was puzzled by this curious request. "What! For these few poor devils we should exert ourselves? I intended to go through the service rapidly and sing hardly anything."

"On the contrary," Nisi replied, "The rich magnates and potentates are still sleeping. They are exhausted from the parties, concerts, theatre performances and other pleasurable social gatherings, which they attended last night, and even if they are already awake, they are too apprehensive of their precious health and comfort to venture out in such weather.

"But these lowly creatures, neglected pariahs of our cruel society, had nothing last night, most likely not even an adequate decent Sabbath meal. The only pleasure to which they can look forward all week is the liturgical chants of the synagogue, and ignoring the sleet, frost and wind they came to the synagogue to listen to us. It is, therefore, only fair that we should reward their steadfast, staunch loyalty by an extra bonus, with which to brighten up their gloomy, drab Sabbath."

He was a modest, unassuming man, known for his soft-hearted generosity and his noble impulses which prompted him to respond readily and to lend a helping hand, particularly to colleagues in need.

The well known Zalmen Constantiner once was the victim of a deplorable expensive accident. On a sea voyage to Odessa, he happened to be carrying with him all his worldly possessions which he had converted into golden ducats. He had his treasure of coins tucked away in a leather pouch which he always held in his hands wherever he went. As he was standing on the deck looking out at the vast body of water and leaning on the starboard railing, the ship suddenly lurched and rolled violently, causing him to drop the closely guarded precious bundle which contained the total fruits of a lifetime into the sea. Stunned, distraught and heartbroken by the misfortune, he stood there helpless. It was gone, irretrievably lost

and no earthly power could reverse that sad fact. When he arrived in Odessa, he was full of despair and hopeless gloom.

When Blumenthal learned of the great loss suffered by his colleague, he immediately initiated a campaign to raise a considerable sum with which to recoup somewhat the nest egg of which the mishap at sea had deprived the visitor from Constantin. And even though Reb Zalmen was reluctant and kept declining to accept the proffered financial help, Nisi persisted in forcing the urgently needed assistance upon him, making it more palatable and acceptable to his colleague by terming it a temporary loan which he could repay if and when he got back on his feet.

The destination of the unlucky voyager was Uman, where there was an opening for which he had applied. Blumenthal, after having accomplished the good deed which he had set out to do, made personally the necessary arrangements for Zalmen Constantiner to continue on his interrupted trip. Luckily, there was a happy ending after all to the story, for his audition in Uman was highly successful and Reb Zalmen was elected to the vacant cantorial post of that city.

Among the numerous disciples of Blumenthal who later made their own mark in the world of Chazzonuth, the most famous was Yeruchem Hakoton, with whose outstanding activities we have already had occasion to become acquainted in previous chapters.

Another prominent figure who drew his musical nourishment from the rich well of knowledge and experience which was revealed to him by Nisi was Welvele Shestopol. Inspired by Nisi, he was able to quench his thirst for erudition. He was considered and treated like a son in the home of Blumenthal, who paid him special individual attention and gave him intensive lessons in music, theory, harmony and liturgical tradition. To him the master entrusted the task of copying and cataloguing his works.

Shestopol had a keen, perceptive ear and was a diligent pupil, eager and anxious to learn. His intimate relationship with his mentor enabled him to absorb and digest in the course of a relatively short apprenticeship his style, method and line of musical interpretation which he faithfully followed in later years. He was still a young fellow when he began writing compositions of his own, the quality of which can be gleaned from the fact that his tutor, Nisi himself, thought enough of their merit to have them performed by his choir in the Broder Synagogue.

Blumenthal also encouraged his favorite pupil by frequently allowing him to lead a service at his pulpit. Meanwhile, his voice had developed into a resonant lyric tenor, and with the experience which he had gained through the benevolent promotional moves engineered on his behalf by his mentor and teacher, he was now ready to go out into the world on his own.

At this important juncture of his life, it was once again Nisi Blumenthal who took a hand in smoothing his way and putting his protege on the right track. He recommended him for the prominent cantorial position with the community of Cherson, which turned out very well. It proved in the long run a mutually beneficial association for both parties.

The young cantor set out on his budding career with industrious vigor, great determination and vision, intent on carving out for himself a lasting niche in Chazzonuth. He mapped out for himself a very ambitious program of musical activity, embracing a broad range of all facets of the liturgical field. The fruits of his labor eventually appeared in print and are a valuable source for students of liturgy to this day. He became so closely identified with the city, which he served, that he is known to the world as "Welvele Chersoner."

* * *

In 1891, the Broder congregation celebrated the golden jubilee of her cantor's activities in Odessa with elaborate and lavish festivities. It was a momentous event not only for the Jewish community of Odessa, but for world Jewry in general and particularly for the Jewish cantorial and musical world. It was participated in not only by all Jewish organizations of the city, but a great number of gentiles and city officials too, as well as representatives of the state government, came to pay homage to the ecclesiastical dignitary who, with his long, faithful and devoted service, had earned the respect and high regard of his fellowmen. Messages of congratulation and salutation poured in from all over the world and the celebrant received valuable presents, tokens of friendship and of appreciation for his fruitful work of a lifetime.

His grateful congregation honored him by establishing a new special charitable fund in his name and knowing that it had been his often expressed wish and hope to someday visit the Holy Land, they sent him and his wife on that long awaited journey to Palestine at the expense of the Broder congregation.

After Blumenthal returned from his pleasure trip, refreshed and full of new enthusiastic tales about the impressions which he gained from treading on the holy soil of his forefathers, the leaders of the congregation paid him a visit to welcome him home. In the course of the ensuing conversation, they managed to hint very diplomatically that on account of his advanced age, his work might be too much of a burden and it might be the better part of wisdom for him to slow down, to retire and to become the cantor emeritus.

Nisi was taken by surprise. The idea had never occurred to him, and he did not relish the prospect of being put out to pasture. But he realized that the die was cast. Having no alternative, he went along, pro forma, with the proposition of the hierarchy of his congregation to invite cantors to give auditions, with the purpose of selecting a successor to take his place. To sweeten somewhat the bitter pill which they wanted him to swallow, the trustees offered to arrange a very generous lifelong stipend for him, if he would agree to step down and be pensioned.

Scores of candidates came and went, but none of them made the grade even though they represented the best of the crop available. It was not so much the public or the trustees who were so demanding, particular and discriminating, that none of the applicants who appeared on trial

could satisfy their taste and measure up to their requirements. The stumbling block was in most instances the incumbent. Blumenthal naturally had to be consulted. In fact, he insisted on having the deciding vote in choosing his replacement and there seemed to be no way of pleasing him. No matter who it was that presented himself for his scrutiny, Nisi invariably found some fault which in his opinion disqualified the contestant from serious consideration for the post.

Underlying his consistent reluctance to approve of any of the candidates who gave auditions was, of course, his resolute intention to hold on to his post. His strategy was to foil the attempt to ease him out by demonstrating conclusively, that there could not be found a suitable cantor, who would be qualified to adequately fill his shoes.

When it became clear that Blumenthal was determined to veto everybody in sight, the heads of the congregation, in exasperation finally put it to him squarely, "If none of those that we propose can meet your standards, then we will leave it up to your judgment. Pick your own man and let us get it over with."

"The only cantor that I could think of who would be just right for our congregation," Nisi replied, "is Pinye Minkowsky." He had a very good reason for recommending him. Pinye was at that moment in America, the chazzan of Congregation K'hal Adas Yeshurun of Eldridge Street and Nisi's calculation was, that he was hardly likely to even consider quitting his job in New York in favor of returning to Russia.

To make doubly sure that nothing would come of the proposition, he immediately dispatched a letter to Pinye reminding him of all the troubles, quarrels and indignities to which he had been subjected during his tenure as associate cantor of the community synagogue, which ultimately drove him from Odessa. Thus, he intimated that he surely would not want to go through a similar experience, which would most likely be the case if he were to return and accept the offer of the Broder congregation. In his missive he also bitterly complained about the unjustified campaign of a handful of powerful individuals to retire him when he still felt capable of serving with undiminished potency. He was confident that the overwhelming majority of the membership ultimately would share this view of his, and would be gratified to have him continue actively in his present capacity.

What he did not know was that Pinye was far from happy in his New York post and had been looking for a chance to escape from America, where he was not at all content. He was hounded by the strictly religious members of the congregation for using the tuning fork on Sabbath and Holy days. The congregation also found it to be too burdensome to pay him $5000. So the invitation from the trustees of the Broder Synagogue was a Godsent opportunity for him which he grasped with joyous eagerness. Blumenthal's arguments did not dampen his desire and readiness to respond favorably to the call from Odessa. Furthermore, he sent the cantor's letter to the president of the Broder Synagogue.

When the trustees, taken aback by the cantor's inexplicable move, confronted Blumenthal and demanded an explanation of his attempt to

discourage and dissuade the very man whom he himself had recommended as the best possible choice, Nisi petulantly and angrily retorted, "Well, if you are so anxious to get rid of me, to have a new face, a new broom, who you think will sweep better, take him."

Taking him at his word, the trustees dispatched a special envoy to New York to confer with Pinye and to negotiate an agreement with him. He arrived in Odessa in 1892 shortly before the High Holy days. But Blumenthal, infuriated by the quick pace of developments, insisted on leading the services himself, at least on these sacred festivals, arguing that all musical arrangements had been made and the rehearsals had been held under his direction and the newcomer could not at the last moment become sufficiently acquainted with the repertoire to effectively take over the task and to supplant him at the pulpit. But the validity of this reasoning was highly questionable in view of Minkowsky's well established reputation as a seasoned musician. The trustees thereupon went to work on the insistent incumbent and finally succeeded in wresting from the stubborn and recalcitrant Nisi a reluctant consent and permission for the newly elected cantor to chant the prayers on the High Holy days.

But when Pinye for the first time ascended the altar from which he had been ousted against his will, Blumenthal was so heartbroken that he suffered a stroke there and then and became paralyzed. A long siege followed from which he could not recover any longer, and after having been bedridden for several years, he passed away on January 15th of 1902 at the age of 96.

On the day of his funeral, all Jewish stores of the city were closed as a token of respect and regard for the great departed. All of Odessa, old and young, Jews as well as gentiles, were in deep mourning, and a giant throng among whom were public personalities and prominent figures of the community followed the catafalque (hearse) bearing the earthly remains of the beloved servant of God to his eternal resting place.

On arrival at the cemetery the coffin was carried by the honorary pallbearers into the socalled "black Hall". Only eminent, highly revered personalities were privileged to have their lifeless bodies placed into that room prior to burial. The total blackness of the hall relieved only somewhat by the white stars, that dotted the ceiling, made a deep impression on the mourners as a symbol of death.

The three outstanding cantors of the city, Pinye Minkowsky, Yechiel Alter Karniol and Ephrayim Zalman Rozumny walked in together behind the casket followed by a long line of chorists, composed of singers from several synagogue ensembles. The Rabbi of the Broder synagogue, Gurland was conducting the ritual and in a moving eulogy extolled the exceptional virtues of the deceased servant of the Lord.

After the chorus under the leadership of David Novakowsky intoned the "Shivisi", Minkowsky and Karniol recited psalms. Finally Rozumny stepped up to the bier to chant the "Keyl Moley Rachamim" which concluded the service. According to an eyewitness, J. Judson of New York, Rozumny's rendition of the lament is still ringing in the ears of the chorist,

who at that time was only nine years old. "As long as I'll live, he said, "I will not forget that Moley." Such a moment occurs only once in a lifetime. When he sang out "B'gan Eyden" (in paradise may be his resting place) the walls of the room trembled and all of the assembled dignitaries broke out in an uncontrollable wail.

As a footnote, let's close with the following characteristic human interest episode, from which can be gleaned in what high esteem Blumenthal was held not alone by the whole law-abiding population of Odessa, but even by the underworld.

Just as in all large cities there were in Odessa also a great number of thieves and as befits any professional craft, they too had an organization with all the usual trappings, including naturally also a president, who happened to be a Jew.

Thieves too have a code of ethics and the homes of certain highly respected, noble personages are understood to be out of bounds even for their lucrative activities.

But as is usually sometimes wont to happen, one or more members of any union may unwittingly pull a boner. So it came about that one balmy evening Nisi Blumenthal's residence was burglarized and some valuable objects, mostly of sentimental significance only to the owner, disappeared without a trace.

When Nisi was already resigned to write off the loss, an unexpected visitor was announced. He turned out to be the head of the thieving branch of the organized underworld. He had come to apologize to the esteemed cantor for the mistake his bungling underlings had made and for the heartaches they had caused him by their lack of caution in failing to obey the strict directions, that he not ever be molested.

He of course assured the cantor that the guilty culprits will get what was coming to them. He'll give them hell, since such disobeyance of orders cannot go unpunished.

But the main purpose of his visit was to make amends, minute arrangements for the complete restitution of the swiped objects, since such delicate matters understandably must be handled in an inconspicuous manner on the q.t.

He asked Nisi to leave the door of his home unlocked that night, so as to make it possible for the delinquent burglars to bring back the stolen articles. "When you'll get up in the morning" he assured the cantor "you'll find that everything that had been missing is back in its place" and as if it had just occurred to him as an afterthought the chief rebbe of the underworld added pointedly: "Of course I would consider it a great honor, if next Saturday after the conclusion of the religious services you would deign to accompany me to my home and be my guest for "Kiddush", have a glass of wine or whisky and a snack of pastry and perhaps a portion of herring or fish with me and my family." It was an invitation the cantor willy-nilly had to accept.

That was the price Nisi was obliged to pay in return for getting back his lifted possessions and it stands to reason. You cannot expect the head

חזן אהרן ליעבער

of the pickpocket union to perform any kind of service, not even to lift a finger, without extracting some personal favor for himself in return. But you can just imagine the puzzled look on the faces of the outpouring worshipers from the synagogue when they saw their high principled cantor walking home from the synagogue with the boss of the "Ganovim Chevrah."

* * *

Pinye (Pinchas) Minkowsky was born on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, 1859 in Biala Tzerkov, Ukraina, Gubernia of Kiev where his father was the chazzan in the Beth Hamidrash Hagodol for 45 years. He studied in the cheders of the best melamdim and after becoming Bar Mitzvah he was so advanced that he was able to study by himself in the Beth Hamidrash. He officiated often in the kloiz of the Tolna'er Rebbe.

At 16 years of age he got married and was appointed the chazzan of the Stempeny'er Synagogue with a weekly salary of four rubles. Feeling the need of widening his horizons in liturgical music and of gaining more practical experience he enlisted as chorist in the ensemble of Nisi Belzer in Kishinev.

When Nisi accepted a call to Berditchev, Pinye at the age of 18 became engaged as successor to his mentor as chazzan of the Old Synagogue. Later he transferred to the Choralna Temple to the consternation of the Tolna'er Chassidim. Three years later he accepted a call from Cherson to fill the post of chief cantor. In 1881 the congregation sends him to Vienna to continue his musical studies with Zultzer who, by now old and frail, advises him to go to Moritz Friedman, chief cantor of Budapest. He takes courses in all facets of music with Robert Fuchs, Victor Rakitansky and other great musical authorities of Vienna and having grown considerably in stature as one of the best educated cantors of Europe he returns to Cherson.

His fame spreads and the Great Synagogue of Yevreysky Street in Odessa appoints him as their cantor but after one year he is called to New York to occupy the post of cantor at the K'hal Adas Yeshuron whence he returned to Odessa to succeed the retired Nisi Blumenthal at the Omud of the Broder Synagogue.

The Broder Synagogue was a modern, liberal oriented synagogue, but not a reform temple as we understand it in America. The chazzan at all times faced the Holy Ark even when he was chanting the "Kiddush". "Chassidim", ultrapious Jews would not set foot in that house of prayer. They avoided it like a pest. It was, however, frequented by great Talmudic scholars. Primarily, it was patronized by the intelligentsia, men of high standing in the world of secular education, of literature, of art and similar spiritual achievements, also members of the upper class who had power and influence in the world of business or politics.

The altar was not located in the center of the synagogue, as required in a strictly orthodox synagogue, but during the tenure of Blumenthal there was not even a thought of having an organ. The introduction of in-

strumental music occurred under the aegis of his successor.

The idea of installing an organ in the sanctuary of the Broder synagogue did not originate in the mind of Minkowsky but was the brainchild of his choir leader, David Novakowsky. He had for some time been dreaming about it and knowing full well how essential it was to first of all enlist the support of his cantor, he used to broach the subject of his pet project occasionally in the course of their conversations.

But to his great disappointment Pinye's reaction was not very encouraging. It was not that he had any scruples as to the propriety of the step suggested by the choirmaster. But even though personally he was sympathetic and sentimentally he too was in favor of further modernization of the religious services by the introduction of instrumental accompaniment, he was enough of a realist to foresee the fierce opposition, which such a radical proposal would encounter in some quarters.

As a consequence he was hesitant and loath to start something which he was not quite confident of being capable to pull off successfully. He therefore advised the maestro to go slow, bide his time and hold the matter in abeyance until a more auspicious moment for its realization would come along.

But Novakowsky was not one to give up or even to butt off (albeit temporarily) easily. He was impatient and determined to achieve his goal there and then by hook or by crook. He conceived a stratagem, which he was confident, was most likely to tip the scale in his favor and bring around the cantor to his way of thinking, inducing him to join forces with him and actively campaign for the installation of the musical instrument, which he coveted so much.

He wrote a new composition to the text of "Unesane Tokef", the highpoint of the high holiday religious services and he arranged this opus of his for a mixed choir and organ accompaniment. He called special rehearsals for this new composition, which were held in the "Union Hall" for the sole reason, that it boasted of a first rate organ. When he was ready for general rehearsals with the participation of the cantor, he invited Minkowsky to join in the musical session.

Novakowsky's face was shining as he directed the singing, while simultaneously playing the instrumental accompaniment, giving a convincing demonstration of the immense advantages and contributions of the added sounds of the organ. The principal element in the ploy, calculated to make Minkowsky reconsider and which indeed mainly caught his fancy, turned the trick and did definitely convert him, was the cantor's solo, written in by Novakowsky to suit the style of Pinye like a glove.

He showed first how it would sound with merely the chorus chiming in. Then playing his trump card, he demonstrated how different it would sound and how much better and more effectively Minkowsky would be able to render it with the accompaniment of the organ.

As the cantor listened intently with an expression of delight on his face, it became quite clear that Novakowsky had succeeded in persuading Minkowsky of the necessity of the project and he in turn managed to con-

vince the board of directors of the congregation and the Rabbi Dr. Schwabacher of the need of the musical instrument. At a meeting of that august body at which the proposition was put to a vote and overwhelmingly passed, up rose the senior member of the wealthy Brodsky clan to inform his colleagues that he would personally underwrite the whole sum of 10,000 rubles that were required for the acquisition of a first class organ. Professor Gelfelfinger of Sweden was appointed as the organist.

This was however not the end of the story by a long shot. As was to be expected, ominous repercussions followed in short order on the heels of the publication of the board's decision. At the news of the radical departure from traditional usage, a storm of protest broke out. Reactions were hotly divided. There was a bitter outcry on the part of a considerable number of members against what they considered a sacrilege. And a great segment of the membership headed by one of the most prominent and influential community leaders Neyzel broke away from the Broder congregation and joined the membership of the great Yevreysky synagogue.

This was the very first case of an organ being installed in a house of worship in all of Russia. The very first organ in a synagogue was in Prague, but it was played only on Friday afternoons before Kabolas Shabos.

The Rabbis started a crusade, a campaign of strong protest with the aim of bringing about the removal of the "Treyf posul" musical instrument from the sanctuary.

But Minkowsky, himself a talmudic scholar of note, cited arguments from the Talmud and other scriptures, which tended to prove him right in his view, that the use of an organ at religious services was proper.

That he did not convince the Rabbis goes without saying, and pious Jews henceforth would not even touch the sidewalk of the Broder synagogue. In their eyes there was no difference between that edifice and a church.

Minkowsky had his way but if he thought, that by this move he would win friends and augment the attendance, he was greatly mistaken. Au contraire he alienated a great many worshipers, who transferred their allegiance mainly to Rozumny, to whom the people flocked in droves. The Shalashna and Jevreysky synagogues gained new worshipers and the Brod'er synagogue yawned from emptiness.

In the Broder synagogue nothing was omitted from the prayer-book. The cantor wore a long, silken Talis covering his whole body and not just lying folded on his shoulders.

True, the cantor did not repeat words or sentences of the prayers over and over again and did not try to overwhelm the worshipers with mighty outbursts of his voice or with stunt-like acrobatics of intricate coloratura passages. He did not exert all means at his disposal to bring tears to the eyes of his congregants.

But between Mincha and Maariv (evening devotion), there was held a session of learning Mishnayos (early sacred scriptures) and for the members of the "Chevrah Shass" (society for study of the Talmud) a rab-

bi used to lecture on a chapter of the "Halacha" (religious law.).

It was no rare sight to find among the worshipers some with their prayer shawls pulled over their heads, swaying back and forth in their zeal and religious fervor. On the Sabbath, toward evening, there was a regular gathering of the devout, who were seated around a long table, dutifully conforming to the ritually prescribed custom of partaking in the "Shalosh Soodos" (third Sabbath meal) and there was lusty singing of the "Zemiros," (traditional table melodies). Essentially, the Broder Synagogue was not much different from any other house of worship. It resembled them down to the last characteristic habit of many of their members using snuff, like their co-religionists in the chassidic Kloiz. In America, the Broder Synagogue could have passed as an orthodox or, at the very least, a conservative synagogue, with definite more traditonal leanings.

Pinye Minkowsky fitted in very nicely in his new environment. He was one of the most intelligent and learned cantors, with a background of erudition in many fields rarely equalled by any member of the liturgical fraternity. He was a cultured singer, who knew how to use his pleasant lyric tenor voice to best advantage. The extent and range of his musical knowledge can be gleaned from the fact that he was considered competent enough to be appointed a full professor to a chair at the Odessa Conservatory of Music. He had considerable ability as a composer and was also a very talented writer. In his published articles and books, he revealed deep insight and the possession of a great treasure of varied information and pertinent data. He believed in the maintenance of decorum and dignity, both inside and outside of the synagogue, setting a shining example, worthy of being emulated and followed by all congregational functionaries.

He was indefatigable in crusading against the actions of certain colleagues, which he considered unbecoming and incompatible with their sacred calling. He fought Sirota and Kwartin tooth and nail for recording Hebrew chants for gramophone companies. In his opinion, this was a sacrilege, a cheapening and a desecration of the prayers and psalms, and he relentlessly kept up his attacks on them by word of mouth, in newspapers, and in his books. His campaign and protests intimidated many colleagues and kept them from following the example of Sirota and Kwartin. As a regrettable result there is no reproduction of the voice of Rozumny.

For over thirty years, Minkowsky served his congregation with distinction, dignity and eminently competent and fruitful authority. Together with David Novakowsky, the great composer and choirmaster, they succeeded in elevating the religious services at the Broder synagogue to spiritual heights never before attained. It was the envy of the entire cantorial world, and the ambition of cantors and choir leaders everywhere was to copy it.

The upheavals and turmoils that surged through the land of the Tzars forced Pinye to leave Odessa, and in 1922 he set out for America to seek his fortune, arriving in New York on the 15th of December. But the reception which he received in the New World was anything but enthusiastic or

even cordial. This was the second time that he came to the golden land. If on his first visit as a very young man, he had not been fully appreciated and was after a brief sojourn obliged to return to Odessa, how good were the chances now that he was in his declining years, that he could fare better and make a big splash in New York?

As could have been predicted, he was not very successful. The public did not care for him and he suffered morally, as well as financially. It was pitiful to see how the celebrated cantor, who reigned in Odessa in majestic splendor for over a generation, was neglected and ignored by American Jewry in his hour of need. Only the professionals, the cantors and the Jewish composers and choir directors who knew what Pinye Minkowsky represented, held him in great esteem.

The Jewish Ministers and Cantors Association of America and Canada had arranged a gala concert which was held on the third day of February, 1924 in Madison Square Garden of New York. Pinye was chosen by the arrangements committee as one of the principal soloists for that historic event.

It was planned also to honor him on that occasion with a special award and he was looking forward to it with great expectation. But fate robbed him even of that last small satisfaction, of his last moment of glory in the limelight. A few days before that auspicious date, he slipped and fell, thumping down a staircase and landing with a broken leg. Blood poisoning set in and he died shortly after the accident on January 18, 1924 in a Boston hospital. His relatives had his body brought to Philadelphia where he was buried.

The tragedy of the great master cast a dark shadow over the festivities at the Madison Square Garden affair. At the Cantors Association concert, there was a black-draped empty chair on the stage where their deceased, revered colleague was to have sat. An "Eil moley rachamim," a memorial prayer for his soul, was recited by Karmiol, who at one time had also occupied a pulpit in Odessa.

Such was the sad and tragic end of one of the most brilliant scholars and ingenious researchers of traditional liturgical music, a most worthy representative of the cantorial fraternity, of whom his colleagues always were and will continue to be justly proud.

(More about Minkowsky in the Kishinev Section)

CHAPTER 10

ROZUMNY — THE BRIGHTEST STAR IN THE FIRMAMENT OF THE CANTORATE

Wherein his great power lay — How he became a cantor — His personality — His famous interpretation of "The beloved and the charmers" — He was idolized even by gentiles — His untimely death.

Odessa, the port city on the shores of the Black Sea had acquired an enviable reputation and distinction in several fields of Jewish cultural activity. It was the preeminent breeding ground of the shining lights of belleslettres (literature), the home of the "Chachmey Odessa", the "luminaries", the mind aristocracy of Odessa among whom there were to be found such greats as "Mendele Mocheyr Sforim", Chayim Nachman Bialik, Achad Hoam, Ravnitzky and many others who made history with their timeless contributions.

The city won also recognition as a mighty citadel of cantorial art, the magnetism of which drew to itself the "creme de la creme" of the chanting fraternity. But in the galaxy of stars that converged on Odessa, the one that shone with the most glittering glow was unquestionably none other than Ephrayim Zalman Rozumny.

Soon after I began writing about the famous cantors of yesteryear in the *Jewish Forward,* I was literally swamped with letters and telephone calls from readers. Comments, pro and con, complimentary reactions on the one hand and occasionally mild criticism on the other, were the order of the day. Some of the missives contained personal reminiscences of the writers, which they thought would complement my fund of information and be of great help to me in compiling pertinent data for future articles. I

received unsolicited advice galore, requests for additional information, demands and questions.

Significantly I couldn't help but notice the unusually frequent references to one name in particular. I recall especially one encounter with a faithful reader of my series. After commending me for reviving the memories of the greats of liturgy, he asked me point blank, "When will you come around to writing about Rozumny?"

In characteristic Jewish fashion I too responded with a question: "Why are you so concerned about Rozumny?", to which the man responded with heat: "You should ask yet why Rozumny? Don't you know that he was the greatest in the whole wide world? Didn't I hear him in person? I tell you, there'll never be another Rozumny."

The Rozumny cult in the circles of the cantorial craft and among the devotees of synagogue music is of course nothing new to me. It often happens in my experience that after the conclusion of a religious service or a concert, one of the audience comes over and shaking hands with me to express his appreciation, he at the same time also throws in the confidential information, that he was privileged to hear yet Rozumny in person.

This aside as I understand it, is of course intended to convey to me the uncontrovertible proof, that since the mere fact that he at one time was lucky enough to hear Rozumny, naturally stamps him automatically as an expert, a competent appraiser of cantorial art, his expressed favorable opinion of my performance ought to weigh heavily in my estimation, coming as it does from an old hand in judging such matters.

But the remarkable aspect of this phenomenon is that not alone the professionals and the staunch lovers of liturgical chants were enamored with and captivated by the Rozumny brand of vocal art but even the everyday Jew became infected with the epidemic bug of his magic name and universal fame.

There is a distinctive, unextinguishable gnawing nostalgia for that great virtuoso of song burning not only in the hearts of the survivors of the era when he was exerting his unique charm but also of those who only heard second hand of his mystical power over audiences.

I don't know whether it was his sweet voice or his artistic interpretation of the music, his interesting personality or his theatrical showmanship or the interplay and combination of all these characteristics that worked their patently hypnotic magic on his listeners and lit up their enthusiastic fervor to such an extent, that it spilled over into an enduring legend that holds in its grip the imagination and fantasy of the generations that came after them.

The fact remains that to this day there is general agreement in authoritative circles, (whether right or wrong I would not presume to say,) that Rozumny was the most brilliant diadem in the crown of Chazzonuth, the most illuminating star in the constellation of the cantorial firmament, that lit up the atmosphere in the latter part of the 19th and the beginning of the current century.

There is no question but that whenever and wherever there is a discus-

sion about the great cantors of yore his name must of necessity figure prominently in the palaver.

But the puzzle persists. What could've been the miraculous ingredient possessed by him which is capable of even bringing foam to the lips of hoary oldsters, when talking and reminiscing about Rozumny and recalling his almost superhuman necromancing power?

As far as I have been able to ascertain his voice was not the kind of mighty organ that is capable of causing eardrums to burst, window panes to break or chandeliers to swing hither and yon. It has also been reliably established that he had a habit of often singing with a nasal twang and throaty production of voice, he was not very musical, did not have a very fertile, inventive phantasy and that originality and variability in improvisation could not be said to have been his forte, his strong points. Add to this fact, uncovered by our "infallible" intelligence service, that he hasn't at any time served the usual apprenticeship at the side of any cantor as a "Meshoreyr" (choir boy) but without any preparation whatever sprang out of nowhere a ready-made cantor, a kind of "deus ex machina" and you stand before an unfathomable puzzle. How was he able to bring forth the seemingly impossible feat of becoming such an accomplished artisan? Can you imagine an animal getting to be a full grown cow without ever having been a calf?

And yet the fact remains, that he did manage in spite of all these negative factors, to climb the greasy pole of fame and reach the very top rung and stay there. What is the explanation? In what lay the secret of his magnetic power?

It would seem that in the first place it was the extraordinary sweet quality of his voice. He was blessed with a fine, mellow lyric tenor, pure as gold, soft and tender as dough, with the sound of a cello and a pianissimo of the precious quality of silk. His "mezzovoce" possessed the ideal combination of forte and piano. His voice contained the amalgam of all the resonances, that a human sound could possibly consist of.

He did not have to sing in order to work his magic. Even when he only said "good evening" gently and softly under his nose, the whole room became filled with music. His art lay mainly in his sweet mouth, what Karmiol called "ah chazzonish moil". If ever there was a most convincing demonstration of the dictum "Lo beraash velo bekoach, ki im beruchi" (not with noise and not with power but with spirit) then it was when Rozumny opened his mouth and out poured honey.

Secondly his interpretation and delivery. In most instances he would present only fully worked out, set opuses. He preferred to walk on an iron bridge rather than depend on his phantasy and inspiration of the moment and do some improvising which once in a while is successful and ten times comes a cropper.

Being meticulous to get himself completely familiar with the material to be used and fully prepared for his task, he was able to concentrate on the interpretation and he was a master in the art of bringing out the most of a musical phrase and investing it with lofty meaning that was bound to

touch the hearts of the worshipers.

Whatever he took in hand was transformed by him into a work of art. A plain, ordinary solo of "Tov lachsot" (It is better to trust in the Lord) in the psalm "Min Hameytzar" (out of my straightness) by Pitze Abrass took on in his masterful handling and phraseology never-dreamed-of extra dimensions in stressing the inevitable relevancy of the total unquestioning reliance of the mortal human being on the divine grace. The way he put it was so persuasive and convincing, that when he finished the whole congregation broke out spontaneously in a thunderous applause.

His coloratura was unusually easy flowing and sharp as the edge of a sword. The coloratura contained in it a secondary roulade, making it a double-layer coloratura. He had a breath of remarkably long extent. Yaakov Kelmansky, an old chazzan seriously contended that he was able to emit two different tones at the same time. He managed to sing the two notes of a duet simultaneously by himself. "Don't ask me how he did it," he said, when I expressed skepticism about how he was able to perform this seemingly impossible feat. "Most likely he himself would have been at a loss to satisfactorily explain it. Does a bird know how its muscles coordinate their functions to enable it to fly? It just decides to fly and the muscles respond by making the moves that are needed to make the flying possible. The muscles that were in charge of Rozumny's vocal chords apparently could constrict and synchronize their actions in such a fashion as to produce two different tones in tandem."

A charm without equal, exuded from everything that he ever did, bringing about such a profound effect, that people became mesmerized, their innermost feelings aroused to a fever pitch, their hearts melting under the influence of the outpouring sweetness of the heavenly chants and their hands automatically lifting themselves ready to give concrete expression of their deep appreciation by also producing loud sounds.

In our search for the secret of Rozumny's unparalleled popularity we hit upon a third characteristic of his, which may yield a clue to his baffling magic. We have reference to his personality. He had a pleasant appearance, was a man of lean build and of slightly taller than average height. Notwithstanding the fact that he had a pock-marked face, he had a way with him to impress people, he was at all times elegantly decked out in a flowing cape on his shoulders and a silk hat covering his blond hair. In winter he would wear a furlined coat, the collar of which was mink. His headgear for the season was of curacul fur, of the same color as the collar of his coat.

He knew how to maintain an aura of glamour around his person. His walk was graceful. Strutting in the street he would unconsciously rock his body back and forth in the manner of a dance master. It was by no means a deliberate affectation. He came by it as naturally as breathing. His whole comportment was more like that of an opera singer than a cantor. The scent of expensive perfume frequently could be felt in his presence.

In the synagogue he donned an extra high cantorial hat, which together with the elevated footstool tended to accentuate his towering presence,

adding a regal touch to his appearance. It was all calculated to heighten the suspense and evoke the reverence and awe of the assembly. His solemn bearing and the introvert mien and pious expression on his countenance, while walking up to the Bimah with measured steps had by itself already created the atmosphere most conducive for sincere praying. While leading the ritual he would frequently lift his hands and his eyes toward heaven in a gesture of importuning the Almighty on behalf of his flock.

Albeit theatrical in nature, it did not appear so when employed by him, which only proves that he was a seasoned showman, whose most contrived ploys and gimmicks were accomplished so ingeniously, that they seemed quite natural and hit home smack on target with maximum effect. Rozumny knew every trick in the book and played on the heartstrings of his audience at will, without their realizing that they were as clay in the hands of the potter, his unwitting foils, who succumbed readily to his enticing sounds.

In the last analysis however, it must be borne in mind, that even discounting all the aforementioned devices, which undoubtedly helped him work his magic to the hilt, the lion's share of his success still must be attributed to the uncontrovertible fact, that Rozumny was a born virtuoso with the finest vocal tools in his arsenal and the most sensitive, innate musical inclination in his heart and soul.

Every great cantor had his particular specialty, a certain prayer, in the unique interpretation of which he excelled to such an extent, that by means of that single performance he was catapulted into prominence and it became so identified with him, that in time it became so-to-say his trademark.

In this sense, the Wilna Balebeysel was closely identified with "Shchoolo achoolo", Tzalel Odessa'er hit the spot with the interpretation of "Ato noseyn yad" and "Ato Hivdalto", Hirsh Weintraub climbed to fame by virtue of his "Mipney Chatoeynoo", Nisi Blumenthal drew universal appreciation for his "Ato Yotzarto", Pitze Abrass is best known for his "Nilvim" and Yaakov Bachman is associated in the minds of all knowledgable lovers of liturgical music with his masterful composition of "Yom Kippur Koton."

Rozumny, himself not much of a composer, could however do wonders with the musical work of others. His "Konyok" (schlager masterpiece) was Peyse Chotiner's "Av Horachamim" (Father of mercies) which is being recited on most Sabbath morning services.

Particularly impressive and effectual was his interpretation of the passage "Hanehovim vehanimim" (who were lovely and pleasant in their lives and even in their death were not separated). He conquered the world with his uttering of this handful of words in his inimitable artistry. His inflections of voice, the nuances and shadings forcefully conveyed the depth of mournful grief of the faithful remnants of Israel over the sad fate of those loving, upright and devoted brethren of theirs, who laid down their lives for the sanctification of the Divine name, who never faltered and remained steadfast and loyal to the end. "Bechayehem uvmosom, loh nifroduh."

Rivers of tears were shed by the congregants, when the full impact of the words was brought home to them by the sweet strains of the inspired reader, who looking like the high priest pontificating in the holy sanctuary was demanding that an end be put to the blood letting of his long-suffering people.

Whenever and wherever he chanted this lament nary an eye remained dry and nary a heart remained unmoved. The effect it would have on the listeners was as predictable as the sundawn and the sunset — and the most remarkable aspect of the matter was, that he hardly ever varied his approach. Time and again he would repeat the same set version of the composition, without changing an iota and there was no need for him to do so. It was a sure-fire hit and the more often the people heard it from his lips, the more they appreciated and savored its beautiful heart-rending melody and the more they wanted to hear it again. To change anything in it would have surely been counterproductive and anathema to his fans.

To this very day cantors the world over are trying to emulate his style and are singing this showpiece of Rozumny. The text is the same, the music is the same, but still it is not the same by far. Many are scouting and searching for the evasive ingredient and are wondering what mystical element is there in the seemingly unpretentious melody of Peyse Chotiner that enabled Rozumny to enchant with it all that were within the reach of his voice.

But they are searching in vain. For the solution of the magic lay not in the music, but in Rozumny's mouth. It was he, who breathed life and meaning, depth of feeling and sentimental nostalgia into the dry notes of the composition.

Ephrayim Zalman Rozumny! How did he come by such a last name, which surely does ill fit a cantor, who according to the generally accepted opinion has little in common with the main characteristic attribute of King Solomon?

His grandfather, whose first names were also Ephrayim Zalman was awarded this tag by Nicolay the first and our hero inherited it from him. That ancestor of his was Chief Rabbi of Nikolayev and was appointed chaplain of the Jewish sailors who were serving on the warships that were cruising the Black Sea. When the Tzar on one occasion came on an inspection tour of his navy and the chaplain was introduced to him, Nicolay drew the Rabbi into a conversation. Afterward he remarked to his aides that this "Rabin" is a "Rozumny Jevrey" (a smart Jew) and the name stuck as a designation for the family.

The grandson of this "pater familias" evinced a great interest in singing from his early childhood on. Whenever he had a chance he ran to listen to a cantor chant the religious ritual. Occasionally he himself would also make bold to go up to the pulpit and let loose his voice in one of the smaller houses of worship of the town, where his cradle stood: Nikolayev — and where he was born in the year 1853. However to become a professional cantor never entered his mind. He was too "smart" for that.

He finished four classes of gymnasium (high school) and had the am-

bition to go on and become a pharmacist (provisor). To continue his studies toward that end he was obliged to transfer to Odessa. He took courses in the science of filling prescriptions and at the same time he served as an apprentice (utchenik) in a pharmacy. On the Sabbaths he would frequent the different synagogues of the city, listen to the chants of Minkowsky, Abrass and Bachman and at work he was in the habit of singing and copying the melodies of the famous cantors.

More and more he became interested in cantors and in the singing craft. It seems that the atmosphere of Odessa, the city of cantors, exerted a strong influence on him and he had second thoughts about the wisdom of embarking on a career of dispensing drugs and filling prescriptions. He was persuaded by pals and acquaintances, who chanced to hear him give out in song, to switch signals and try his hand at the cantorial art.

Word of the sweet voiced and talented youth reached the ears of the officials of the Yevreysky synagogue and those of its cantors, with the result that the young man was taken in hand by them and after a short period of intensive indoctrination he was named assistant cantor of the Bolshoy (large) synagogue that was located at the corner of Yevreysky and Reshilevsky streets. He proved to be a rare find, an unqualified success and so it came about, that when Pitze Abrass passed away, the assistant cantor was elevated to the rank of regular cantor of the largest congregation of the city, equal in standing with the great Yaakov Bachman, with whom he alternated in the performance of the cantorial duties at the pulpit of the central synagogue.

It didn't take long and all Odessa was set on its ears with the realization that out of nowhere a unique talent has sprung up, who shows such great promise, that he must be reckoned with as a newborn fast rising star, who'll go far.

And it came to pass that just at that juncture there occurred a vacancy in the Shalashna synagogue. In that prominent house of worship had for about a decade been reigning Yankel Soroker (Spivack), a cantor of eminent stature, who was the possessor of a gigantic tenor voice that encompassed nearly three octaves and was reputed to be an extraordinarily endowed artisan of liturgy.

All of a sudden he fell ill with a nasty cold. Complications set in, causing his condition to deteriorate to such an extent, that for months he was unable to officiate. In view of the seriousness of his malaise, which did not respond to their treatment, his doctors advised him to leave for Vienna, where better facilities for diagnosis and health-care are available in the clinics of renowned specialists.

During his absence, rumors circulated in Odessa, that Yankel Soroker lost his voice and the word was passed around, that he won't be able to resume his duties even after his expected recovery from the illness that incapacitated him for so long in the first place. Acting on this presumption, which was based on supposedly authoritative, dependable information, the leading lights of the congregation scouring the field for a replacement for their laid-up cantor hit upon the brilliant idea, that it would be a valua-

ble acquisition if they could succeed in persuading the phenomenal young cantor of the Yevreysky synagogue to defect to them.

They had an inkling that Rozumny was not very happy in his present position where he was obliged to play second fiddle to Bachman who was after all the seasoned cantor and even after Bachman left for Budapest and Minkowsky took his place, there were indications that Rozumny could not get along with his new colleague either and would not at all be averse to making a change.

So they approached him with the proposition and sure enough Rozumny proved receptive and quite willing to exchange his current status of associate cantor with that of chief cantor and sole possessor of the cantorial post in the Shalashna synagogue situated at Yekaterinaskaya and Maleyaarnutzkaya and so the deal was quickly closed to the satisfaction of both contracting parties.

There was however still another (third) party that had a vital interest in the matter and could hardly be expected to be satisfied with the "fait accompli". — After a protracted period of health-care in the Austrian capital, Yankel Soroker unexpectedly returned to Odessa fully recovered, his voice once more in good shape only to find that his position in the Shalashna synagogue has been usurped by an interloper. He demanded to be reinstated.

This new turn of events put the hierarchy of the congregation on the horns of an embarrassing dilemma. They tried to solve the problem by offering to take back their former cantor under an arrangement whereby he and Rozumny would share the pulpit and officiate on alternate Sabbaths, similarly to the usage that was in vogue in the Yevreysky synagogue.

However Reb Yankel balked at such a suggestion and rather than agree to become an associate cantor with the younger man, who was smuggled in during his absence by the scheming big shots without his knowledge and consent, he preferred to go it alone and accepted in 1895 a call from the Jewish community of Uman, where he henceforth served for six years as the chief cantor of the city until one fateful night his synagogue went up in flames and burned to the ground.

When the cantor heard of the arson that consumed the holy edifice he was felled by a stroke that paralyzed most of his body. An invalid, he struggled on for 14 years in agonizing suffering until he passed away at the age of sixty six in 1918.

In later years, when Aryeh Leyb Rutman caused a considerable stir in the musical circles of Odessa, he too was offered the same deal by the officials of the Shalashna synagogue — But just as did Yankel Soroker, he too refused to enter into a partnership with another colleague, especially when that colleague happened to be Rozumny, who was bound to be "primus inter pares" the first of the equals, more equal than any partner of his and who would surely overshadow his associate.

Furthermore both Yankel Soroker as well as Rutman apparently still well remembered the tug-of-war that was raging between Abrass and Bachman and later between Bachman and Rozumny and between Rozum-

ny and Minkowsky when they were sharing the pulpit of the Yevreysky synagogue, which proved once more the validity of the age old lesson contained in the adage: "No two kings can ever wear the same crown."

The Shalashna synagogue was an imposing edifice. It was built with towers in the fashion of a castle. As for its circumference it was smaller than the central Yevreysky synagogue, but larger than the Broder or Brodsky synagogue — As far as religious traditionalism is concerned it also occupied the center, the middle ground between strict orthodox adherence to principles of faith and modernistic straying from the golden path.

For a long time there was no "Balemer" (estrada) in the center of the synagogue as prescribed by traditional custom. Eventually however the Rabbinical council succeeded in getting the leadership around to their point of view and a "Balemer" was duly erected.

Rozumny officiated only on alternate Sabbaths twice a month, but the choir sang each and every Sabbath accompanying not only the chief cantor but also the assistant cantor, usually a tenor of the choir, who filled in on the Sabbaths when Rozumny was off duty. The chorists were dressed in flowing black gowns, velvet multiedged "Yarmulka's" and small folded "Taleysim" prayershawls according to the latest fashion of Vienna and Berlin.

Even though Rozumny made already his mark in the Yevreysky synagogue, he came into his own only when he transferred to the Shalashna post. Here he took off like a rocket. People flocked in droves to hear the new sensational singer. Like a magnet he drew overspilling masses. He emptied out all the other synagogues of Odessa of worshipers.

His name became famous throughout the land, a by-word of excellence and he received invitations for guest appearances from numerous Jewish communities, many more than he could possibly accept being that he was connected on a permanent basis with a congregation to which belonged his first allegiance most of his time.

As much as he was adored by the general public, he was shunned by the members of the Rabbinical fraternity, who were looking askance at his rather unconventional, irreverent personal conduct that did not jibe with his status of "Sheliach Tzibur" (representative of a Jewish congregation). He was reputed to be a frivolous light-weight in the observance of the religious tenets and the restrictions in morality and they therefore objected to a man of such unsavory comportment being given the assignment to lead their worshipers in prayer.

Some strictly observant laymen also joined the camp that had it in for Rozumny and vetoed any suggestion of letting him ascend the pulpit of their holy sanctuary. By and large nonetheless not only was there no scarcity of opportunities for him anywhere to get a hearing, but he was literally swamped with insistent requests for open dates. The more he was denounced by the purists, the more he was in demand.

The overwhelming majority of music lovers were little concerned with Rozumny's personal life, with his private behavior. All that interested them was that he was a great artist of liturgy and they were anxious to

listen to his chants and where there is a will there is always a way. So even though he was denied access to the hallowed pulpit of the Wilna Bolshoy (large) synagogue, the welcome mat was put out for him at the entrance of the choir synagogue of the "Jerusalem of Lithuania." There were also several occasions when Yudel Apatov, one of his greatest admirers brought Rozumny to Wilna to make a guest appearance in his own house of worship.

One of the main strongholds of tradition-true piety was Berditchev and if anywhere the dubious reputation of Rozumny was a handicap it surely would in the first place be in that city, and he never even gave any thought to conducting a religious service in that ultra religious community. But nevertheless that unlikely occurrence did take place.

It came about in a round about way. Rozumny was nurturing in his heart a long standing hankering to listen to the performances of the two leading masters of liturgical ensemble-singing of his time, Nisi Belzer and Zeidel Rovner, both of whom reigned supreme in Berditchev. So he decided to make a special trip and spend a weekend in that city. He arrived in town unheralded and incognito and succeeded in killing two birds with one stroke. Friday evening he mingled with the worshipers of the old city synagogue and admired Nisi's artistry — and Saturday morning he got his fill of Zeidel Rovner's mastery in the new city holy edifice. But matters did not end there.

The presence in town of such a celebrity could understandably not remain unnoticed and even though he intended it to be a private visit, when people found out that Rozumny was in their midst they tried to induce him to extend his stay in town and officiate on the following Sabbath, conducting the religious ritual at the "chorshool."

He was receptive to the idea of making a guest appearance, but he did not think that the choir synagogue was a large enough place to suit his need. There was also the question whether Zeidel would relinquish the Omud to Rozumny. "Get me a larger auditorium," he said "and I'll be glad to oblige." So the ad-hoc committee went to work and hired the "Ritz Hall" for that purpose.

Rozumny also had his doubts about the competency of the choir of the smaller synagogue and he turned to Nisi Belzer with the request, that he lend him his choir for the occasion. But Nisi had a firm rule, that he did not allow his chorists to assist any other cantor but himself. The only exception was Avrohom Kalechnik, who was like a son to Nisi and at whose disposal he would put his ensemble, whenever he came to Berditchev on a professional mission.

So Nisi was obliged to turn down Rozumny's request much to the disappointment of the latter, who had to be content with the accompaniment of the choir-synagogue ensemble. The assistants were not "A number 1" singers and their performance left much to be desired, but for their deficiencies the visiting luminary made up sevenfold. He took the public by storm and the enthusiasm of the audience was so spontaneous and overflowing, that at the conclusion of the service Rozumny was car-

ried from the hall in triumph through the streets of Berditchev.

In Mohilev Podolsk Rozumny was paid five hundred rubles for a Sabbath service, an unheard-of sum. True enough Mirzvinsky, the heroic tenor, who was the rage in that era received two thousand rubles for one evening in the Royal opera house and the popular folk singer Madame Vialtziva charged three thousand rubles for rendering gypsy songs at concert appearances.

But sad to relate, it is a well known fact of long standing, that gentiles reward their stage personalities in generous fashion and Jewish art is being treated by its patrons as they would a stepchild. However by the usual standard of liturgical music, as it existed in that epoch, five hundred rubles was considered a fortune.

Rozumny had a selfimposed rule that the compensation had to be handed over to him in cold cash not later than Friday afternoon. Failing that he would not under any circumstances mount the podium. This standard requirement he would enforce everywhere and everytime. Where he hid the cash which he received shortly before the advent of the holy Sabbath remained a deep unresolved secret.

At one time he came to Kishinev and led the religious devotion of the Sabbath in the Hecker'sher synagogue. As usual he made a tremendous hit and yielding to the general demand of the membership, the trustees of the congregation appealed to Rozumny to honor them by accepting at their hand the post of chief cantor. They sweetened the proposition by proffering him a yearly salary of four thousand rubles and a comfortable furnished home.

It was considerably more than he was getting in Odessa and besides the timing was very propitious in favor of Kishinev because only a short time prior to that, he had a falling out with the dictatorial president of the Shalashna synagogue and in a fit of pique the petulant Rozumny was bent on taking revenge on his antagonist. So he lent a sympathetic ear to the offer laid on the table by the Bessarabian community and to teach that so-and-so a lesson he put his John Hancock to an agreement with it.

However Odessa did not stand idly by either. To lose the services of Rozumny was something no community could afford. For the Shalashna congregation it would be a calamity of the first order. So they mobilized every conceivable influence, which they could muster to try and undo the damage.

They went to court and brought a charge of unethical conduct in alienating the affection of their cantor to the Rabbinical judiciary against the offending Kishinev community leaders. A "Din Torah" (religious tribunal trial) was conducted and after lengthy consideration by the judges their edict found in favor of Kishinev.

There was jubilation in the streets. The coveted prize was adjudged to them and the Bessarabian Jews were in seventh heaven.

But even though they lost the battle, the trustees of the Shalashna synagogue did not give up the fight. With redoubled efforts they mapped plans of action in a determined resolve to bring back the prodigal son to

the fold. And using every means in their arsenal, they eventually succeeded in persuading Rozumny that his place was in Odessa, the residents of which city had taken him to their bosom and heart in the first instance. Two years later they succeeded.

By that time he had forgotten his gripes and he gave in to the pleas of the devoted fans, for whom his absence was unbearable torture. He came back to Odessa and reoccupied his orphaned pulpit once more and there he stayed on for the rest of his life.

The last years of his life were marred by the delicate state of his health. He was ailing and physically weak, and on several occasions he was unable to attend to his duties. He had contracted an incurable disease, which was gradually more and more incapacitating him. (Significantly the nature of his malaise was withheld from the public as well as from the synagogue members.)

Suddenly just before Passover of 1904, his condition worsened considerably and it became almost certain, that he will be bedridden during the oncoming festival of liberation. When the population learned that the great favorite of the people was seriously ill and won't be able to ascend his pulpit on Passover, there was a veritable "Tishoh B'av" (the ninth day of Av, day of mourning over the destruction of the holy temple in Jerusalem) anguish and dread all over Odessa. Masses took up an all night vigil in the front of the Christian hospital, whereto he had been taken.

True to the hopeless prognosis of the physicians, his illness progressed unchecked and proved fatal soon afterward. When his soul departed this valley of tears he was barely fifty-one years old.

After Rozumny's burial the heads of the Odessa Medical School allegedly offered to pay his heirs thirty thousand rubles in return for turning over to the college the throat of the deceased cantor for an examination of his vocal chords, in an effort to discover wherein lay the secret of the magical sound which they were able to produce.

The family, however, indignantly refused to let the lifeless body of their dear father be mutilated for pecuniary gain and so Rozumny took the puzzle of his uniquely mesmerizing voice with him in his grave.

CHAPTER 11

THERE ONCE WAS A BLESSED GREAT "BAAL TEFILA" (MASTER OF PRAYER) AND HIS NAME WAS YECHIEL ALTER KARNIOL

How the central synagogue of Odessa managed to lure him away from the Ohav Zedek Congregation of New York — His remarkable voice — His farewell appearance in the downtown New York Warshever Synagogue — His death and funeral.

Now that we have concluded our visits to the Broder and Shalashner Synagogues, let us return for a while and look in again at the large, main synagogue of Odessa, which, when we left it, did not have a cantor after Bachman deserted her for Budapest, Rozumny for the Shalashna Synagogue, and Minkowsky for America.

It did not take long before the Jews of Odessa became lonesome and longing for Bachman. When he was with them, a large faction of the membership made his life miserable but as soon as he left them, even these antagonists realized that an irreplaceable genius had been driven away from their city. But if Odessa did not know how to value the great talents of Bachman while they had the chance, Budapest did. They recognized his true worth, and showered him with love and appreciation. When he officiated at his first Passover service at the Rombach Temple in 1885, a delegation, consisting of the whole presidium with the president of the congregation as its spokesman, came to visit him after the conclusion of

the festival of freedom and presented him with a beautiful laurel crown tied with silver ribbons and covered with a golden plate, on which there was a dedication and an engraved expression of deep gratitude.

Meanwhile in Odessa, the congregation advertised for a cantor, offering to pay a salary of three thousand rubles. A score of well-known candidates presented themselves but not one of them proved acceptable to the members. So they decided to send to Bachman one of his best friends and confidant, Jonas Feldman. He took a trip to Budapest with the object of conferring with Bachman and urging him to come back. When his mission failed to bring the desired result, the president, Barsky, went to Budapest, taking along with him the choir director Yakovkin. They were authorized to offer Bachman a salary of 4000 rubles with a contract for ten years, a house and two months vacation in summer. Such conditions were unheard of up to that time. But still Bachman remained unmoved. He could not forget the troubles, distress and disrespect which he suffered while in Odessa, and the delegation returned empty-handed. The main reason for Bachman's refusal to reconsider allegedly was the fact that he had shortly after his arrival remarried and this time to a Hungarian woman, who would not even want to hear of leaving her native country and emigrating to Russia. After they were repeatedly rebuffed by their former cantor, the Odessa Synagogue engaged Pinye Minkowsky, then Meyer Pisack, who later transferred to Yelisovetgrad and eventually became the successor to Nisi Belzer in Berditchev. After him came Zev Wilder, who later went to South Africa.

These were only provisional cantors. The congregation did not cease to look and search for a cantor with a great, famous name, who would be able to bring back the old good times of Pitze Abrass and Bachman, when the great synagogue grew and prospered.

By a curious coincidence some big merchants, who had just returned from a business trip to the United States, related among other wonders which they saw and heard in the New World, that they happened to hear in New York a cantor, who was outstanding in every respect and who would be a great asset to Odessa if he could be prevailed upon to leave his post in America.

The trustees saw in this possibility a ray of hope and they immediately sent a letter to Karniol, who at that time was the cantor of the first Hungarian congregation, "Ohav Zedek," in which they offered him the position in the great synagogue of Odessa.

To Karniol, who resented his New York bosses, the idea of making the change appealed, but he had by now acquired American ways and demanded financial conditions, which were unheard of previously in Russia. But what is a congregation not ready to do and to what length is it not willing to go, if it is determined to get a certain cantor? After lengthy negotiations, they finally arrived at an agreement and the Odessa congregation engaged Karniol at the colossal salary of 7500 rubles a year. All Russia was agog at the unheard of precedent in the escalation of cantorial salaries set by Odessa Jewry. There was general disapproval all over the

country of the Odessa trustees' generous spending of public funds.

Karniol arrived in Odessa in the year 1898 and was greeted by a large crowd, which gave him a rousing reception. His fame preceded him and the interest and desire of the Russian Jews to hear and know this newcomer was very intense.

Let us, too, find out something about him and get acquainted with some biographical data of his career. A native of Ozialeshitz in the Gubernie (state) of Keltz, where he was born in 1855, he early in his life became a resident of Hungary. He sang in the choirs of the famous cantors, Moshe Lutzker and Peysi Chotiner. When he later went out on his own, he occupied cantorial positions in the largest cities of Hungary, such as Sabadka, Mishkoltz, Gross-Wardein, Balasha Dyarmat, Ofen (Buda). Finally, he landed in Finf Kirchen (5 churches) where they gave him a life contract.

His name became known all over the country and his fame even reached the Hungarian "landsleit" in America, who heard wonderful tales about the rising new brilliant star in their old country. When the Hungarian congregation, Ohav Zedek of New York, needed a cantor and was unable to find a suitable candidate among the American applicants, they decided to import the cantor of Finf Kirchen, who was so highly and favorably spoken of by all Hungarian Jews. That is how Karniol was brought to New York in 1895.

In America, he at once became a big success. With his first appearance, he confirmed the good name that preceded him. The Jews of New York took him to their hearts and spread the good news that a new star had arisen on the American horizon. The Ohav Zedek, thanks to its new imported cantor, soon became the recognized center of the cantorial art in New York.

But Karniol, who in Hungary was used to almost royal honor and considerate treatment, whom his members coddled and considered as precious as the "Kohinoor" diamond and watched over him like the apple of their eyes, could not get used to the new kind of patronizing attitude with which he was confronted. He could not tolerate the dictatorial and rude treatment accorded the employees of the congregation by their superiors. Independent as he was in his thinking and his conduct, there were bound to occur frequent clashes between him and some of the influential trustees and members.

At one time, the vice president reminded him, "Cantor, don't forget that in a few weeks my son will be 'Bar Mitzvah' and you will have to officiate." Karniol was offended by his commanding manner, for that particular date fell on a Sabbath on which, according to his contract, he was not supposed to officiate. He thought that the least the official could have done was to ask him to be so kind and make an exception and conduct the services for his sake. But to say, "You will have to" is overbearingly arrogant. So he replied to him in the same vein, "I'm very sorry, but on that particular Sabbath I will have, I am sure, a very bad cold and I won't be able to officiate."

Similar recurring unpleasant incidents and the generally very low status of the cantorial profession in America made him uncomfortable and dissatisfied. He now regretted that he had left his lifelong position in Hungary and had let himself be dazzled by the illusory luring promises of America. That was the reason that when the offer came from Odessa, it found him in a receptive mood. To Odessa, the new cantor presented an entirely new style of cantorial interpretation which made a profound impression upon the Russian music lovers. The whole city was agog. The new cantor captured their souls with his extraordinary broad and mighty voice and original way of praying.

When Rozumny, who until then had dominated the Russian scene, heard him the first time he declared, "Now I am through as a cantor" and he became ill and was bedridden for three months. Furthermore aggravated him the fact that Karniol was paid twice as much as he. It was enough to make him ill. He also lost a great portion of his former devoted following. The public is fickle. It henceforth was catering to the new wonder, the new sensation, the "American cantor."

The director of the Odessa opera also came to hear him and offered to take him under his wing, cultivate his voice and prepare him for the opera where he claimed he could assure him of a brilliant career. But Karniol who was a truly religious man would not hear of it. He felt that his place was at the pulpit, and how right he was!

People used to come from Kishinev and from other nearby cities especially to hear the wonder cantor from America. They left singing his praises and made his name famous all over the country. One day, on "Erev Rosh Chodesh" (the eve before the first day of the month), Karniol happened to stray into the Lithuanian synagogue. When the worshipers saw him, they implored him to conduct for them the "Yom Kippur Koton" (little day of atonement) prayers, which are recited on such occasions.

First he declined, saying that inasmuch as he had fasted all day (the usual custom), he felt weak and did not know whether or not his voice was in good shape but when the Jews insisted, he relented and agreed to try. In a flash the word got around and spread like wild fire, that Karniol was saying Yom Kippur Koton in the Lithuanian synagogue, and as if from under the earth, people sprang up. In a jiffy, a crowd of several thousand gathered, besieging the building and breaking in the doors and windows. The report later had it that not before and not since had the Jews of Odessa heard a Yom Kippur Koton to compare with the one delivered that evening by Karniol.

He was the possessor of a freak voice, which in its low register was a basso, in the middle of baritonal quality, higher up had the sound of a dramatic tenor, and on the very top was a definite lyric tenor. In addition, he was blessed with a wonderful mezzo voce and a falsetto which was comparable to that of Galli Curci. He also possessed an extraordinary, marvellously fluent, sharp and polished coloratura, which he was able to wind through four octaves. He was the true Baal Tefilah (master of

prayer) and wondrous "Zoger" (improvisator) who was capable of pouring out his heart in prayer that was so sincere, insistent and disarming, that it could move a stone. It was said that this so effective mode of prayer he had learned from Moshe Lutzker, who had a remarkable powerful basso voice and was one of the greatest experts in the "Nusach" (traditional melodies) of Hungary.

Karniol was, however, deficient as far as musical knowledge was concerned, and his choir leader, Dunayevsky, had no easy task keeping him and the choir in proper rapport. He hated any kind of discipline. He was at his best when he could roam all over the place and give free reign to his phantasy, singing extemporaneously, according to the inspiration of the moment.

Neither was he a very learned scholar, and as far as the meaning of the words is concerned, there was also room for improvement, but all these flaws were of small account and more than fully compensated for by his chief asset which was, that he had a cantorial mouth and whatever came out of it had charm, sweetness and artistic form.

When he was asked what was the most important quality for a cantor to possess, he always used to stress that in his opinion a "Chazzonish Moil" (cantorial mouth) was the sine-qua-non requirement, the determining factor and the most precious asset one can have. Without a cantorial mouth one can never become outstanding in the profession. Odessa simply worshiped him. If anyone dared to utter a word of criticism about the "American cantor," he was ostracized by the community, as if he were an outlaw.

The congregation wanted to give him a contract for life, but when in 1895 a bloody pogrom broke out in Odessa, and Karniol, who was hiding in a cellar, was discovered and set upon by the murderers and almost lost his life, he refused to remain in that city any longer.

He returned to New York where he accepted the post of cantor at the Illyer synagogue. From there he transferred to the Cong. Shaarey Zedek of 118th Street. Later he occupied the pulpit at his former congregation, the Hungarian Ohav Zedek. He was also the cantor of the Roumanian "Shaarey Shomayim" Synagogue, the "Dukler Mogen Avrohom" of Attorney Street and the Forest Avenue Synagogue in the Bronx which was close to Home Street, where he resided in his later years.

In the declining period of his career, the formerly adored and extolled Karniol suffered from humiliation and disrespect by the officials of many synagogues. He had to beg permission to be allowed to officiate and earn a pittance to sustain himself. Bitterly he complained that even if only some of the members of the congregations which he had served would want to remember and would pay up the pledges, which they made for him in return for the "Mi Sheberachs" (blessings) which he recited at their request, he would not have to suffer in his old age from hunger and sickness.

In those years, a club was organized to which belonged about a dozen of the most prominent cantors like Kwartin, Hershman, Roitman and others, which had as its purpose the support of Karniol, Bromberg and

other cantors who were in need. These colleagues saw to it that he received a regular weekly stipend and he was even provided with a vacation during the summer.

Shortly before his death, the cantors of New York arranged for his benefit an appearance in the Warshever Synagogue on Rivington Street in downtown New York. He conducted the Yom Kippur Koton service, the prayers which were his specialty, and with which he used to enchant his listeners in his heyday. The synagogue was packed to the rafters. In the front rows, there were assembled a goodly number from among the cantors of New York, who came to pay homage to a great colleague. All of them paid for a ticket of admission. When Karniol began in a trembling voice "Tefilo Leoni" (the prayer of a poor man, the words fitted perfectly the great master of prayer, who at that time was a very poor man indeed,) the choir of over 100 cantors responded, serving as his assistants throughout the service. When Karniol heard the mighty accompaniment, tears welled up in his old eyes. It was a very moving demonstration of the love and regard which the cantors wanted to show and express toward the great veteran of their profession. He was then naturally but a shadow of the great, celebrated cantor of yore, who conquered a world in his time, but the traces of his inborn great talents were, nevertheless, still discernible in the course of his delivery, when here and there, a brilliant phrase and a lightning tone recalled to the vast audience the power and incomparable virtuosity of the Karniol of olden days. This was his last professional appearance, his swan song. Soon after that in 1928, he passed away at the age of 73. His funeral was attended by a great crowd of mourners. Some of the greatest cantors took part in the service which was held at the Hunts Point Jewish Center.

He left behind a number of phonograph records, and when listening to his "Tikanto Shabos" and "Sim Shalom" one cannot help but be astounded by the facility with which he managed to do the most difficult and complicated vocal acrobatics and by the enormous range of his voice. His Galician-Hungarian pronunciation of the words had a peculiar sound. But his praying style is so full of charm and natural beauty and so sincere and honest, that it is overwhelming. And it must be remembered that when he recorded these compositions, he was long past the zenith of his career. Many cantors try to imitate him and to copy his style, but few succeed and even the best ones fall short of the original.

There was once a great genius, a blessed-from-God grand "Baal Tefila," a most original "zoger" and improviser and his name was Yechiel Alter Karniol of blessed memory.

CHAPTER 12

BLUMENTHAL, MINKOWSKY, ROZUMNY and KARNIOL

Additional episodes from their lives — Their final days — The rare generosity of the goodhearted Rozumny — Blumenthal's parable about the spider and the bee — Minkowsky's last unfinished composition.

Before proceeding to the drawing of a pen-portrait of another great cantorial star, it behooves us to pay up our still outstanding debts to the great four of the Odessa scene, by gathering up in the manner of a postscript, a bouquet of some of the most interesting stories, which we have failed to include in the previous respective chapters dealing with their careers.

This would be in the nature of bringing them out for another curtain call, so that they could take a final bow and we could give them another ovation, before we take leave from them.

Blumenthal, Minkowsky, Rozumny and Karniol. What a marvelous quartet they would make! Just imagine! Blumenthal singing the prima melody, while Minkowsky is taking the role of the tenor. Rozumny chiming in as baritone, at the time when Karniol (who was at home at any one of the registers) is subbing as basso.

What a heavenly combination that would form and what angelic chants such an ensemble could produce! And who knows? Maybe they do get together on special occasions for such a celestial musical bull session where-ever their spirits dwell in the spheres.

However, right now and here it is not their art and profession that we are concerned with, but rather their attributes as human virtues or foibles

as revealed by certain characteristic acts of theirs and sometimes even by mere uttered words.

Now who shall we begin with? Rest assured that we do not pose the question facetiously. When you are dealing with several cantors at one and the same time, this question is not as immaterial as one might think. Artists are very sensitive people and are easily offended. The problem of what sequence to adopt in placing their names becomes a very delicate one indeed. In the ads everyone wants to be the first but to sing the last. To solve it to the satisfaction of all concerned takes tact, diplomatic skill and you may not believe it, even psychological intuition.

So we might perhaps do best to fall back on a biblical precedent and adhere to the method followed and employed by the adjutant of Joseph, who was dispatched to overtake his departing brethren and search their sacks for the missing goblet of his master.

In the account of that deliberately staged "theft", we are told: "Bagodol heychel uvakoton kiloh", with the biggest (oldest) he began and with the smallest (youngest) he concluded. Accordingly let us turn our attention first to the senior member of the foursome.

We have reference of course to the venerable Nisi Blumenthal, who even though principally a traditionalist, was not above occasionally borrowing some musical ideas from various secular sources and incorporating and integrating them into his compositions.

This process of grafting and inoculating alien ingredients into the fabric of the ritual did not sit well with some liturgical purists, who chided him for his action which, they thought, had the effect of desecrating and profaning our musical heritage of liturgy.

In answer to the criticism voiced in certain musical circles and leveled against him, Nisi rejected the allegation that selective adaptation of suitable tuneful phrases lifted from classical works was in any way improper tampering with sacred traditional values. To his way of thinking the overriding consideration was the enrichment of our musical treasure.

Endeavoring in his rejoinder to illustrate the validity of his viewpoint as against the objections raised by the reprovers, he pointed to the contrast between the activities of the spider and the honeybee.

The spider produces from his own body the raw material, which he needs for the purpose of weaving the network of his web. But when all is said and done, what is the end-result of his labor? Nothing of intrinsic value, nothing that could benefit anyone else.

How different, on the other hand, is the nature of the end product in the case of the honeybee! Observing her method of procedure, we can clearly see, that not only is she not averse to taking what she considers valuable for her purposes from outside sources, but that this exactly is her main task and principal endeavor, which enables her to realize her ultimate goal.

With indefatigable persistence she flies around the length and breadth of the open spaces in search of the raw material, the ingredients, that are required for the production of honey. She skips from one flower to

another, picking up whatever she can find, a morsel of nectar here and pinhead of a sweet blossom there, anything that could be of use to her and her co-workers in their workshop, the beehive, where all the stuff gathered from various sources is being transformed by their unique recipe into a delicious syrupy substance, which is relished by all human beings.

"Well", he drew the obvious conclusion, "who would make so bold as to contend that one ought to emulate the example set by the spider, rather than that of the bee? I for one must confess, that to me the role played by the bee appeals much more as one that is useful and beneficial, as opposed to that of the spider, which strikes me as selfish and barren.

"It is for that reason that if I find something worthwhile and containing some affinity to Jewish modes, in the work of others, I do not consider it inconsistent with my principles to apply it, fit it and work it into some of my musical compositions. In my version it becomes an integral part of the new work, it acquires a new identity compatible with traditional usage." In this context he was fond of citing Disraeli, who defined a critic as one who failed in literature and art.

When Nisi was retired by his congregation it presented him and his wife with complimentary paid-up round-trip tickets for a trip to the Holy Land. When he returned from that pilgrimage, he said that in the course of his treading on the sacred soil and criss-crossing the hallowed ground of the ancient Jewish homeland he gained a new insight into the meaning of the prayers and psalms.

He remarked that the impressions, which these fresh experiences made upon his heart and soul evoked in him new inspirations and he added with sad resignation in his voice that were it not for the regrettable fact that by now he was too old for undertaking a whole line of new projects, he would begin from scratch and change all his works, so that they would more closely and faithfully reflect and express the true spirit of Zion and Jerusalem.

Blumenthal passed away on a Friday and the funeral was set for Sunday. On that Sabbath the whole ritual of the religious services consisted of nothing else, but exclusively compositions by the fallen giant. It happened to be a "Shabos Rosh Chodesh," which was also the first day of the month.

When Pinye Minkowsky, his successor, chanted "Ato Yotzarto" (Thou has created) and came to the climactic passage of "chorvoo ireynoo veshomeym beys mikdosheynoo venotal kovod mibeys chayeynoo" (our city hath been laid waste, our sanctuary hath become desolate and the glory hath been removed from the house of our life) the words struck home and the whole congregation was moved to tears, lamenting their beloved departed, who served them faithfully for lo those many years.

The whole town turned out to pay the final homage to its great son. Pinye was also one of the participants in the numerous funeral orations. In his eulogy he applied to his celebrated predecessor the words, in which King David threw down the gauntlet as a challenge to the angel of death, "Lo omus ki echye veasapeyr maasey Koh" (I shall not die but live and re-

count the works of the Lord).

The anointed ruler of Israel thought that he had found an effective way of blocking any attempt on the part of the grim reaper to rob him of his soul, no matter how he tried. He was unable to find out the exact date of his scheduled demise. However that much was disclosed to him from heaven, that his death would occur on the holy day, of a certain unspecified Sabbath.

With that information in his possession, King David evolved a plan of action to frustrate any stratagem the "Malach Hamoves" might conceive for the carrying out of his fatal mission. The above quotation from the one hundred and eighteenth psalm is being interpreted by some commentators in the sense that "I will not die but live because I will keep on recounting the works of the Lord." He knew for certain that at a time when he would occupy himself with the study of the holy scriptures the devilish meanie with the thousand eyes, won't be able to harm him.

Accordingly he made it an irrevocable, immutable rule to spend the whole day of each and every Sabbath in uninterrupted sessions of prayer and study of the Torah. It was his habit to pore over his sacred folios in the bucolic serenity of his garden — and so the contest between the King and his celestial adversary went on. The King would not budge from his dedicated service of the Lord and the angel of death was thereby rendered helpless. He could not touch his intended victim.

But destiny can in the long run not be evaded by any creature of flesh and blood, be he even a king. To catch him off guard, the angel in desperation made a loud, weird noise on the tree under the shadow of which the King was sitting engrossed in the sacred literature. Distracted suddenly by the unusual sound David looked up to see what caused the rumpus and in that moment the man with the scythe made his move and ran away with the precious pure soul of the psalmist.

Equally was the case with Nisi, Pinye concluded the analogy. "His mission in life was to praise the Lord and pray for his flock. And as long as he was able to raise his tongue for this noble cause and was able to serve in his capacity as the chosen emissary of his congregation and recount the works of the Lord, he was immunized to the wiles and designs of the "Maloch Hamoves". No evil could befall him. But woe to us, the sad day dawned, when the power of speech was taken from him.

That incapacitating stroke made him vulnerable and easy prey for the angel of death.

About the last years of Pinye Minkowsky in Odessa we learn from the reminiscences of an eyewitness Cantor Gottlieb of London, England. Like the captain of a sinking ship, he was the last of the great cantors of that important Jewish centre to leave his post. The year was 1921. Hunger had already been stalking the streets of the devastated port at the shores of the Black Sea for some time. The favorite target of the "Bezbozsnik" (Godless) bolshevik's persecution was religion and Jewish religion in particular.

However, such was the grade of esteem in which Minkowsky was held

by the authorities as well as the general citizenry of Odessa that even the most vicious "yevsek's" (Jewish communists) did not dare tangle with him, at least not personally harass or openly attack him and interfere with his religious activities. Not only did he keep up his regular prayer sessions but he even expanded their scope.

Never before had "Selichoth" (midnight forgiveness) services been held in the modernistically oriented Broder synagogue. But on that autumn night in 1921, that introductory service to the Days of Awe was for the first time scheduled to be chanted by Pinye Minkowsky with the assistance of the full complement of his chorists under the direction of Maestro Novakowsky and this time the organ remained silent.

Gottlieb vividly recalls that in spite of the late hour and the inclement weather, the line of the crowd, that had gathered around the synagogue, waiting for their next to gain admittance to the sanctuary was even longer than the "otcherad" (bread line) that customarily stretched in front of the kitchens or stores, where some kind of foodstuff rations were on occasions obtainable, "and it was worthwhile" according to the English cantor to stand in line for hours for a chance to attend that service. For the combination of Minkowsky and Novakowsky made it a memorable experience, a "Selichoth" ritual of unequalled artistry.

Things went from bad to worse. People were dying as the saying goes, "three times a day" from hunger and to even more compound the misery in the aftermath of the violent political upheaval, the "Tcheko" (secret police) made life, especially for the Jewish population, unbearable. They were hounded and jailed for alleged violations of ordinances without trial.

No wonder therefore that under the given circumstances everybody thought of and sought ways and means to get out. There was a mass exodus in progress and Gottlieb too was making ready to leave. So he turned to Minkowsky with the proposition, that Pinye join him in his plan to steal across the boundary into Rumania.

But Minkowsky could not see the point and did not believe that such a move on his part would be the answer to his dilemma. "What good would that do me?" he replied. "Even should I be successful in smuggling myself over the Dynester into that strange country, the kind of position to which I have become accustomed, I hardly could expect to find there and such as would be proffered me in Bessarabia or Rumania, I couldn't possibly accept. So I might as well stick it out, remaining at my post, hoping for matters to right themselves eventually and normalcy to be established in the not too distant future."

This optimistic view of his, however, proved to have been an unrealistic pipe-dream. It didn't take long for him to also become convinced, that to expect any improvement in conditions in the foreseeable span of time was a forlorn hope. The deterioration in every facet of life was galloping downhill at an ever increasing tempo, at a rate that made it clear for even a blind man to see that to remain stuck in the doomed city was the height of folly.

The "coup de grace" for Minkowsky was the loss of his sanctuary.

The Bolshevik big shots took over the Broder synagogue and converted the holy edifice into a political club named after Rose Luxemburg. After this outrageous action, there was no reason left any longer for Pinye to tarry. Disillusioned and broken-hearted he too went into exile. Winding his way in zig-zag indecisive fashion through several lands, he finally arrived in France, where he was reunited with the members of his family who had already fled the cursed land that was languishing under the brutal heel of the merciless regime of hooligans.

There they boarded a ship bound for the land of the free. But no salvation awaited him in America. In his remark to his colleague in Odessa he had correctly analyzed his slim prospects of landing a suitable post outside of his bailiwick. The cantorial fraternity of the new world knew who Pinye Minkowsky was, how considerable his contributions to the elevation of the standard of liturgical art were and what a meritorious activity he had been engaged in both as a theorist writer and professor of music, as well as the practitioner of the sacred calling for three decades in the city of cantors — and they were delighted to have such an eminent colleague join their ranks. They welcomed him with open arms and gave him an enthusiastic, warm, affectionate reception.

But the attitude of the general public was much more reserved. To the fickel masses, past achievements mean nothing, what was has no relevance at all. Artists are judged by audiences solely by what they can produce at the moment. He conducted the religious services of Passover at the Mariompoler synagogue of Chicago and on the Shevuoth (Pentecost) festival in 1923 at the "Talmud Torah Torath Moshe" of Prospect Avenue in the Bronx. His best years were behind him — and even though he still possessed the fine qualities of a past master of the liturgical chants, his rather dry, solemn, unemotional, modernistic style of delivery was not conducive of sweeping listeners off their feet and making them fall over themselves in outbursts of adulation. It would be more accurate to describe their reaction as rather unresponsive.

Yes! Pinye was right in the prognosis of his own chances. A position prestigious enough to fit his stature in the profession had not been proffered him. No such was forthcoming from any quarter and what proposition he did receive fell far short of even the minimal adequacy that would've made it palatable for him to seriously consider.

For the high holidays of 1923 arrangements had been made for him to conduct religious devotions in the auditorium of "Tammany Hall" of New York, with the assistance of an especially organized ad-hoc chorus under the leadership of Jacob Schorr.

It was a quite ironic twist of a cruel fate. One can just imagine how the celebrated chief cantor of the Broder synagogue must've felt about this curious development. That he of all people, who throughout his life led the crusade against the profanizing and cheapening of the sacred calling, who was dead set against cantors recording liturgical chants for gramophone or making concert appearances in halls or on the stage, that he, who fought Sirota and Kwartin, tooth and nail and even published a

book, mercilessly attacking them for these unbecoming extracurricular activities, which he considered, branded and labeled incompatible and unethical should himself be obliged to become guilty of commiting that very same breach of cantorial etiquette, which he so vehemently denounced, could not but have caused him bitter qualms of conscience and heartaches. He could not help but dread the prospect of leading prayer-sessions on the holiest days of the year in a club house of politicians and reproach himself for having let some undiscriminating individuals influence him to even dignify such a step by considering it at all.

He fervently hoped that by some miracle he would be spared that ultimate debasement of having to go through with an action, which was so definitely contrary and abhorrent to his convictions! And sure enough relief was forthcoming, even though time seemed to be running out for him. It arrived in the nick of time — and was due chiefly to the untiring efforts of Jacob Rappaport, the president of the Cantors association. He was casting his eyes in all directions in a feverish search and determined effort to find a way out for the downcast veteran giant of the synagogue dignitaries and in practically the last moment, he succeeded in having the North Russell synagogue of Boston engage him for the high holidays.

Happy as a lark at the receipt of the news of his last minute reprieve from the necessity of having to compromise his lifelong advocacy of the proper code of ethics, he plunged with gusto into his assignment and the Boston community was won over by his display of seasoned craftsmanship to such an extent, that as a result a movement was under way, designed to keep Minkowsky in their midst on a permanent basis. The cantors of the New England states also banded together with the object of taking advantage of the presence of such a great authority in Boston for the founding of a school for liturgical art under Pinye's competent directorship.

He was looking forward with great expectation to the grandiose music festival, which was to have celebrated a momentous milestone of the American cantorial history. On the program of the announced concert which was to be held at the colossal Madison Square Garden on February 3rd of 1924, he was listed as the soloist to whom was assigned the role of singing the cantor's passages of Zavel Zilbert's "Heyey im pipiyoth" (Be with the mouths) the prayer, in which the appointed emissary of the congregation pours out his personal feelings and hopes for the successful completion of his mission on behalf of the flock, which selected him as their intermediary.

It was to have been his great moment in the limelight of the American scene. But fate intervened and robbed him even of that last opportunity to bask in the glory of the tribute, which his colleagues had prepared to pay him on that occasion in front of the vast assembly.

An unfortunate accident put a sudden finis to his fruitful life, a short time before the date set for the great musical event, and among those who took part in the funeral ritual of his burial were Rabbi Stephen Wise and Yossele Rosenblatt. On the writing desk of his room was found a half completed composition of his, to the text of the morning prayer of "Elo-

kay Neshomo'' (Oh My God the soul which Thou hast given me is pure). The last words on that manuscript of his, were ''veato osid litlah mimeni'' (and Thou wilt take it from me) a prophetic passage indeed.

Very characteristic of the dignity and decorum with which he comported himself and the solemnity with which Minkowsky was very particular to invest his sacred calling at all times is the following anecdote as told by Jacob Rappaport.

For the elaborate publicity campaign envisaged by the concert committee in their plans worked out for the promotion of the gala affair, celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the ''Jewish Ministers Cantors Association of America and Canada'', it became necessary for all the leading participants in the program to supply a photograph of themselves.

For that purpose Rappaport took Pinye to the studio, that had been commissioned to take the required pictures of all these prospective performers clad in the regalia of their sublime craft. As is usually the case when anyone poses for the camera to take his likeness, the photographer in trying to catch the subject in the most photogenically favorable pose, feels obliged to keep on directing instructions to him like: ''turn somewhat more to the right, to the left, lift up your face a little bit, lower your chin, look straight into the focus of the camera, raise your eyebrows, etc.''

Pinye patiently sat through the ordeal and obediently responded to every command of the photographer, but when he was finally satisfied with the posture assumed by the subject and ready to press the button, he requested of the cantor ''Please smile'', Pinye balked. ''I'll do anything you ask of me, but to smile when I am dressed in my cantorial vestments is something I cannot do.'' He took his mission as ''Sheliach Tzibbur'' (emissary of the community) too seriously and as too great a responsibility for him to be able to emasculate it by the levity of grinning, while garbed in priestly robe, headgear and ''Talith'' (prayer shawl).

And speaking of photographs, Pinye kept on his desk in his home in Odessa a picture of himself flanked by Chayim Nachman Bialik and Shoul Tchernichowksy, for which they had posed at the time when the three literary luminaries joined in the project of founding the publishing establishment ''D'vir'' (palace) of which firm Minkowsky was for a time the chairman.

When the writer, publisher of the Warsaw Daily ''Unzer Leben'' (our life), S. Hochberg on one occasion visiting the cantor evinced a particular interest in that prominently displayed photo of the celebrated poets, Pinye turned to his guest with the question: ''Well! How do you like my 'Meshorerim?' wouldn't they add glamour to any ensemble?'' (both chorists as well as poets are called ''Meshorerim'' [singers]) which goes to show that Minkowsky was not devoid of a sense of humor, which had a fine subtle edge and could be lighthearted and playful when the occasion was opportune for such an approach in his private life. His sharp wit and irony was also evident in his writings, but he drew the line when he was engaged in his professional capacity.

We have now arrived at the point where we'll be privileged to have the opportunity of turning our searchlight at Panye Rozumny who had a predilection for "govorit po rusky", to speak Russian. Joseph Rumshinsky relates that when he once came to Wilna to preside over a Sabbath religious service at the choral synagogue of Zavalna Street, the resident cantor of that house of worship, Moshe Bernstein brought Rozumny on Thursday evening to a scheduled rehearsal with the choir. No sooner did he enter, than he began addressing the choirleader in a torrent of Russian and in spite of the fact that the director of the chorus as well as Bernstein replied to his remarks in Yiddish, he kept on talking in his favorite "goyish" language. His guest appearance in Wilna was a momentous event, notwithstanding the fact that the great central synagogue had been denied him and he had to be content with the second ranking house of prayer in town. Throngs flocked from all directions converging on the synagogue, where the celebrated wizard of liturgical art was scheduled to conduct the prayer ritual.

He was a great drawing card, who attracted not alone Jews, but also gentiles. Notables from the highest circles of the social strata were curious to hear the Jewish cantor, about whose exploits so many wonderful stories went the rounds. Among other highranking officials there was also in attendance the resident commander of the local garrison, General Ganetzky, who had come in the company of his entire staff.

Needless to say that Rozumny fully lived up to his reputation, electrifying his audience with his incomparable artistry. The General was so deeply impressed, that he invited the visiting cantor to give a musical recital for the high brass at the concert hall of the military (voyansky) club. It was an unqualified success and the grateful host was not only lavish in his praise, but also very generous in the tangible pecuniary tokens of appreciation, with which he rewarded the great singer.

Rozumny was fiercely independent and had frequent fallings out with officials of his congregation and on such occasions when anyone stepped on his toe he could be a very outspoken adversary who in his effort to cut his offender down to size was prone to break out in a violent denunciation of the culprit. He let nobody trifle with his pride.

Once he had a heated argument with one of the biggies of the Shalashna synagogue. In his aroused anger he gave the trustee a piece of his mind, lecturing him like a schoolboy, heaping a full load of abuse and his choicest insults upon the head of the poor chap in stentorian tones.

All the while the recipient of the dressing down took it on the chin without replying in kind. He let the cantor vent his rage uninterruptedly, standing by in humble silence. This lack of any rejoinder still more got Rozumny's goat and finally not being able to contain himself he burst out, "Well! Why don't you answer me? Why don't you say something?" This finally elicited a quite unexpected explanation from the member of the synagogue hierarchy, whose face suddenly lit up with a surprising smile.

"I could not pay any attention to the insulting epithets you hurled upon me, because I was distracted by the caressing sound of your voice. In

particular do I like your high tones and the more vehement your attacks became, the sweeter the musical quality of your harangues delighted my ears."

The great literary genius and idealistic thinker "Achad Hoam" (Osher Ginzburg) was not particularly fond of cantorial art and would not go out of his way to listen to even the most renowned liturgical giant and most certainly would nobody have expected him to have any desire to hear Rozumny, whose reputation as far as his everyday personal conduct and standard of morality was concerned resembled rather more that of a boheme than of a congregational dignitary.

However his close friend and devoted disciple Avrohom Elihayu Lubarsky, who was known in Odessa as a generous patron of all arts kept regaling him with the wondrous reports about Rozumny's unmatched wizardry. Ginzburg listened with an indifferent mien, evincing no interest whatever. No matter how enthusiastically eloquent his friend waxed, exhorting him to go and listen to the cantor, who in his considered opinion was one of a kind, "Achad Hoam" remained skeptical and unconvinced, believing his impressionable friend to be grossly exaggerating in his use of the superlatives and Lubarsky's urging went unheeded.

He was however not one to give up easily. He kept up without let up the drumming into the ears of his teacher and intimate friend the tales of Rozumny's extraordinary mastery of the liturgical art, until at long last he succeeded in persuading the great thinker to accompany him to the Shalashna synagogue on Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year.

Ginzburg reluctantly agreed to come mainly just to please Lubarsky, but it didn't take long for him to also fall under the irresistable magic of the famous cantor's chants. Having never heard him before, the impact of Rozumny's display of virtuosity was even stronger on him than on his companion, who knew what to expect. To Achad Hoam this unique experience was a revelation, which stirred him to the depth of his poetic, sensitive soul. He became as excited as a young boy on his first visit to a circus and he kept tugging at Lubarsky's sleeve, when something struck him as of a particularly ingenious nature.

As the prayer session progressed so did the admiration of Achad Hoam grow for the infectious grace, charm and sweetness that flowed from the inspired lips of the cantor, who gradually kept handing out and unveiling the howitzers, the real big guns which he had held in reserve.

When he proceeded to chant the "Zichronos" (reminiscences) and rendered his deeply nostalgic musical interpretation of the passage "Zocharti loch chesed neooraayich", (I remember thy kindness of the past) Achad Hoam was so overcome with emotion that he grabbed Avrahom Elye by his arm and dragged him to the exit. He explained that what he had just heard was so sublime and spiritually majestic, that he felt the urgent need to retain that exalted moment fixed in his memory forever — and he had to run out for fear that subsequent impressions may possibly tend to intrude upon and cloud or even erase and displace this vocal feast, the like of which he had never enjoyed nor ever expects to.

Rozumny would never just walk in casually into the synagogue. He made a point to always make a grand impressive almost theatrical entrance, so as to instantly become the center of attention.

To "Kol Nidrey", on the eve of the Day of Atonement, it was his custom to have himself driven to the Shalashna synagogue by a uniformed chauffeur in an elegant limousine.

The "Gabbayim" (trustees of the ritual) would plant themselves on the steps in front of the holy edifice to await the arrival of the cantor. When the "equipage" came into view, they would walk down to meet it.

As Rozumny alighted from the carriage they would humbly bow to him in greeting and taking him gently by the arms and flanking him, they would escort him into the sanctuary walking up the central aisle with measured, swaggering steps and ceremonial solemnity until they would get to the throne-like chair adjoining the holy ark and deposit in it the "VIP".

Rozumny one day was riding in a carriage together with his basso Kaganowitch, who also subbed occasionally as his managing impresario. As they passed by a store, they were struck by the unusual sight of a noisy group of people standing around and excitedly arguing about something or other.

His curiosity aroused he made the coachman halt and asked his assistant to go down and inquire "Tcho tam za sobranye" (what is going on there)? Kaganowitch brought him back the report, that the cause of the converged circle's rage was the order issued by the "pristav" (sheriff) to close down the store for the reason that the storekeeper had failed to secure a socalled "blet'l" (paper license) and to compound this malfeasance he was in addition also far behind in the remittance of certain tax obligations of his.

The way matters stood the poor devil, already deep in debt, would as a consequence of the punitive ordinance of the authorities have been left without any hope of eking out a living, a prospect of a bleak future indeed.

Upon hearing the sad story Rozumny also got out and addressing the "pristav", he begged him to hold off for a while the execution of the order for the closing of the store and he will take personal responsibility and give a guarantee, that in a few days the owner of the store would take out the required license and pay up in full the balance of taxes which he still owes.

In order to raise the money, he got Kaganowitch to make arrangements for him to chant the long "Vehu Rachum" (and he being merciful) on the morning devotional the following Monday, at the "Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol" synagogue. The news spread quickly by the grapevine route. Here was a unique opportunity to hear the superstar in a long string of prayers, that are said only on the weekdays of Monday and Thursday and customarily do not form part of the repertoire of any cantor.

Even though that service is held in the early hours of the morning, a huge crowd besieged the house of prayer, whose members belonged to the elite of the Odessa Jewish community. Rozumny did himself proud even

in the unfamiliar role of a weekday "Baal Tefila" (reader) and after completing his recitation of the "Vehu Rachum" he himself went around with a plate in his hands collecting contributions from the worshipers for the charitable purpose. No one among those present would refuse to give, when the appeal for funds came from such a universally adored personality.

The proceeds exceeded all expectations. Close to three hundred rubles were turned over to the hard pressed store owner personally by Rozumny, which was a Godsend and put him solidly on his feet. And there was no happier man in Odessa than the great cantor in the blessed knowledge, that by means of his art he succeeded in saving a poor man from ruin.

On his way to a scheduled engagement in another city he once happened to pass through Tolna. When his numerous fans in that town got wind of this fact, they beseeched him to stay over until after the holy Sabbath and lead them in the religious ritual of the day of rest in their "Kloiz" (house of prayer) of "Chassidim" (devotees of a holy Rabbi). Yielding to their insistent pleas, he agreed.

However an unexpected snag developed to foil the realization of the hopes of the music lovers. There always are sure to emerge from nowhere killjoys who manage to throw a monkey wrench into the path of the best intentioned plans and most beneficial propositions.

So some overzealous holier-than-thou individuals felt dutybound to alert their Rebbe to the danger of allowing a man of Rozumny's unsavory reputation to mount the "Omud" of their hallowed "Kloiz" and be their intermediary (Shliach Tzibur), commissioned by them to represent them before the heavenly presence. They contended that he was not worthy of such confidence.

Acting upon the objections of his followers based on the gossipy aspersions cast upon the cantor from Odessa, the Rebbe vetoed the invitation tendered by the officials of the Kloiz to Rozumny. The cancellation of the already announced guest appearance irked the cantor no end. It amounted to a public chastisement and denunciation of his conduct. To take it lying down could've been interpreted as an admission of a guilty conscience on his part. Swallowing therefore his pride he went to the Tolner Rebbe and assuring him, that the slanderous allegations are largely the figments of the fertile imagination of his antagonists, he appealed to him not to shame him and revoking his issued veto, allow him to conduct the religious services. But his personal interview with the Rebbe availed him nothing. The Rebbe preferred to believe what the stoolpigeons whispered into his ear and Rozumny left with disappointment and bitterness in his heart.

But even though he drew the short end in this instance, it was but the first round that he lost. He vowed that he wouldn't be caught napping next time out and come what may, he would have to by hook or by crook somehow manage to officiate at a Sabbath service in the "Kloiz" of some celebrated holy Rebbe — and he lost no time in making elaborate preparations for carrying out his design.

On one Friday bright and early, soon after that painful misadventure,

he betook himself to the town of Makarov. Late in the afternoon he entered the Kloiz and mingling with the chassidim who were assembling for the "Kabolos Shabos" (Reception of the bride Sabbath) he dropped casually the information that he was a businessman voyageur from Odessa, who got held up here by the advent of the holy day and that it so happens that he has "Yahrtzeit" (anniversary day of his father's demise) and he would therefore by custom be entitled to preference over others to lead in the devotional ritual.

The unsuspecting trustee in charge, taking the stranger's story at its face value, gave him the go ahead with a nod of his head. But no sooner did the supposed businessman launch into the initial psalm 95 of "Lechou Neranenah" (Oh come exalt before the Lord), than the Rebbe, Reb Boruch'l, opened up somewhat wider than usual the door of the adjoining study, where he customarily remained during the prayer sessions apart from the other worshipers and listened intently to the sweet sounds that emanated from the other room.

It soon became clear to all congregants, that far from being an uninitiated graphamon (amateur) they were led to believe him to be, the reader standing at the "Teyvah" (prayerbox) was unquestionably not a simple everyday accidental passerby, which he pretended to be, but a highly competent professional of the first order, the possessor of the finest possible mettle and unusually appealing vocal equipment.

At the Sabbath table the Rebbe honored the stranger, by extending to him the assignment of leading in the chanting of some "Zmiros" (Sabbath songs). With great gusto he regaled the assembled "chassidim" with beautiful melodies, but it wasn't until the "Sholosh Soodos" (the third and final meal of the Sabbath), that the saintly Makarover summoned the secretive guest to his side at the head of the long table and revealing to him that he was all along fully aware of his true identity, he took Rozumny to task for having perpetrated the deception on the gullible retinue of his court.

Having thus been unmasked, the humble cantor profusely apologized to the grand Rabbi for having slipped into his realm incognito under trumped up pretenses. "It was the height of my ambition", he confided to the holy man, "to get the opportunity of conducting a religious service in the 'Kloiz' of a chassidic grand Rabbi. But inasmuch as I had reason to be doubtful of being able to achieve this aim of mine by proceeding through regular channels, I resorted to the device of posing as an everyday Jew, just one of the crowd. I hope that you will forgive me. Praying in your Kloiz gave me the greatest satisfaction of my whole life."

"The sincerity of your chants and supplications became evident to me from the outset", replied the Rabbi, "and that was the reason for my resolve to allow you to continue. The almighty gave you the gift of evoking deep emotions with your chants and of touching the heartstrings of the worshipers, making them inclined to pious meditation and contemplation of repentance." In the court of the Makarover Rebbe, "Neginah", inspirational vocal application at the devotional sessions was highly regard-

ed. This circumstance worked to Rozumny's advantage. He had found favor in the eyes of the Rebbe, who not only was willing to overlook his harmless white lie by means of which he managed to get access to the "Omud" of the chassidic "Shtib'l", but even gave him his blessings, before sending the happy cantor on his way.

Rozumny once came to a certain town in Bessarabia, where he had been invited for a Sabbath service. As was his unalterable standard rule, he insisted in this instance too that the agreed upon compensation be brought in to him on Friday afternoon at the latest. The members of the committee in charge of the arrangements had worked hard but the going was difficult and as the deadline, when they would have to come across with the considerable amount needed menacingly approached, they still found themselves woefully short of the stipulated sum.

In the pinch they went in to the waiting cantor, put the collected money on the table and baring for him frankly their plight, they pleaded with him to accept the smaller sum as payment in full, since that was all they were able to raise. But Rozumny proved to be a much harder nut to crack, than they had thought. It was no dice. They found him adamant. It was either they make good on their assumed obligation handing over the whole amount due him, or he would not fulfill his part of the bargain either.

He gave them another hour to fulfill the conditions of the agreement or he would at the expiration of the grace-period granted them, be obliged to cancel his guest-appearance and leave town. Having been placed before such an ultimatum, the committee scoured around town in an effort to get their hands on the balance that was still eluding them and they were finally forced to borrow the money and rush it post-haste to the inn, before the impatiently waiting cantor would carry out his threat and take off.

But if the implacable insistence of Rozumny on his pound of flesh made the town's people think of him as a heartless money-mad extortionistic character, they had to radically revise their opinion of him in view of the action which he took after the conclusion of the holy Sabbath. As it turned out he had never had any intention of pocketing the money, which he earned for this engagement and using it for his own purpose. He was well informed of the shaky financial position, in which the communal welfare and charitable institutions found themselves and it was his desire to lend a helping hand, that prompted him in the first place to make the trip and take on the proferred task. And if he was adamant and wouldn't budge from his demand that the promised fee be forthcoming without fail, and that not a kopek be missing, it was not in order that his greed be fully satisfied, but rather that he may be enabled to be of assistance to the needy, as much as possible.

To the surprise of everybody, but especially of the arrangement committee with the experience on Friday still rankling, he summoned the heads of the town's charitable institutions to his quarters as soon as the departure of the Sabbath had been accompanied with the suitable "Havdolo" (division) ceremonial and the appropriate "Zmiros" (songs) and

taking out from its hiding place the money, he divided among them the whole purse paid him for his services, not leaving for himself even the price of a train ticket for his return trip to Kishinev. The true munificent nature of the famous cantor was thus revealed for all to see and to admire.

A certain small fry cantor came to Rozumny and requested of him that he recommend him for a minor cantorial post with a congregation that had its headquarters in the "Moldovanka" section of Odessa. He asked the petitioner to sing something. After he finished, Rozumny, sizing him up, remarked, "I can see that inside you are a pretty good cantor, but as far as your outside appearance is concerned, you are very poorly equipped."

The poor devil's clothes were all shot to pieces. In such a getup no congregation that amounted to anything was likely to even consider him a fitting candidate for a cantorial post. So Rozumny made it his first order of business to make the indigent man throw out his rags and let him pick out an entirely new set of vestments from among his own clothes, that hung in his closets. After he thus fitted him out from head to foot in presentable garments, he supplemented it with a brand new hat and an elegant pair of shoes.

Decked out in sartorial splendor, he hardly did resemble his former self. Now that he looked the part of a congregational dignitary, his benefactor complied with his original request and sent him away with a warm letter of recommendation for the vacant cantorial position in the pocket of his newly-acquired suit. That a word from Rozumny was a sure-fire boost and worked like magic goes without saying.

A short time before his death which cut off the thread of his life in 1905, he was yet destined to pour out his bleeding heart in a stirring lament over the tragic fate of the pogrom victims of Kishinev, the city where he resided and functioned for a time. The "Keyl Moley Rachamim" (Lord full of compassion), the prayer for the souls of the dead — for his brutally murdered brethren of the Bessarabian capital — was his swansong and those who heard Rozumny bewail the violent death of the fallen victims out of a well of endless grief and sorrow, say that never before has the world heard anything so deeply moving and never again will anything like that shattering and bemoaning Jeremiad be heard. Even the walls of the Shalashna synagogue shed tears.

It was Rozumny at his sublimest and that is indeed saying a mouthful. He was indeed the peerless spellbinder, the Chazzan "par excellence".

* * *

That not only these famous cantors of Odessa had their fan clubs and that not in the eyes of all residents of the city were they as great as reputed, can be gleaned from the following incident:

A Jew from Odessa came to a town in Ukraina on business. To have a live inhabitant of the "city of cantors" in town was of course a big event and a rare occasion and opportunity to learn something about the great cantors of that great centre of liturgical art.

So naturally people were crowding around him and began quizzing him: "Please tell us about Pinye Minkowsky, Rozumny and Yankel Soroker. Are they really as great as the people are saying?"

"Oh! those publicity-seeking big shots? I don't go to hear them," the visitor surprised his questioners. "My cantor is Moyshe Balter, who in my humble opinion has it over all of them."

"You mean to tell us that he is better than the big three?" the astonished Jews cannot believe their ears.

"Of course he is better, the best of the lot" the Odessian said with conviction in his voice.

Many of the assembled country-Jews lost all interest in the confirmed admirer of some nonentity. They are turning away, dismissing the guy by remarking with scorn: "with an Odessa Jew who does not go to hear Pinye, Rozumny or Soroker, there is nothing to talk about."

Others, still curious however keep on pumping the maverick: "But according to the information that reaches us, Moyshe Balter is only a plain 'Baal Tfila' (reader)."

"Well! that's why he stands out", this from the visitor. "The first and foremost requirement of any cantor worth his salt is that he be a good 'Baal Tfila' (improvisator) and the greatest 'Baal Tfila' among the cantors of Odessa is none other than Moyshe Balter."

"But," the town-people don't let up, "from what we hear from all sources Reb Moyshe has no voice at all."

"Voice, Shmoys", ridicules the Jew from Odessa. "What does that matter? who needs 'a shraayer'? [a hollorer], a cantor must in the first, second and last place be 'ah zoger' [a creative singer], and there is no 'zoger' in sight, who could compare with Moyshe Balter 'un shoyn' [and that's all]."

That he did not convince the provincials goes without saying. Since the man from Odessa closed the argumentation with a final "un shoyn", they gave up and scattered, dismissing the stand taken by the stranger with a deprecating downward movement of their hands and the shaking of their heads in disbelief as if to say "this man is evidently not all there" (es failt ihm a klepke)."

"His talk is nothing but 'gechlapotchet' [utter nonsense]. How in the world can anyone be such a fierce devotee of some 'piyechotne' [pedestrian] 'Baal Tfila', who hasn't got a tone in his throat and even dare to rate that 'nobody' greater than the acknowledged giants of liturgy, who made Odessa famous? Incredible."

Well, as the Romans already said it, "De gustibus non est disputandum", each to his own taste. One likes the "Rebbe", the other the rebbetzin and a third one their daughter.

CHAPTER 13

YECHIEL ALTER KARNIOL

The cantor and the person — A bouquet of interesting episodes in his life — His enormous appetite — The pogrom in Odessa and how he was saved in a miraculous manner — His rare sense of humor.

In the previous chapter we tried to relate some of the characteristic episodes from the lives of the famous cantors of Odessa which we had succeeded in gathering together. Due to the limited space, we could not manage to also dwell on the significant happenings in the private life of Karniol, so we were obliged to leave this for the next chapter.

But as compensation for having postponed his appearance, we will grant him the special privilege of a solo performance, instead of having to be part of a quartet. This arrangement, we are sure, is better suited to his natural inclinations, than having to share the spotlight with others.

An unbiased analysis of Karniol's strengths and weaknesses will confirm, that when he had to sing set compositions with the choir, he felt uncomfortable and constricted. His singing on such occasions reminded the listener of a circus performer, walking a tight rope, anxiously and intensely watching his every step, lest he slip and fall. By contrast when however he could improvise, he felt like a bird, that had just been freed from his cage. He flew about in the realm of his released phantasy with a levity and a verve that knew no boundaries and only then one got to savor the real flavor, the true spirit of Karniol.

I had an opportunity to once more convince myself of the accuracy of this appraisal, when I happened to hear recently on a radio program a recording by Karniol of the second "Kedusha," where he was accompanied by a choir. I imagine that many of the listeners must have been

greatly disappointed and must have wondered if this was indeed the famous artist, whose great talent so impressed the whole world. In the first place, it must be realized that Karniol sang these numbers for the phonograph companies in his old age, at a time when he did not possess the vocal qualities of his youth any more and when he was only a shadow of the giant, who enchanted the masses on two continents. Secondly, and this is the point we wish to make, his performance when singing with the choir cannot serve as a basis for judging the true qualities and abilities of this highly individualistic and artistic cantor. But this is here not our main object. For about Karniol, the cantor, we already had our opportunity to say what we thought in the previous chapter. Our interest in this instance is centered on Karniol, the human being, and in his case my pen, too, feels much more free and unhampered than usually. For my hero of today was the only one of the cantors, about whom I have written up to now, whom I had the great privilege of knowing personally, although when I first met him he was already in his seventies.

He used to come to our house quite frequently and first of all would play with the baby (now a physician, a father of three). He loved children and one of his tricks was to blow himself up like a turkey and then push his fingers from both sides suddenly into his cheeks, thus puffing and pushing out the air from his mouth. He accompanied this maneuver with funny faces, all kinds of comic grimaces, causing the child to burst out in high-pitched laughter. This action caused him at least as much enjoyment as it did the baby. In such moments, he himself had the appearance of a carefree old child. It was a pleasant distraction for him which made him forget his troubles for a while.

When he got tired of performing his antics, he usually sat down at the piano, although a Paderewski at the keys he surely was not. However, he loved to cymbal in his primitive way on the piano and hum a tune softly at the same time. Then stretching out both his hands over the whole length of the piano, he graphically illustrated what an extraordinarily wide range his voice had possessed and how he was capable of beginning on a Saturday morning at the service to sing in the lowest basement like a contrabasso and gradually ascend and climb up to the highest spheres, the sublimest notes of a lyric tenor, or the way he used to pronounce it, in his peculiar dialect, "Tenoor."

He could ramble on for hours and intermittently he would fall silent, lost in his thoughts and memories and only a nostalgic sigh would suggest that he was living over once more in his mind the years of his long-lost youth, the glorious period of his life, when he reigned supreme in the Hungarian cities — Sabadka, Mishkoltz, Nadywarad, Balasha-Dyarmat, Ofen and especially Finfkirchen (so called because it boasted of five churches), where he lived in luxury like a count and where he was presented with a lifelong contract.

But he had a restless nature, could not remain in one place, always longed for a change, and when after having served his congregation for seven years a call came to him from the golden land, he could not withstand

the temptation. The lure of America was too much for him to overcome. When he deserted Finfkirchen, there was some commotion in the city. The congregation split into opposing factions, which accused one another of having been the cause of the great, irreparable loss that befell them. For a long time they were unable to find a suitable successor. When they finally engaged a cantor from Gratz by the name of Rosenbaum, a large number of the members were so disappointed with the choice and so enraged at the leaders, who in their opinion were directly responsible for Karniol's defection, that as a protest they quit and formed a new congregation. The quarrels lasted for years, and the gabbay (trustee), who allegedly triggered by his actions the misfortune of Karniol's resignation, was unable to cleanse himself and atone for his sins in the eyes of his accusers. Finally, Karniol himself had pity on him. In a letter to the congregation, he declared him innocent of any wrongdoing and of having been the cause of or having had anything to do with his decision to leave.

To the question of how it came about that he, a native of the gubernia of Keltz, landed in Hungary of all places, his reply was that inasmuch as in heaven it is proclaimed 40 days before a child is born which girl shall be betrothed to which boy, and inasmuch as the girl who was selected as his future wife had the notion to want to be born in the land of the Magyars, he had no alternative but to betake himself to that country in his search to find her.

He loved to dwell on the seven fat years which he spent in Odessa, where he reached the high point of his brilliant career and where his patriots carried him on their hands. There he used to visit often the well known "Aslan's cellar," whose owner was one of his most ardent admirers. He gave standing orders to serve his favorite cantor the choicest delicacies, anything that his heart desired — the best dishes and the finest drinks.

When Karniol was done with the meal, the restaurant had the appearance of a raided place after a pogrom. All iceboxes were empty, like (excuse the irreverent parallel) the holy ark on Simchas Torah, after all the scrolls were taken out for the "Hakofos." Not a trace remained of all the goodies, and the best part of it was that everything that he had put away was on the house, for Aslan would not think of taking from his beloved cantor a Kopek in payment. His only reward was, that Karniol would as a favor to Aslan sing a certain favorite number of his on the following Sabbath. The restaurateur, listening to the prayer dedicated especially to him, felt amply rewarded, happy and elated.

I had heard before unlikely sounding stories about the fantastic, colossal capacity of Karniol's stomach. Rumor had it that he could consume the "Shor Habor" (legendary ox) and Leviathan (giant fish), both of which are to be served in the world to come to the righteous, at one sitting. I discounted these stories as one of "Raba Bar Bar Chona's exaggerations" (he was known for telling tall fish stories). Imagine my surprise when I heard them confirmed by the "Bal Davar" (hero) himself, who related them with pride in his voice.

"When the month of Elul arrived," he told me, and I sensed that his

mouth was watering as he recalled his usual routine, "I began preparing myself for the approaching holy days like a prize fighter, who is training for a scheduled championship fight."

"I suppose you mean," I interjected, "rehearsing with your choir and preparing new compositions."

"Who is talking about choirs and compositions?" he disillusioned me, "that is the leader's business. What I mean is that I began eating in earnest, with 'K'voneh' [devoutly]". He enumerated the menus of the meals, with which he used to strengthen his heart and muscles during the month of Elul for the bout with the additional duties which the Holy Days entail — geese, ducks, pigeons and turkeys with all conceivable trimmings, with all kinds of desserts and cakes and the most expensive wines and liqueurs, in quantities that would have been adequate for Ogg, the King of Booshon (an ancient giant).

"Thus did I prepare myself for a whole month until the date for 'Selichoth' arrived," he concluded. "And when after such a training, I ascended the pulpit, the people exclaimed, "Oh! How that marvelous Karniol did sing! But they were wrong. It was the geese, the ducks, the squabs and the turkeys that sang. Oh! did they sing! They sang with such fire that it almost caused smoke to rise!"

I heard it related by cantors, old timers, that at one time Karniol, together with the cantor from Bialystok, Moishe Basso, and the famous Leibele Alookster Schlossberg, two colleagues, who like him could also eat heavily, invaded the well-known, "Roumanian Krechma" in downtown New York and only ordered a bit. But by the time they had finished the after-the-meal prayers, the owners closed up the place, although it was not yet dark. The reason for the unusually early closing was that there was no point in keeping the restaurant open, when there was no food left to serve any customers.

Once I came to his house unexpectedly, having been sent to visit him by our cantors club on a certain Samaritan mission. I found him sitting at a table and eating lunch. In the course of our conversation he complained, "Allegedly the appetite comes with the eating, but here I have been eating for the past two hours and I still have no appetite. How do you explain that?" He showed off his scrap books full of clippings, all extolling his great mastery, scrap photos that he took with famous personages, together with enthusiastic dedications, silver and gold cups with inscriptions, letters, resolutions and articles in many newspapers. Several medals, which he had received from some of his grateful congregations that he had served in Hungary, Russia and America he wore constantly on his person. He had them attached to the massive golden watch chain that he wore on his vest. With a heavy sigh, he turned to me, pointing to his collections and said, "That is all that I have to show for the work of a lifetime."

He was once invited to officiate as guest cantor in a Brooklyn synagogue in honor of a "Bar Mitzvah." When after the conclusion of the "Shacharis" he went down to the vestry, where tables were set up for the repast which was to be served to all the guests after the conclusion of the

religious service, he sniffed the smell of gefilte fish and with the help of some of his choirboys who did some detective work, they located the tasty delicacy in the refrigerator, where the caterer had hidden it away. Quick as lightning the "chevrah fressers" hauled out the big pot of "gefilte fish" and went to work on it with Karniol doing the principal job. His appetite fully satisfied, he pulled up his trousers and said to his helpers: "Now, with a full stomach, you'll hear what kind of a 'Mussaf' I'll be able to deliver."

He was a solidly built man, heavy set and somewhat shorter than medium height and wore a mustache with upturned ends and a short Van Dyke beard. For a man of his age, he possessed a remarkable strength in his hands which he loved to demonstrate on every occasion. When he shook hands with you as a greeting, he never failed to grip it so tight and with such force that it made you wince, and for days afterward your fingers would hurt.

I was always intrigued by the curious absence of curves in the shape of his bald scalp. It was like a plateau on top of a mountain and almost as flat as the surface of a table — as if it had specifically been formed for the purpose of accommodating a basket, which women in many backward countries carry on the top of their heads.

Karniol used to reminisce and tell horrible details of the pogroms which hit Odessa in October of 1905. The tragic outbreaks of those days and his personal experiences with the rabble-rousers he could not erase from his memory. The "confederation of the true Russians" distributed among the mob circulars, in which they incited them to a pogrom against the Jews, whom they accused of being the main supporters of the socialist revolution, which had swept the country. The murderous attack lasted for four days in the course of which 300 Jews lost their lives and forty thousand were robbed of all their valuable belongings and left economically ruined.

Karniol lay hidden in a cellar. Suddenly the murderers broke into his hiding place and he saw his companions fall dead before his eyes. But when his turn came, one of the leaders, whom he had once befriended, recognized him and ordered the others to halt their attack on him, saying: "Oh! I know him. This is the pany Rabin Americansky." The word "Amerikansky" (American) had a magical effect and stayed the hands of the murderers. For the leader declared that he could guarantee that as an American clergyman, he can vouch for him that he had no connection with and surely no sympathy for the Russian revolutionaries. In this manner did he miraculously escape death at the hands of the hooligans, but when he returned to his home he found that it had been visited and ransacked by the plundering mob that took all the valuables that they could find in the house.

The fright and terror remained engraved forever in his mind, and for all the treasures of the world he could not bring himself any more to remain in a country, where such an outrage could occur. Leaving everything behind, he ran away as one would from a burning house. He returned to

New York although there did not await him very bright opportunities.

On arrival back in New York, he officiated on the High Holidays of 1906 at the synagogue of the Poaley Tzedek Anshe Illiyah Congregation of Forsyth Street. For the next year he became connected with the American Roumanian Congregation of Rivington Street.

In 1908 Karniol led the religious services on the Days of Awe at the Manhattan Lyceum. In 1911 he conducted Succoth and Shemini Atzeres ritual under the auspices of the Austrian Young Men's Association at the Lenox Assembly Hall.

In July, 1912 he made a guest appearance on a Sabbath devotion held at the Laurel Park Hall of 116th Street, and in 1921, at the Stone Avenue Talmud Torah of Brooklyn.

I was, of course, very anxious to hear Karniol sing. I tried many times to get him to sing something for me but I could never persuade him to let me hear him sing. No matter how much I begged him, he would not open his mouth to really give out in a song. His excuse was that if I should hear his voice in its present condition, I would think that he was a liar, when he was telling me of his great successes in the years gone by. However, there did come a time when he could not refuse me and I finally had the opportunity to hear him sing for the very first time. It happened at the occasion of the circumcision ceremony (Brith) of my second son (now a lawyer), which was held in the vestry auditorium of the Hungarian congregation, Ohab Zedek, where he, too, was once the cantor. My other two predecessors who also had functioned at the same congregation before me, Shaaye Meisels and Yossele Rosenblatt, were also present.

Meisels sang "Habein Yakir Li" (the son is very dear to me), Rosenblatt — his famous "Shomeir Yisroel" and Karniol sang the "Horachamons" (grace). The great number of the most prominent New York cantors, who came also to take part in my Simcha, gave Karniol a warm ovation. It was indeed a rare treat to hear this veteran in his masterful rendition. Each and every cantor, and there were present several dozen, was called up to contribute a song and all of them obliged graciously. The joyous party ended only when it was time for the Mincha (evening) service.

A funny incident occurred when Israel Shorr began singing. Karniol left the hall. When he returned, Shorr reproached him for having demonstratively left, just when he started to sing. Karniol assured him that it was not meant as a reflection on him, but that he had to go to the place, where even the king cannot send a substitute but is obliged to go himself. Whereupon Shorr remarked, "Too bad that you did not have a chance to hear my 'Yom Leyabosho'. Everybody thought it was a masterpiece." "But, Cantor Shorr," replied Karniol, "I did so hear it. Your voice is so powerful and penetrating that I was able to hear you clearly in the toilet."

He was a jovial chap, always cheerfully disposed, with a smile and a friendly word for everybody. He was a sympathetic human being. He had a sense of humor, loved to tell funny stories, relate jokes and enjoyed entertaining people with anecdotes from his past.

He was a plain, simple, unpretentious person in his everyday life but when he went up to the pulpit, he became a changed man, a giant, a great artist. An extra soul, a "Neshomo Yeseiro," was then given to him and God's grace, the "Shechina," rested on him.

He died in 1928. The funeral service was held at the Hunts Point Jewish Center in the East Bronx.

Cantor Yitzchok Sheyn says that in the final years of his life Karniol acted like a child. He happened to meet up with Karniol on Grand Street of the Lower East Side of New York, as he was trying to cross the street. Sheyn took him by the arm to assist him. Suddenly he halted and turning to Sheyn remarked: "I heard today a train locomotive give out with a very long-winded, piercing whistle blast — so the thought occurred to me that if there could be found a cantor who possessed such a long breath he would be the greatest cantor of the world. In my heyday I had almost as long a breath."

At the funeral of his wife, when Cantor Gershon Wollman chanted the dirge "Keil Moley Rachamim" Karniol, standing at the coffin could not contain himself from expressing his displeasure by murmuring: "Oy vey! This is a Moley? You should hear me chant a Moley, then you would hear something!"

When on one occasion I asked Karniol, how he spends his time and what he does to while away the long hours that have a way of hanging heavy on the hands of retired persons, he answered my query in characteristic Jewish fashion with a question of his own: "What does a retired general do?"

And without waiting for me to guess the answer, he himself gave away the solution to the puzzle.

"Why, he is sitting at his table with his medals laid out before him, admiring and enjoying them and scrubbing, polishing and shining them up over and over again, day in and day out. And that is what I am doing in addition to reading over time and time again the hundreds of clippings on the pages of my several scrapbooks. And believe it or not, I still get a thrill out of a favorable critique that I have already read so many times, that I know it verbatim by heart. The bad notices I ignore, they could've only been inspired by jealousy. As the Latin proverb goes, 'Sic transit gloria mundi.' In other words 'just lived and already dead.' Oh! the fleeting nature of 'Dame fame.' Napoleon has become a pastry, Bismark a herring."

It was the world famous star of the opera and most brilliant basso of his time, Feyador Chaliapin, who so accurately and poignantly pictured the predicament and shadowy side of the coin of the supposedly brightly glittering life of a renowned artist.

"Fame", he said "demands sacrifices at every step of the lucky individual, on whom it deigns to bestow the sunshine of its much coveted gift.

"Take for example, myself. I love to down every so often a good glass of wine, but many a time I am obliged to deny myself that harmless enjoy-

ment because of my professional duties.

"I am also very fond of taking long walks. However at the first indication of the blowing of a cold wind, I must run for shelter. If the weather forecast predicts rain or snow, I dare not venture out into the street.

"I am supposed to be a very successful artist, who is in a postion to command large fees for his services. But when I departed from Russia in 1922 with a thirty year career in opera under my belt, I had nothing to show for my hard exhausting work except for the eight gold francs in my pocket.

"As long as my voice retains its sheen I am a sought-after singer and all the musical circles and music lovers are interested in me. But how long can a singer stay on top? Nothing lasts forever. No sooner does his voice go back on him than all the fans, who just yesterday were running after him, were his most enthusiastic admirers and quite envious of his great popularity and good fortune, turn a cold shoulder toward their former idol and won't even look his way any longer."

As Omar Khayyam expressed it so succinctly, "Fame is a breath on the wind."

CHAPTER 14

LEYBELE ALUCKSTER, A RAW UNPOLISHED CANTORIAL JEWEL

A chazzon with a leonine voice — Anton Rubinstein had big plans for him — He became instead a world roaming cantor — He ended up in America.

One of the largest and prominent synagogues in Odessa was that of the Hecker'she congregation. In the course of her colorful history this house of worship too had her share of eminent cantors with whom it is worthwhile to get acquainted.

One of the famous cantors who for ten years was connected with this synagogue and who in the literal sense of the word could be called a "world-cantor," having in the course of his brilliant career traveled almost all over the globe and gained universal acclaim as the "lion of the Omud," was the liturgical "gray-eminence" with the multiple names of Yethro the priest of Midyan, the father-in-law of Moses. He was known under the names of Aryeh Leyb Schlossberg, alias Leybele Aluckster, alias "Shaagas Ari," alias "lion-voiced master" of liturgy.

The reason for the variety of tags that he adopted could probably be found in the fact that he had several kinds of voices in his throat, in which aspect he resembled Karniol. His voice was indeed one of the world's wonders, one of the biggest and mightiest that ever could be heard. It was truly a leonine roar of tremendous power, mighty enough to be divided among ten cantors.

He could reach even a higher range than Karniol, which was going some and his crystal clear falsetto reminded one of Tetrazini. His middle register was of a baritonal timbre and in his low tones he sounded like a

basso profundo. The impact of his voice was such that when he officiated at the pulpit of the Hecker'she synagogue, people could hear him three blocks away. His religious services always drew capacity crowds, which stood compressed and packed closely like sardines with the overflow blocking traffic in the nearby situated streets none the worse for standing outside, because the cantor's voice carried far and wide and every word and sound which he uttered was clearly audible and discernible.

When he was the cantor of the community of Dwinsk the Tzar happened to pass through the city and the authorities arranged a festive reception in honor of the royal visitor. The Jewish community too, of course, sent a representative delegation and Shlossberg was on the program to chant a "Mi Shebeyrach" (May he who blessed our fathers — bless his majesty). The "Polkovoy" (military) band which came out in full force was assigned the role of accompanying the blessing of the cantor, who naturally put forth his best foot and when he let loose his voice it bombarded the eardrums like thunder and covered the combined sounds of all the instruments of the orchestra standing out like a beam of a beacon.

Shlossberg's part in the proceedings was the highlight of the affair and the Tzar was so deeply impressed by the Jewish dignitary's blessing, that he expressed to him his warm royal appreciation and admiration and ordered his adjutant to present the cantor with a special award for distinguished contribution to the crown.

Even though he did not possess anything like Karniol's sweet mouth, divine talent and multifaceted intricate manyfold winding, marvellously facile, easy flowing, acrobatic coloratura and was not the great artistic "zoger" declamator improvisational wizard like his famous colleague, he did possess a fiery enthusiasm, an incendiary style and a clearcut sharp diction and was able to rattle off twenty-five words in one breath without a single syllable being swallowed up, or skipped over by him.

Born in the month of June 1843 in Alukst, where his father Noson was the cantor, he was a gentle, noble soul, who in his young years sat in the study chambers of several notable Yeshivot, diligently poring over the folios of the sacred scriptures and absorbing the wisdom of the sages of yore. He was a chosid, faithful follower of the grand Rabbi of Lubawitch, who carried with him even on his frequent journeys the "Seyfer Chasidim", the book of the Chassidim of the "Baal Hatanyah", the founder of the Shneyerson wonder-rabbinical dynasty and author of the chassidic handbook of Lubawitch "Tanya" (to learn).

He was praying with his "Talis" over his head and drawn so far in front of him, that his whole face was wrapped up in the praying shawl and only the tip of his nose stood out. What he did there under the cover of the talis remained his own secret. He emitted such weird sounds from that invisible workshop, that all kinds of theories sprang up and gained circulation among his detractors, who spread around their suspicion, that he used some kind of instrument, with the help of which to produce those queer noises.

As was the usual custom of the chassidim of his brand, he too wore a

"gartle", a silken sash around his loins at prayer sessions and a yarmulke (velvet cap) under his hat and even when he donned a stovepipe on festive occasions, the Yarmulka remained ever present for added protection lest his head, horrible dictu (cholile vechas) does happen to become accidentally uncovered.

Physically he was a handsome hunk of a man of average height and build with an imposing countenance and a well nursed, cultivated and cared for round beard, nicely complimenting the contours of his oval face. He was considered "ah Litvak" a Lithuanian, even though he was a native of Aluckst Kurland where his father was the cantor of the community. It was he who imparted the first rudimentary ground principles of liturgy to his son, who showed great promise from early childhood on.

Already as an adolescent Leybele got the "wanderlust" bug in his system and he struck out on his own to make the rounds of the towns and villages of the vicinity, regaling the Jewish inhabitants with his liturgical chants in their houses of worship and earning some much needed change in the process.

By some chance encounter Anton Rubinstein, the famous general director of the St. Petersburg Royal Conservatory heard him sing and said that such a voice was a rare phenomenon and belongs in the opera.

He offered Leybele a scholarship in his institution, assuring him, that upon completion of the studies in the Conservatory, he would have a career on the operatic stage that would have few equals in the world.

But of course Aluckster having been brought up in a strictly religious environment, had already made up his mind to devote his natural gifts to the service of the Lord.

Still he could not bring himself to decline the generous proposition of Rubinstein. He goes to St. Petersburg, where the head of The Royal Conservatory hands him over into the care of the famous teacher of voice technique, Professor Everardy.

He buckles down to his studies. The teachers discovering that Leybele also has a knack for playing the violin, include that subject also in his curriculum.

But after a while, fearing that if he tarries much longer in the secular surroundings, he might possibly become tempted to listen to the flattering siren-songs of his patrons, who keep urging him that he embark on an operatic career, he suddenly picks himself up and leaves without a good bye.

His "wanderlust" drives him to roam the wide world. He visits many lands, Great Britain in particular, and wherever he makes appearances he mesmerizes his listeners.

Cantor Morris Doberman recalls the time when Shlossberg came to his hometown of Libau, Kurland Latvia in 1916.

The Cantor of the large Synagogue Avrohom Mordechay Rabinowich would not cede his pulpit to the visiting guest, so he officiated in the smaller house of worship, which had only a short time before been erected on a nearby site, and was called "The Kuhrlendishe Shule."

The young Moishele pleaded with his father to take him along, which he was reluctant to do, for fear that the lad may get hurt in the melee, which he was sure would result when all the Jews of the city will seek entrance to hear the famous Cantor.

But the persistent entreaties of the youngster overcame his father's reservations, and he was there with the adults, squeezed, and pushed around. But happy to be an eye and ear witness to the memorable event. He remembers that when the guest Cantor went to town chanting "Kol Adoshem Chotzeyv Lahavos Eysh" (The Voice of the Lord Cleaveth Flames of Fire), it indeed did put the whole audience on fire, as if tongues of flames were coming out of his mouth.

On Sabbath morning, such a tremendous mass of humanity converged around the Synagogue, that all traffic came to a halt. All streetcars in the streets within a radius of a quarter of a mile were stopped in their tracks. Shlossberg surpassed himself in his masterful interpretation of the long "Av Horachamim" (Father of Mercy), which to quote Doberman's words, was "heavenly and unforgettable." His tones were like bombs that sent shudders through the spines of the Jews.

Mr. N. Caplan tells of the excitement that held in its grip the whole Jewish community of his native town of Drohitchin, Gubernia of Grodno, when the news got around that Leybele Alukster was expected for a Sabbath guest appearance. As chance would have it one of the most prominent members of the community, Reb Dovid Leyb Shedrovitzky happened to be in Brest Litovsk (Brisk), having traveled to that city for the purpose of buying provisions for his sodawater factory, at the very time that Aryeh Leyb Alukster made a guest appearance in that city.

Happy at the opportunity to enjoy a rare musical treat he rushed to the synagogue, acquired a ticket of admission for two rubles and was amply rewarded seeing the celebrated chazzan in the flesh and listening to his inspiring interpretation of the prayers.

Deeply impressed he decided to try to induce the cantor to come also to Drohitchin. He looked him up in the inn and making his pitch in his most persuasive manner, he succeeded in getting Shlossberg's consent to his proposition, on the condition that he gave the cantor one hundred rubles on account and a paid up train ticket. The elated Shedrovitzky gladly complied and on arriving home he was the hero of the day when he made public the joyous news, that his townspeople may expect the fabulous visitor. Squads of young men went to work to sweep clean the streets, to spruce up the synagogue, so as to put up a good front in honor of the prominent guest. It was the talk of the town. Nobody would want to miss the great event. People would pawn any valuables the hock shop would lend money on, just so they could secure a ticket of admission.

By Friday morning, every seat in the house of worship was spoken for at one ruble per. There even sprang up a black market, when those who somehow had neglected to secure a ticket of admission, were willing to pay a bonus, just so they wouldn't be left out of the great event.

A large crowd gathered at the depot when the train, which was sched-

uled to bring the celebrated cantor, pulled in. Caplan, a youngster, craned his neck to catch a glimpse of the revered man of the cloth, as he stepped down to a noisy roaring welcome. He remembers that Shlossberg wore a "pelerina" (a long flowing cape) over his broad shoulders and he had an elegant traveling bag in his hand.

At sundown, the Synagogue was besieged and there was no holding back the crowd. After every legitimate ticket-holder was seated, the trustees relented and opened up the entrance for standees, who swarmed in to fill the auditorium to overflowing.

Shlossberg was his usual self, giving from his bounty with generous abandon. His voice shone with glittering brilliance, and his soulful prayers moved the hearts of the worshipers to esctasy. When he turned around and with his face to the startled audience, he belted out the "Boyi Chaloh", (Come My Bride) with superhuman power on his highest tones, it sounded as if a thunderbolt had crashed on the roof of the holy edifice. It made the whole congregation and the edifice tremble.

The proceeds, a considerable sum, were earmarked for "Muos Chitim" (wheat money) for the Passover Festival. The needy families of the community were the designated beneficiaries and were thus assured a joyous holiday, the like of which they never had before and were not likely to have soon again. Matzos (unleavened bread), meat, fish, potatoes, borsht, wine and other goodies, were distributed to them in generous abundance. Drohitchin had a Sabbath and a Passover long to be remembered.

Needless to say, that being a confirmed globetrotter, pretty soon he came to the Land of Liberty too. He arrived in New York for the first time in 1904, together with his son Joseph. He made his debut in America with a Sabbath service in the "New Irving Hall," which was located on Broome Street in downtown's Eastside. When he arrived, the street was made impassable by a huge crowd, which had converged outside the hall, blocking the entrance. Police on horseback were hardput to disperse the mob and clear a passage for Shlossberg and his son to be able to get into the hall.

He made such a colossal hit that congregations vied with each other to land the newcomer for a guest appearance in their Synagogue.

Brooklyn too hopping on the bandwagon, put out the welcome mat for the new sensation. The congregation Anshey Liubawitch of Brooklyn had an old edifice, which had already outlived its usefulness. and had become too small for the expanding needs of the membership. To fill the need Rabbi Hecht, the spiritual leader of the religious association, arranged for the Board of Directors to purchase a church on Maxwell Street, and transform it into a Synagogue for the use of his flock.

Having acquired the building, which transaction practically emptied out the till of the congregation, the next problem which stared them in the face was where to find the considerable sum that was required for renovating the former church, and equipping it with all the paraphernalia that are essential to change its exterior, and mainly its interior, into a house of worship for a Jewish congregation.

In the deliberation dealing with that problem, a motion was advanced and adopted to invite a name-cantor for a Sabbath service, as a most likely successful method of raising money for the construction project. The greatest drawing card among the cantorial stars at that moment was Shlossberg.

So it was only logical to invite him for the guest appearance. The coming great attraction was prominently advertised in the Yiddish press. Posters and leaflets were distributed, and tickets of admission were sold, many on trust to members.

The Cantor arrived clad in a fur-collared overcoat, and with a shining silk hat (stovepipe) covering his head, ready to go on as per the schedule.

However, a snag developed that threatended to deprive the Brownsville music-lovers of the pleasure of listening to the famous cantor. One of the conditions laid down by Shlossberg when the arrangements were made with him was, that the whole sum that was to be paid him, shall be brought to him not later than Friday afternoon at the time of his arrival at the scene. But since a lot of tickets were not as yet paid for, the cash-on-hand was pretty short of the required sum.

Being that the committee in charge of the affair was unable to meet the deadline, the Cantor refused to conduct the evening devotion. Greatly disappointed the audience blamed the solons for being remiss in their handling of the project.

There was a vociferous general clamor for the leaders to do everything in their power to see to it that on Sabbath morning, Shlossberg should chant the services.

Having no alternatives, gentile messengers went out scouring the neighborhood and collecting the outstanding amount for unpaid tickets of admission. And only when Shlossberg received the assurance of the trustees that the whole amount of the compensation due him was at hand, did he agree to mount the "Bimah" (Estrada).

To compensate his dear public for his failure to officiate the evening before, he did not begin as is customary with "Shocheyn Ad" (Inhabiter of Eternity), but starting way in advance of that from "Matzil Oni Mechozok Mimenuh" (He Delivereth The Weak From Him That Is Too Strong For Him), he chanted almost every prayer, finishing up with "Omar Rabi Elozor." And for good measure he announced that on Sunday he would also give a Mincha-Maariv Concert.

As a result a large sum of money was raised. The generosity of the famous Cantor, in giving lavishly from his God-given talent, was matched by the open-handed large contributions that were announced in response to the appeal to the members of the congregation for "Bedek Habayis" (Renovation of the Sacred Edifice).

(More about Shlossberg in the section of American Cantors)

CHAPTER 15

YESHAAYEH MEISELS

Yeshaayeh Meisels, a well-endowed but scantily tutored, coarse "Urmensch."

The subject of our following pen portrait in some respects greatly resembled — "Leybele Aluckster". Several characteristics of theirs were so similar that it seemed as if both of them were of the identical vintage and kneaded from the same dough.

Like Shlossberg he too was a raw, unpolished diamond, a primitive, barely molded product of nature with the rough edges showing, who remained in that original unprocessed stage of low grade development, with barely noticeable progress brought about during his career.

Nonetheless just as in the case of the latter in his case too, the lack of sufficient training, refining and shaping did not prove to be a handicap to his advancement and it did not prevent him from achieving great success in his chosen field of endeavor.

There was also between these two the common bond that both of them happened to serve the same congregation at one time or another, which fact and coincidence would tend to confirm the assumption, that the members of the "Hecker'she" religious association of Odessa were not very particular in choosing their cantors and had a predilection for precentors with big loud, freakish voices, even when these precious innate gifts had not been complemented by cultivation, acquired musical intelligence and artistic delicacy. Quantity of sound rather than quality counted the most in their book. Background, instruction, experience of the candidate from the past were not of paramount interest to them.

Yeshaayeh Meisels or as he was somewhat deprecatingly called "Shaay-

eh Gorgel" (the gizzard), or as he himself preferred to be tagged ("The Jewish Caruso") belonged to the category of liturgical singers, who were noted primarily for their unusual voices which were their outstanding assets.

His was indeed a phenomenal rare instrument, something special to behold. It not only stretched far above the heights that are within the usual reach of a high lyric tenor, but it also possessed a razor-edge-like piercing sharpness which however at the same time was relieved by a strangely gentle sweetness.

In contrast to Shlossberg whose voice was uneven, not always properly placed, equalized and uniformly sounding in all its registers, Shaaye was very fortunate in that respect. By a lucky quirk of nature his voice was in no need of any adjustment. From birth it was placed in exactly the right position in his throat.

Throughout its entire range it came out correctly produced, of the same quality, identical color, characteristic ring and timbre even without the benefit of culture by any professional molder. It was ideally located, in exceptional good position and near perfect shape. But when all is said and done it still remains an undeniable fact that a great opportunity was missed. For in more competent hands great feats could've been accomplished with such a unique heaven-granted brilliant tool.

Novakovsky, the great composer and choirmaster of the Broder synagogue of Odessa said about him, that just as an ox is not conscious of his own strength and as a consequence of its ignorance of his immense innate power a tiny whippersnapper with a mere threatening motion of his hand can drive the animal away, so doesn't Meisels comprehend what a treasure is nestled in his throat.

A native of Warsaw, Poland, he early in life drifted to Odessa, where he found employment as a "zagatovtchick" (operator of gaiters) in a shoemaker's workshop on the "Tolchock" (fleamarket).

As fate would have it, one day as "Yoyne the lame", a disciple of Avrohom Kalechnick, who happened to be in town on a visit from his home in Kishinev chanced to come in for the purpose of having his shoes repaired, he felt like breaking out in song to relieve the monotony of his toiling at the sewing machine.

Being that he was himself a teacher and a reputable coach of cantors and singers, Yoyne was an expert in judging voices and could recognize a good one, when he heard it and there was no question about it, no doubt whatever in his mind but that the organ of the singing young fellow was of the finest quality, the real McCoy. Engaging him in a conversation, it also became clear to Yoyne that the shoemaker's helper was not aware of the immense value of what he possessed.

It took some urging and persuading on his part to convince the skeptical Shaaye'le of the advisability of at once quitting his lowly manual craft and shoot for the much nobler goal of becoming a professional singer and preferably a cantor.

The visitor from Bessarabia alerted about his find two friends and col-

leagues of his, both of whom were engaged in musical pursuits, Knebelman and Polyakov. The latter in particular was a well known composer and conductor of a choir in a synagogue that was located in the Neumark (new market) section of the City.

Their interest aroused, these competent coaches tried their best to teach him the ground principles of theory and harmony, attempting simultaneously to get him accustomed to ensemble-singing. They found him however to be a difficult, stiff, inflexible pupil whose mind was not on his studies and not very receptive and who was unable to concentrate and adapt himself to the discipline of a chorus.

After repeated futile attempts first by Knebelman and subsequently by Polyakov to transform, educate the youth and put him on the right track, they had to give up the patently hopeless task.

Shaaye, by now determined to see things through goes from hand to hand. Next we find him at the side of Yakovkin, who sensing his great potentialities not only accepts him as a member of his choir, but also recommends him to the trustees of the Shalashna synagogue as the most gifted candidate to rate appointment as assistant cantor to Rozumny. However, his well meant action backfired. Shaaye had the needed requirement as far as voice was concerned, but what he lacked in every other respect, especially the correct reading of the "ivre" (the text) was enough to make the congregants wince, as if stuck by a needle. Yakovkin had to shoulder the blame and for a while he was even in danger of losing his post because of his blunder.

The long and short of Meisel's saga was that after these unsuccessful experiences no choirleader would touch him with a ten foot pole. He was told: "Apparently you are not made of the stuff that would make you fit for singing in a choir. So there is no other alternative for you but to become a cantor. Go and jump the gun. Who knows? You may be lucky and hit the pit like the blind horse."

It calls to mind the story of the playing children who, looking for some new game, settled on the idea of organizing themselves into a club. As they proceeded to appoint the officials of the boys club, they elected as their president the 4 year old Moishele, who was the youngest, smallest and weakest kid among them. Asked why they had chosen the least endowed member of their group for the most important and most demanding post, the spokesman for the gang gave the following explanation: "We couldn't make him cashier, because he doesn't know how to count; for secretary we could not appoint him because he cannot as yet read nor write; neither could we elect him to the job of watchman or guard since he is too small and too weak. The only office we therefore were able to elect him for was: president."

Shaaye was not better equipped to be a cantor than Moishele for the presidential chair. To become a qualified "Chazzan" one must pay "Rebbegelt" in time, energy, persistence, sweat, study and other sacrifices. This fellow wanted to be counted a member of the fraternity without even having paid any of these initiation fees or his first dues.

Well, that was just up his alley. He was now bent on getting there as soon as possible. He enlisted the assistance of Adelman, whose specialty was the training of fledgling aspirants for cantorial careers. He took Shaaye in hand and having developed a special effective method for indoctrinating hard-to-bend pupils with at least a modicum of the most essential musical knowledge, he applied this technique to his new disciple. He knocked into his head some measure of sight reading and by hard, yeoman diligent work he also managed to make him familiar with the "Nusach" (forms of traditional modes in usage at the rituals). In addition he got Meisels to religiously attend the services of the great masters of the different synagogues and observe their ways and methods in chanting the prayers.

By visiting alternately one house of prayer or another and listening attentively to the liturgical art of the seasoned celebrities with whom Odessa of his day abounded, Shaaye learned a whole lot that stood him in good stead when he struck out on his own to make his mark in the realm of the cantorial profession. He felt now fully confident that he could take on all comers in any competition for cantorial posts.

And sure enough his first attempt at breaking into the sacred craft was crowned with success. His audition at the synagogue on Rimeseny Street went so well, that he was unanimously elected. Having thus broken the ice, he aimed higher and higher and goes on to the post of Teplitzky's house of worship for a stint of three years.

There being no better teacher than the actual involvement in and practice of a profession, he gradually caught on to the tricks and gambits of the art of liturgy, with the result that in time he earned for himself a respectable standing among the better-known members of the cantorial fraternity. The word got around that in Teplitzky's synagogue there is officiating a cantor, whose voice is a wonder of mother nature. The finicky connoisseurs still turned up their noses at the awkwardness of his presentation and clumsiness of his interpretation which lacked depth and the artistic touch of a refined, seasoned professional. He was also given to large gestures, that lacked conviction. But the natural beauty, sweetness and enormous power and unusual range of his voice compensated for all the other shortcomings and as far as the unsophisticated general public was concerned "Shaaye Gorgel was in," one of the elite. He drew large crowds, his name acquired a good sound and became well known even in the outlying provincial centres. Such a city was Yekaterinoslav. In the three synagogues pontificated outstanding cantors. The most famous was Moshe Behr Kuritiansky, a native of Nemirov, who was the cantor of the "Chohr Shool" (in East Europe this designation was applied to a more modern progressive house of worship, which would correspond to what in America is called Conservative temple. The connotation "Temple" was never used. All houses of prayer were called "synagogue"). He was a small, thin, but exceptionally gifted man, possessor of an extraordinarily sweet lyric tenor voice with which he was able to enchant his audience. He was also highly musical. He wrote a world of wonderful compositions,

that served Rozumny as vehicles in his triumphal career.

The other prominent cantor of Yekaterinoslav was Mendelevitch, who was connected with the "Abritchne" synagogue. He too was an excellent "menagen" (musician) and a composer of note.

Oddly enough his choirleader Sharagrodsky was almost deaf. Yet in spite of his defect he was a master of indoctrinating and directing his ensemble.

The third house of worship of the city was the Kazatzke (soldier's) synagogue. There happened to be a vacancy there and Meisel's good name having reached the ears of the leaders of that religious organization, he was invited for an audition and promptly installed into the post. And even though he had to contend with two outstanding incumbent colleagues, he nonetheless managed to make a big splash.

However he didn't tarry long there either. He transferred after a short stint to Yelisevetgrad and the "shadchen", the matchmaker, who was instrumental in bringing about this changeover was none other than Yechiel Alter Karniol.

This famous cantor of Odessa was invited by the Beth Hamedrash Hagodol of Yelisevetgrad for a guest appearance on a Sabbath devotional in their synagogue.

On arrival in town he paid a courtesy visit to the chief cantor of the city, Meyer Pisack, incidentally remarking in the course of their chat, that inasmuch as his host-congregation is unable to put a choir at his disposal for the occasion, he would very much appreciate it, if his colleague could help him out by lending him several singers from his own chorus.

When Pisack refused to be of any assistance to him Karniol vowed to pay him back in kind. To get even with him, he declared "I'll send over 'ah Meizele vos vet tzegrizsen dos Meyer'l'" (I'll send over here a mouse [Meisel] which will chew up the carrot [Meyer'l]). Since the cantor's position in the Bet Hamedrash Hagodol happened to be vacant, he urged the solons to look no further for any candidates for the post, for as he assured them, he has for them a real "tzatzke" (someone special).

At the same time he induced Shaaye Meisels to accept the invitation tendered him by that congregation to come for an audition. The upshot was that Meisels was elected by acclamation and installed as the cantor of the "Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol" of Yelisevetgrad with a festive ceremony.

A new broom always sweeps cleaner than the old one. Shaaye was a novelty and his immense voice overshadowed that of Pisack, even though the latter's mighty tenor voice was also nothing to sneeze at. It was mainly his freakish high notes that attracted the populace. But there was no question but that he was by no means a match to Meyer in the latter's profound familiarity with all the various facets of the art of liturgical chants. This state of affairs gave rise to the witticism that went the rounds in critical musical circles of Yelisevetgrad: "If only Meyer's head could be placed upon Shaaye's neck the resulting ideal combination of knowledge and raw power would make for an unbeatable cantorial phenomenon."

Nonetheless the raw edges of Shaaye's performances got smoothed out and varnished over considerably as time went on, and he grew more experienced during the years of his ministrations at the pulpit of his congregation, so that by the time he left Yelisevetgrad, Meisels had acquired a sizeable repetoire of chants of proven worth and a goodly measure of seasoning in his field, a useful bag of tricks of his trade which he learned to apply with dexterity and good results. With his self confidence thus strengthened, he felt ready for a new venture.

Armed with a bulging arsenal of such amply tested and tried out tools of his craft Shaaye Gorgel bade goodbye to the bloodsoaked soil of his homeland, where he saw no future for himself and set out for the promising new horizon of the golden land of opportunity. For the continuously harassed Jewish compatriots of his of that epoch all roads led to America, so he too thought it advisable to follow their example. When he arrived in New York his "landsleit" (hometown buddies) gave him an enthusiastic reception. They arranged professional appearances for him at which he had the opportunity to show his mettle with his compatriots untiringly pushing his bandwagon and shouting his praises from the rooftops. It didn't take him long to convince the masses of Jewish immigrants that he was something special in the world of Chazzanuth.

His pretty transparent antics proved very effective making him the hero of the day. Downtown New York of the East Side was agog with the recently arrived "long" cantor who possessed a still "longer" incredibly tall sharpedged voice. The best proof that the made the grade was the fact, that he was chosen by the prestigious "First Hungarian" congregation "Ohab Zedek" to take over the cantorial post at their synagogue, which was located on Norfolk and Houston Streets, where he was the predecessor of Joseph Rosenblatt. During the years in which he was connected with this religious organization, his fame steadily climbed until it reached its high point, the zenith of his career. His name became well-known and he was considered the outstanding figure in his profession throughout the length and breadth of the land. He did not excel particularly as a great accomplished artist of prayer interpretation, neither was he a master of improvisation. His coloratura did also limp quite a bit. He was however compensated for the lack of these possessions by the gift of a clear diction by measured pleasant presentation and theatrical delivery relished by the crowds. Nimble flexibility not being one of his outstanding traits, his singing was straight forward, uncomplicated, unadorned by spiraling intricate runs or roulades and acrobatic coloratura passages. His manner of reciting the prayers had a strong resemblance to the way the "Maggid", the preacher of that time-period was wont to deliver his Drosho (sermon). Turning alternately to his audience on the right and on the left, nodding his head in a much implying secretive gesture and from time to time making also ample use of his outstretched long arms for additional emphasis, he seemed to tell the worshipers a suspenseful story, which appeared to intrigue them to a great degree.

When he let go full steam he sounded like a roaring lion. As was the

case with every famous cantor he too had a particularly effective chant of his own, a sure-fire hit which in time became his socalled "Shlaager", his trade-mark. The remarkable feat associated with Meisels' was his original way with the concluding passage of the psalm being recited at the closing of the holy ark.

"Chadeysh yomeynoo k'kedem" (renew our days as of old) are but three words. However Shaaye made the most of them, they served him as a springboard for showing off his prowess, the almost limitless range of his voice and the extraordinary length of his breath. The climax came with the last word. The cadenza called for him to hit a high "D" above the high "C" on the first part of the word K'ke — and hold it while walking at a leisurely pace from the ark in the front of the sanctuary to the "Bimah" (estrada) at the center of the synagogue which was quite a distance and only when he arrived at the pulpit would he glide down, dropping the other shoe on the concluding syllable, thus finishing the word K'kedem. With bated breath would the whole congregation hang on the mouth of their cantor marvelling at the nonchalant way he was ambling along, all the while holding on to that stratospheric note as if there was nothing to it and as if it was child's play. The suspense was almost unbearable and when Shaaye at long last got back to earth a sigh of relief seemed to escape from the bosoms of the concerned listeners.

For quite a span he played a leading role in the life of the American cantorial fraternity. He was riding high, but his heyday came to an abrupt halt in 1911. He severed his connection with his New York congregation in favor of an engagement in the Mariompole shule of Chicago, a step which turned out to have been his undoing. From that point on the curve of his career turned definitely downward. A contributing factor to his being sidetracked was also the arrival of an ever increasing number of cantorial celebrities at the shores of America from the East European countries. New stars appeared on the horizon, overshadowing him.

When I came to know him in 1926 he was already semi-retired. He still would accept engagement for the Days of Awe. He officiated for the last time in a hall in the Bronx at 169 Street and Boston Road, but during the rest of the year he was not very active in his profession. In later years he gradually retreated into complete retirement, disdaining even to seek employment for the High Holidays, despite the fact that he still had retained to a considerable extent the power and gloss of his voice.

To a certain degree his reluctance to continue practicing the sacred calling was due to the fact, that his considerable portfolio of stocks and bonds, which he acquired when his sun shone brightly, yielded him enough of an income to suffice for a comfortable standard of life for him and his family. There was also an additional consideration that prompted his decision to refrain from making any more cantorial appearances — as he revealed it to me confidentially on one occasion:

"Why I gave it all up? Well, I'll tell you frankly," he confided to me his innermost thought. "At first I did make guest-appearances from time to time and what happened? People would come over to me and compli-

ment me for my performance. But invariably there would among the sincere wellwishers bounce up a killjoy, who had to put in his two cents and prance as a know-it-all by exclaiming for all to hear, 'Oh! this is nothing! You should have heard him twenty years ago. At that time he was indeed a veritable wizard.' That then is the real back-handed compliment. How does a remark like that make me feel? As rotten as can be. Because by calling attention to how wonderful I was twenty years ago, he leaves the implication that at present I am a played-out shell, a nonentity. So what good is it? What do I need it for? What for do I need presidents of synagogues, when I have presidents of banks and corporations who are mailing me in checks regularly without any of them expecting any service from me in return." (His securities were principally shares and bonds of banks.)

My very first remembrance of him was not exactly a particularly pleasant one. Notwithstanding the fact that his parting from the "Ohab Zedek" did not stem from and was not the result of a friendly mutual understanding, but was the outcrop of disillusions and recriminations (their relationship became still further acerbated, when the congregation refused to reinstate him after Meisels saw the folly of his impulsive act and was anxious to return to the fold), he nevertheless joined his former congregation in the years of his retirement as a regular member. He soon rose and became a member of the board of directors. As such and as an expert in the matter he naturally exerted great influence in the question of choosing a cantor, when the occasion arose.

His big chance to play a decisive role in the congregational council came when his successor Yossele Rosenblatt left his post and the search for a suitable replacement for the vacancy was on. A host of prominent cantors applied and I too was one of the candidates under consideration. Meisels naturally was appointed to the committee entrusted with the task of recommending to the plenum who in their opinion was worthy of being named chief cantor of the foremost orthodox congregation of New York, which for fourteen years had the distinction of having had the "King of Cantors" preside over their religious services.

As I soon was to learn, Reb Shaaye was firmly set against appointing me. Not that he had anything of a bad or compromising nature to bring up, that would tend to make me uneligible. Neither did he harbor any feeling of enmity toward me. He couldn't have, since he didn't even know me. He was dead set against my election simply because he was interested in the candidacy of another aspirant (Cantor Morgenstern, chief cantor of Vienna) and he was intensively campaigning for his appointment to the post.

The fact that I did not solicit his support must've also weighed in the balance to turn him against me. Green as a shamrock that I was and totally inexperienced in American congregational politics, I thought it in my naivete to be unseemly and unethical to corral anybody and importune him to vote for me. I preferred to let my auditions (I was asked to officiate twice) speak for me. The other candidates flattered his ego and curried his favor.

When however in spite of his opposition I landed the post, Meisels became a good friend and a warm devoted colleague of mine. We became such close friends that when his youngest daughter set the date for her wedding, he insisted that I perform the marriage ceremony. It was slated to take place at the Temple Zion of the Bronx on a hot day in July. I happened to spend my vacation in the Catskill Mountains at the time and tried to beg off.

But Reb Shaaye wouldn't take no for an answer. Nobody else would do and I was obliged to especially come back into town and do the honors. He was as happy as a lark, when he saw me show up to fulfill his wishes.

I of course took it for granted that the father of the bride would share with me the recitation of the wedding ritual. But when it came to the discussion of the details of the ceremony, to my great surprise Meisels stubbornly maintained his insistence that I take complete charge and pronounce all the blessings by myself on the young couple without any participation whatever by him.

All my arguments, that it was unheard of, that a cantor should refuse to chant even a single one of the "Sheva Brochoth" (seven blessings) at the marriage of his own daughter, fell on deaf ears. It was no dice. He was adamant and stood his ground obstinately.

Having no other alternative I ostensibly resigned myself to the inevitable, but actually this was no more than a pretense on my part. I had a mind to fix his wagon. I was not going to let him get away with it. I had never heard him sing and I was determined to make him, nilly-willy, open up his mouth this time, even if it would take some gentle arm-twisting to soften him up.

I went through the ritual in a routine fashion. Even when it came to the final seven blessings I proceeded to chant in the usual manner, without giving any indication that I have some trick up my sleeve. Only when I got to the end of the sixth blessing did I abruptly stop singing and with a poker face, giving the impression that this has been the prearranged understanding, I offered the wine-filled goblet to the taken-by-surprise father of the bride to finish the marriage ceremony by reciting the seventh (and longest) blessing.

Quickly recovering his wits he furiously began protesting my putting him on the spot. He even refused to take the goblet from my outstretched hand. But I could be as stubborn as he and I too refused to continue. It was a stalemate, but the interruption in the proceedings could not be allowed to get out of hand. For him, who was the host, it was much more embarrassing than for me, an outsider. The assembled guests began taking notice of the tug-of-war that was going on between us under the canopy and Reb Shaaye realized, that he was licked and had no choice but to chant the concluding blessing. It was admittedly a pretty underhanded way of acting, but how else would I have had the opportunity to find out what Meisels' voice sounded like. As it turned out eventually the victim himself grudgingly commended me for laying the trap, from which he was unable to extricate himself, admitting to me after the fact, that it wouldn't

have looked right for him to be merely a silent onlooker at his own daughter's wedding and he was grateful to me for having forced him to put the finishing touch to what thus became a very impressive ceremony.

For Reb Shaaye, once he was trapped, really went to town and in his choicest tall tones. For a man of his advanced age, he still possessed remarkable voice resources. The chants issued from his vocal chords with astounding facility and ringing sound. It was easy to understand why this man was the idol of the masses in his prime.

Meisels was a tall man of well over six feet, whose bearing was akin that of a soldier. He stood erect and straight like a reed and walked with goosesteps, chest out and belly in. He was at all times dressed like a sartorial fashion plate, like a regular dandy, his clothes meticulously clean, well pressed and elegant. He looked the part of a born aristocrat.

He used to come in to my home, but would seldom tarry long enough to sit down. Mostly he just stepped in to call me out for a walk. He was not the homebody type. What he enjoyed most of all was a stroll and the fresh air with a congenial companion at his side. When in the course of our walk we happened to pass a shoeshine stand, he invariably would halt, linger and hoist himself up into the elevated seat to let his footwear get the full treatment of the brush- and polish-wielding youthful bootblack. Even when there was apparently no need for the cleansing process, since his shoes were shining like mirrors, still he could not forego the tempting lure of the cleaning establishment. Perhaps the fact that he at one time was an apprentice in a shoe workshop had something to do with his weakness for glistening leather goods.

In the aftermath of such outings with him, the muscles of my neck usually remained stiff and sore for quite a while on account of the strain, to which they had been subjected, when during our walk I kept looking up to him. I frequently would inquire of him, what was going on up there in the clouds and in response he would give me a pretty accurate weather report as it appeared to him in the mist of the high spheres, where his head was hovering.

If that was the case with me, who am five feet six and a half inches of height, you can just imagine and picture for yourself the scene, when he used to walk in the street with Yossele Rosenblatt, the top of whose head barely reached as high as Shaaye's navel (belly button).

Strolling side by side they looked like Mutt and Jeff. People used to say: there goes "the lange shmone essre mit'n kurtzen freiteg" (the long 18 blessings with the short Friday) and poor Yossele with his short legs was hard put to keep pace with the big strides of his companion's long extremities. Meisels would strut like a peacock with his head in the upper strata of the atmosphere and from that height listen to what his picayune colleague was saying and intermittently he would reply, "Yoh! yoh! Reb Yossele, ihr redt tzu der zach" (literally translated, yes! yes! Reb Yossele you are talking to "the thing") (in Yiddish it also means "you are talking sense").

He was a proud man who leaned toward grandstanding, a great kib-

itzer by nature, a sourpuss and a cynic. He was a maverick, who didn't let anybody put anything over on him. If crossed, he could with biting satire and sarcasm hit back with such devastating and crushing effect that his antagonist would rue the day when he locked horns with him. But his chilliness was only a superficial posture on the surface. He was capable of real genuine friendliness.

Meisels was to have been the exception among the famous cantors, the great majority of whom are living the life of Reilly, of the proverbial grasshopper only for the day, without giving any thought to the future, finding themselves in the years of their eclipse without even the minimal financial means required for a decent standard of living. Most of the renown and celebrated figures of the cantorial fraternity, having in one way or another squandered their considerable earnings, at their old age usually lacked even the most elementary necessities of life. They became indigent paupers, living in strait circumstances, dependent on charitable contributions and dying as the saying goes "in fremde tachrichem" (in shrouds of strangers).

Meisels, unlike the typical swell headed, heedless and lighthearted "bon vivants" of his craft resembled rather the farsighted ant of the previously cited fable. He was frugal, salting away part of his inflow for a rainy day, accumulating in this way a sizeable nestegg, which was to have assured him of a comfortable income in the years of his retirement.

However the nemesis, that as a rule seems to be at the root of the dismal fate of all artists and bohemes, did not spare him either. So in order to get him too, in spite of his sober foresight and well thought-out action, the devil had to bring on the Wall Street debacle of 1929, which swept away fortunes with its tide and caused his securities too to shrink in value, to a fraction of what he had invested in them. His dreams of affluence in his declining years went down the drain and his only asset of any consequence that saved him from utter ruin was an annuity policy, which continued to provide him with a modest income.

Disillusioned and embittered by the cruel disappointments of destiny, he spent the twilight of his life in quiet seclusion among the relics of his eventful and glorious past. He passed on to his reward rich in years and experiences in life in 1948.

(More about Meisels in the American Section)

CHAPTER 16

CANTOR ARYEH LEYB RUTMAN

His colleagues were his most ardent fans — He became famous when still a very young man — The "Rutman Synagogue" in Kremenchug was built in spite — His career in America.

We are still, as you can see, in Odessa. Our visit to this city has unexpectedly become a long drawn-out affair, repeatedly extended and considerably prolonged. Our original plan was to spend only a short time here but before we realized it, lo and behold, we found that we had already tarried here for quite a while and some of our newly found friends had even gained the impression that we have no intention of ever moving on.

There is no denying that Odessa is indeed a very interesting and charming city. In her large and busy port, ships arrive and leave constantly for all parts of the world. The Black Sea, whose waves wash her shore, abounds in all kinds of fish and the shelves of her elegant and elaborately furnished stores are laden with a great variety of bountiful goods and rare delicacies that could not fail to please and satisfy the taste of even the most demanding gourmet.

It is a remarkable city in various respects. It impresses a visitor not merely with its enormous size, its beauty, its riches, its architecture, its commerce and trade, its worldliness, art and culture, but also with what to us is of special interest, its magnificent synagogues and famous cantors. Small wonder then that one becomes so attached to Odessa and intrigued by the many attractions she has to offer, that it is not so easy to take leave of her.

But notwithstanding our prolonged stay, we have not accomplished very much of what we had set out to do. We have barely managed to cover

the four main synagogues and to get acquainted with only a few of their cantors and of what account can that achievement be, considering the great number of houses of prayer and cantors Odessa can boast of?

But to do full justice to all of these would take at least a year with an extra Wednesday added. After all there is a limit to how long one can stay in one place, and particularly is that true of cantors, who strongly believe in the adage, "Meshane mokom meshane mazel" (a change of place means a change of luck) and who constantly are on the lookout for new surroundings in which to seek their fortunes.

There are, moreover, other considerations of which we must not lose sight. Odessa and Berditchev (where we have sojourned previously) are after all not the sole centers where the cantorial art flourished. Kishinev, Wilna, Warsaw, Vienna, Berlin, Lemberg, Budapest, and several other cities also played a prominent role in the history of liturgical music. When will we have a chance to visit all these important centers? To quote from the "Pirkey Ovos" (Ethics of the Fathers), the wise words of Rabbi Tarphon, "Hayom kotzor vehamelocho merubo" (the day is short and the work is so much). Time is flying and we still have so much to do.

So we must be on our way. But before we take off, let us look in again for a moment in the Heckersher Synagogue and if necessary take also a glimpse at the new Kleinman's Synagogue. In one of them, we should find the man we are searching for, one of the brightest stars and most luminous figures of the cantorial world, Aryeh Leyb Rutman. We cannot possibly depart without having met him and had at least a brief chat with him.

Well, what do you know! We are in luck. There he is in the flesh at the religious service in the synagogue and as chance would have it, we happened to enter just in time to hear him called up to the reading of the Torah. "Yaamod (let him stand up) the famous Sheliach Tzibur (messenger of the community) Reb Aryeh Leyb for the "Maftir" (the reading of the closing portion of the week's Torah segment).

In our humble opinion, Rutman justly deserved to be honored with this highly regarded and coveted "aliyah" (religious honor with the privilege of chanting the appropriate weekly selection from the prophets), and if only he is in a good mood (quite often he is not), then we may expect to hear from him an incomparable recitation of the "Haftorah" (appropriate portion from the prophets) to be remembered for a long time.

Let us introduce him to you as we came to know him when he was in the declining years of his life, a shrunken, thin man of medium height, with a small Van Dyke beard, agile in his movements, light on his "ever-on-the-go" feet, nervous, highstrung, moody and unpredictable. According to those who knew him in his younger years, this was quite a change from what he looked like then — a robust man with a round handsome face full of life and energy.

Rutman was still a very young man when he arrived in Odessa to occupy the cantorial post in one of the leading congregations of the city, even though by that time he had already behind him a fine career in the liturgical field. He had served in the capacity of full-fledged cantor in the

cities of Babroisk and Slonim, and he had in the course of these activities earned for himself the recognition of his colleagues and the public. In musical circles, he was considered one of the rising stars in the firmament of cantorial art. When still a youth, he had shown his genius in liturgy. He had traveled all over Russia and made a deep impression on the congregants with his masterful chanting of the prayers.

The cantorial position of the community of Babroisk Rutman was reluctant to accept for the reason that the house of worship of that town seemed to him inadequate, and not up to the standard of holy edifices to which he had been accustomed.

If he did nonetheless finally yield to the importunities of the leaders of the congregation to become their cantor, it was only to please his wife Sarah Winokur, who was a native of Babroisk and whose fervent wish it was to make her home in the city of her birth. For a time he did officiate at the Omud of the "Starzselesh Shool."

Aryeh Leyb's scruples however soon proved to have been justified. People flocked in ever increasing numbers to his religious services and the old synagogue with its limited seating capacity was much too small and totally unsuited for the suddenly inflated requirements for the services, which were so beautifully rendered by the new cantor.

Under the circumstances the trustees, under public pressure, felt themselves obliged to find larger quarters where to hold the Sabbath devotional rituals. The largest hall in town was hired by them for that purpose and after having converted it into a house of worship, with all the accessories properly installed, Rutman henceforth would conduct there the prayer sessions to the immense edification of his wife's "landsleit."

In Odessa, he aroused soon after his arrival such great attention that such prominent luminaries as Rozumny, Minkowsky, Sirota and Meisels came to hear his services, and they were astounded by the remarkable artistry shown by Rutman at the pulpit. One and all asserted that the young cantor was undoubtedly destined to eventually grow into a great master.

His was a lyrical, delicate and flexible tenor voice with a range of up to the high "C". He was the possessor of a sharp, polished, pearly and smoothly spiraling coloratura. His diction was flawlessly clear, his phantasy richly imaginative and colorful. He was a master of improvisation. He belonged to the school of emotional, feelingful cantorial art. He was a creative interpreter of liturgy who revealed originality and unique individuality in his approach and whether he was singing a set composition with accompaniment of a choir or "saying" (chanting) solo a recitative of his own, it equally was characteristic of his style that the listener did not hear merely the empty sound of his tones, but rather notes and musical phrases laden with deep meaning, full of ideas and significant content, clothed in custom-made, ingenious musical vestments.

He was a genuinely "Yiddish" hearty, old-traditional "Mispaleil" (reader), but with a modern wrapper and treatment. He was scrupulous in avoiding the affected "oy vey" sobs and groans employed by some cantors, the "Tzibele treren" (onion tears) and the excessive repetitions of

passages from the text of the prayers, as practiced by his other colleagues. He was willing only to use legitimate means in embellishing his rendition of the religious service.

His cantorial modes were distinguished by great skill and artisanship (Kunst) but he abhorred and had no use for cheap tricks and gimmicks "kuntz." His artistic concepts and methods were traditionally sanctioned, musically fundamentally sound, and properly integrated and motivated. His presentation was that of an accomplished worldly artist, a "pro" and not of an amateurish, old-fashioned, untutored "Baal Tefilah" (reader). He had complete control over his voice so that he was able to bring out the finest, most subtle nuances as well as the most powerful dramatic effects in his colorful recitations.

It is probably not far from the truth what we heard from critics who were willing to stake their reputation on the statement that Rutman was perhaps the most talented and gifted master of liturgy of his time, second only to the great Rozumny.

But notwithstanding his great ability, he nevertheless would not ever allow himself to depend on his fertile imagination and his creative mind to supply him with the spontaneous musical thoughts at the spur of the moment and to improvise while praying at the pulpit. He felt that such a procedure would be too irresponsible and irreverent.

Instead he came to the service fully prepared. Fully conscious of the sacredness of his task, he would begin a carefully constructed, planned musical composition and, as he proceeded, he gradually would elaborate on the basic theme, filling in here and there some new twists and improvisations which his inspiration of the music would dictate and which appeared to him appropriate to the end of making his interpretation more responsive and expressive. He would thus take a sturdily built skeleton and cover it with flesh and breathe into it a living spirit.

Standing at the pulpit, he would pull out from one pocket and another slips of music paper, on which he had scribbled down some fragments of musical phrases. Only he himself could decipher them. He was able to modulate from one form of scale or mode into another with the utmost ease and his lively phantasy would carry him away to uncharted spheres (Hotzenplotz) and it seemed as if he had gone too far astray and had lost the thread. At such times, even seasoned professionals were puzzled and used to wonder how in the world he would manage to unravel the maze and get out unscathed from under the web of complications. But they underrated Rutman's wizardry. He never lost his bearings. He always knew his exact position down to a fraction of its longitude and latitude, and as soon as it suited his purpose he was able to execute the necessary retreat and with one adroit maneuver he was back in the original musical mode, having glided back to the point whence he had taken off with the remarkable agility and the graceful mobility of a cat that always lands on its feet. No wonder then that the greatest vocal artists and musical experts practically worshiped him.

He was not averse to adopting even opera motifs and to applying

them to the texts of the prayers, but whatever he did was invariably in good taste and in a dignified manner, possessed of beauty and form. His recitatives were constructed in proper proportions. They had a beginning, an end and a middle section with a fundamental theme running like a connecting thread through the whole composition. It always was built on the basis of the blueprint of a well thought out plan and his musical interpretation fitted the words like a glove does the hand it covers.

From Odessa he was called to Poltava from where he eventually went to Krementchug where he was loved and cherished by the entire community. However, there is usually one fly in the ointment. This particular fly happened to be the "gabbay," the trustee of rituals. He repeatedly rubbed the cantor the wrong way.

Rutman, who was not the easiest person to get along with, could not stand the stuffy, dominating demeanor of this official of his congregation, and the mogul on his part tried his best to make himself disagreeable, to annoy and to antagonize the cantor. The feeling, we might say, was mutual. Friction between Rutman and the gabby flared up and was about to explode into open hostility. It was just at that time that Rutman was summoned to St. Petersburg for an audition as a candidate for the vacant chief cantorial position of the Russian capital. He was elected to the pulpit of the Baron Guinsburg synagogue, and although his heart was not in it, Rutman accepted, just to be rid of this annoying trustee and the continuous quarrels with him. His choir leader was Herman Zalis, who for many years functioned as the musical director and conductor of Temple Emanuel of Boro Park, Brooklyn.

There was great consternation among the members of the Krementchug Congregation when the news that their beloved cantor had left them became known. They were determined to move heaven and earth to bring him back. The only person that was gratified and happy with the way events had evolved was the gabbay and he acted quickly to exploit the favorable opportunity. Fearing that the aroused membership might succeed in their efforts to prevail upon Rutman to desert his newly-won, exalted post and return to Krementchug, he made haste to fill the vacancy, and prevent any possibility for Rutman to ever be reinstated. But his strategy backfired. The newly-engaged cantor, handpicked by the dictatorial trustee, could in no way even begin to fill the shoes of his predecessor. There was general dissatisfaction and griping. The membership could not make their peace with the gabbay's choice.

The militant fans of Rutman organized themselves into a powerful body. They broke away from the mother congregation and went all out to recruit new dissidents with the object of luring back their beloved and idolized cantor. They had an idea that St. Petersburg did not very well agree with Rutman's disposition and that he was not happy there. It might just be conceivable that he would be as happy to come back to them as they would be to have him return. As it turned out, Rutman did indeed feel out of place in the formal and frigid atmosphere of the St. Petersburg Jewish community. He pined to be surrounded once more by the warm

adoration of his former congregants and even more so was Sorke, his wife, disenchanted with St. Petersburg and wanted no more of it. When the dissidents vowed to form a new congregation and to build a new synagogue and name the sacred edifice after him if only he would agree to come home to be reunited with them, Rutman could not resist the temptation and he readily exchanged the cold glow and brilliant gloss of St. Petersburg for the heart-warming, intimate drabness of Krementchug.

In no time at all, the Rutman synagogue was erected. The members of the old congregation defected in droves and joined the Rutman bandwagon. The prodigal son was brought back amid great rejoicing and fanfare and installed into the post of the synagogue that was named for him. It was a happy reunion.

For some years after that he stayed on in Krementchug but eventually he could not resist the lure of the big city and he accepted a call from Warsaw, where he became the cantor of "Adas Yeshurun." He was an instant sensation, setting the Polish capital on its ears.

Cantor Berele Charloff tells of his experience when one Friday evening, he together with Elihayu Zaludkovsky, who was at that time the cantor of the Sinai Congregation and cantor Moshe Levinson, of the prestigious Nozsik synagogue went to hear Rutman.

They found already the entrance blocked by policemen, who had a hard time keeping back the onrushing crowd. Only by the special intervention of the sexton did they somehow manage to gain admission and according to the description of Charloff there was bedlam in the Sanctuary after each composition recited by Rutman. The enthusiasm was at the highest pitch and in his opinion there was no equal to Aryeh Leyb in the artistry of the liturgical chant.

Rutman came to Smorgon. There was no professional choir available. So in a colleagueal gesture several cantors, among whom was also the famous cantor Froyke Shliepack, volunteered to assist Aryeh Leyb in his Sabbath ritual by acting as his chorus and at least give him accords and background humming accompaniment.

But instead of being appreciative of the helping hand lent him by his colleagues he became annoyed and whenever they chimed in, he would interrupt his chanting, express to them his criticism of their accords, "Kinderlech, es iz tzoo hoych" (boychiks, it is too loud), "es iz tzoo niderig" (now you are already singing too softly), they were not able to satisfy him. Finally he knocked with the palm of his hand on the Omud (stand) stating at the same time to the cantors, "Oy hot ihr gemacht a porech" (oh! what a mess you made), thus making it plain to them, that he would rather have them shut up.

Yet it must be recorded that when Rutman reached for the ultimate goal of every cantor, the juiciest plum which any chazzon would cherish, he was not successful.

He gave an audition in the Great Synagogue of Wilna. But his lyric voice, even though it possessed a cutting piercing quality, lacked the profusion of volume, the mighty sound of a Sirota to fill the enormous sanc-

tuary with sound. His highly sophisticated style was also above the heads of the masses.

Cantor Yehoshua Weisser related that on one occasion as he was taking a walk in his own town of Vinitze in the company of Cantor Mordechay Eliezar Gurewitch, who happened to spend his summer vacation there, they saw a carnival type barker strutting in the middle of the street followed by a band of howling children. He was carrying a painted sign that was hanging from his neck in the front and in the back, forming a sandwich, and like a town crier he was announcing in a sonorous voice for all and sundry, "The famous cantor from Odessa, Aryeh Leyb Rutman, will tonight conduct the Mincha and Maariv (evening) services in the central community synagogue. Admission by tickets only, 25 kopeks per head.

Both of them thereupon went to the great synagogue, intent on attending the service. On arriving, they found groups of people standing around, discussing and arguing about the respective merits of the different cantors. They were loitering around the edifice, but none of them seemed to have any desire to enter, for that would have required buying a ticket.

Within the synagogue, they encountered only between two and three dozen Jews. It was already late. The worshipers became impatient and were urging and finally demanding that there be no further delay in beginning the service. But inasmuch as altogether a grand total of three rubles had been collected for tickets, the guest-cantor refused to ascend the pulpit. In his desire to break the impasse, Gurewitch asked Weisser to go over to the "gabbay" and find out what the cantor's minimum demand was in return for which he would agree to officiate. When Weisser returned with the information that he wanted at least fifteen rubles, Gurewitch handed Weisser the twelve rubles that would bring up the proceeds to the desired level. Weisser completed his mission by handing the money to the gabbay (trustee) for the purpose of compensating Rutman, but with the proviso not to divulge to him the identity of the person, who made the contribution.

After Rutman received the great fortune of fifteen whole rubles, he began reciting the Mincha (afternoon) service, and as he went on his prayers became more fervid and emotional, he was carrying them off with skill and spirit. When he came to the prayer, "To Jerusalem, thy city, return in mercy," and later on, "Hear our voice, O Lord," Gurewitch and Weisser could not hold back the tears, which welled up in their eyes. This was also true of the most hardened listeners, and when Rutman concluded the "Maariv" service the entire congregation, which by that time had been considerably swelled by the free admission into the sanctuary of the crowd which had lingered outside, seemed to be bewitched by the magic of his voice.

The result was that as a consequence of the deep impression which he made on the congregants, there was a general popular demand for a repeat performance and the leaders of the congregation were obliged to prevail upon the cantor to extend his stay in Vinitze and conduct the services on

the following Sabbath. This time, however, there were not only no empty seats but standing room only. Weisser and Gurewitch, of course, were present again. They would not have missed it for the world and on that occasion Rutman knew that a very distinguished colleague was in the audience. In his honor he sang some of the famous compositions of Gurewitch, who professed to his intimates that he got his money's worth ten times over.

This episode, involving as it did two well-known cantors, was characteristic and typical of the regard in which Rutman was held by his contemporaries. Rutman was a cantor's cantor. The greatest ambition of a cantor, and this is true of every artist, is to earn and obtain the recognition of his peers, his colleagues. This means much more to him than the most enthusiastic applause of the masses. Not many achieve this goal. Rutman was one fortunate elite among the great cantors who gained the admiration of his colleagues. They were his greatest boosters. They sought every opportunity to listen to the great master and to learn something from him. He was recognized by all of them as an outstanding authority in his field.

He was the originator of a new school of thought in liturgy which is known as the "Rutman style," and he attracted many pupils and followers, the so-called "Rutmanists" who copied his methods, his manner of interpretation, his unique line of improvisation and manner of delivery, with more or less success.

In 1913, two managers, Rabbi and Mohel Uri Felshin and a Mr. Betzalel Brenner, an owner of a liquor store, brought him to America. He moved his belongings into the apartment of Rabbi Felshin, for the reason that Felshin resided within walking distance of the hall located at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 110th Street called the "Star Casino", where the recently arrived guest cantor was to officiate at the services on the following Sabbath.

When the time came for them to leave for the hall where a large audience was already assembled, anxious to hear the famous cantor from abroad, Rutman could not find his prayer shawl. He had somehow mislaid it. He became very nervous and upset, but no matter how thoroughly he went through his suitcases, the search failed to yield the garment. Felshin offered to let him wear his own prayer shawl, which was no less and perhaps even more richly embroidered and bedecked with silver ornaments, than that of the cantor. But Rutman would not hear of it. He insisted on having his own prayer shawl or he would not ascend the altar. It was long past the scheduled hour and there was no sign of the guest cantor. At long last, Rutman exclaimed with joy and relief, as if a heavy stone had fallen from his chest, "Eureka, I found it," and off they went to the improvised hall of prayer.

Among the guests that came to hear the imported famous cantor on that Sabbath morning was also Yossele Rosenblatt. The arrangement committee invited Yossele to take the seat of honor on the platform near the ark. When Rutman ascended the podium to take out the holy scroll for the reading of the Torah, Rosenblatt went over to him and graciously greeted him with the usual traditional expression "Yasher Koach" (heartiest con-

gratulations). But instead of thanking his celebrated colleague for his kind appreciative words, Rutman retorted rudely, "I do not sing for you. I 'daven' (chant) for 'Mevinim' (people who understand liturgical art)." This reaction was characteristic of Rutman's brusque demeanor and his sarcastic answers to courteous, well-meaning compliments.

CHAPTER 17

HOW CANTOR ARYEH LEYB RUTMAN LIVED, FUNCTIONED AND CREATED IN AMERICA

Interesting traits of his character — Why did not Lady Luck smile at him in the golden land? — He was capable of turning to the congregants in the midst of his service and advising them to go home since there would be nothing worth while that day — His was a cantorial art of the highest type.

I would venture the guess that those who read our last narrative about Cantor Rutman will wonder how come that such a great artist did not receive his due recognition in America. There are several conceivable explanations and contributing factors that were to blame, the most important being the fact that, Rutman, the cantor, was at every step in his career handicapped, frustrated and hindered by Rutman, the man. And what harm a person can do to himself even his worst enemies are unable to inflict upon him.

Rutman was an eccentric curmudgeon, a nervous man of peculiar characteristics, unpredictable as April weather. One could never be certain of anything about him. One could never count on him or know how he would react under certain circumstances. He was a man of changing moods — who was apt to do things on the spur of the moment according to the whimsical notion or idea which happened to strike him. It was possible for a storm to appear suddenly out of a clear blue sky, without the slightest warning, and conversely the stormy weather could suddenly subside and the cloudy sky clear instantly as if nothing had occurred.

If he was kindly disposed and in good humor, he was able to rise to the sublimest heights, to evoke fervid ecstasy in his listeners by giving from his bounty of vocal gems, that were a heavenly joy to behold. On such occasions, he would display bright flashes of genius and was able to actually accomplish marvellous vocal feats. If, however, he was not inspired by his muse, he was capable of running through the whole service in a jiffy, going headlong as if by a fast express train without a stop and making a shambles out of the prayers. On such occasions one could hear absolutely nothing, neither voice nor recitation, neither text nor interpretation. When this happened and he did not feel up to par, he often used to turn around and facing the disappointed worshipers, say to them, "My dear people, you had better go home today, you won't hear anything. The one who you see officiating here is not Rutman but Turman." (There was a cantor by that name in America who was no great shakes.)

I was told by Mr. Shlang, a venerable member and eyewitness, that he left his first position in America with the Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun at East 85th Street on a sudden whim, without giving any reason, shortly before the High Holidays, breaking a contract which was still to run for some time.

However, the facts do not bear out this version. In justice to Rutman, matters should be set right and his seemingly precipitate action somewhat vindicated. It seems that the trouble started on the Day of Atonement of the elapsed year, when some members of the congregation noticed that tiny smoke rings were billowing out from the window of the room where the choir boys were resting between services. Believing in the validity of the adage, that where there was smoke, there must be fire, they investigated, and became convinced that their suspicion that some of the singers had smoked cigarettes on the holiest day of the year was correct. When the Rabbi Ramaz (M.Z.) Margolies learned of the sacrilege committed by one or more members of the performers, who assisted in the religious services and ought to set an example in piety and observance of the Biblical laws, he ordered that the choir be summarily dismissed and that no choir shall ever again be employed by the congregation.

In despair over these developments, Rutman fought tooth and nail to have the ban revoked. He argued that a choir was a necessity and that it surely was possible to find a chorus, whose members were observing religious Jews. He served notice that he could not continue in his post unless his request was granted. When the next High Holidays were imminent and the congregation still stood pat in its refusal to provide him with a choir, he left and accepted a position with a congregation in Detroit. But after a short stint in that city he transferred to Toledo, Ohio.

Next we find him in Boston where he occupied the pulpit of Congregation "Hadras Kodesh." There occurred an unpleasant incident on the night of the first Slichos (forgiveness midnight prayer session). He listened impatiently to the introductory remarks of the rabbi and when it developed into a long-winded sermon which was dragging on and on with no end in sight, he jumped up from his seat in a rage, exclaiming, "If you

prefer to listen to the endless talk of the rabbi, you don't need me." Unconcerned with the scandal evoked by his outburst, he made it clear that he was unwilling to officiate save on his own terms, and he left for home. The embarrassed officials of the congregation succeeded only with great effort and diplomacy in placating him and prevailing upon him to return to the synagogue.

When Don Fuchs, the famous Viennese chief cantor, came to the United States, he went to hear Rutman of whose fame he had heard in Europe. After listening to him, he was greatly disappointed and concluded that there was no other explanation but that the world had gone crazy. Some time later, Don Fuchs was sitting in the "Kibitzarnie" on Essex Street in downtown New York where the cantors used to gather to sip their afternoon coffee and to exchange professional gossip. Rutman entered just as Mordechay Hershman was regaling a group of cantors with a recitation of a composition by Weintraub.

When he finished, Hershman in haughty self-satisfaction offered to pay $100 to any of the cantors present, who could chant that particular recitative as masterfully as he had. When nobody seemed willing to pick up Hershman's challenge, Rutman made his way to his table, declaring, "Now I will show you how this opus of Weintraub ought to be interpreted." He then proceeded to give a classical demonstration of his deep perception and understanding of the Weintraub genius as revealed in the true musical meaning contained in that selection. His rendition was so remarkable for its insight and extraordinary artistry and had such an impact on his colleagues that impulsively they took to hugging and kissing the embarrassed Rutman. The unanimous decision of the cantors was that Rutman won the bet. Don Fuchs, who was sitting quietly in a corner, listened in awe and later confessed to friends, "It was on that afternoon that I realized that I was wrong in having held a poor opinion of the judgment of the public. I must admit that the world is by no means crazy. The public acclaim of Rutman is fully deserved.".

The following episode occurred at Carnegie Hall during a recital by the famous concert singer, and subsequently cantor, Joseph Winogradov. During the intermission, a group of members of the press lingering in the lobby were discussing the performance, and Abe Cahan, editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward,* expressed a very high opinion of the singer. This angered Rutman, who was standing nearby cocking an ear and listening with interest to what the pundits of the writing profession had to say. He collared the editor by the lapels of his jacket and engaged Cahan in a dialogue, challenging the accuracy of his evaluation of Winogradov's abilities. The editor of the labor newspaper became annoyed and retorted, "I don't know who you are and I doubt very much that you are competent to criticize such a fine accomplished artist." "I am Cantor Rutman," his counterpart replied proudly, "and I can judge singing with as much authority as anyone."

Some time afterward, Cahan happened to pass by a synagogue on the outer facade of which hung a large sign, which announced that on the

following Sabbath Rutman, as guest cantor, would conduct the service. Recalling the incident in the theatre, Cahan made a mental note to attend that Sabbath service. He came, heard and was conquered. He was so taken with Rutman's mastery, that he subsequently published in the *Forward* an enthusiastic article full of high praise and superlative adjectives characterizing Reb Aryeh Leyb as one of the outstanding pillars of liturgical music. This was the first and only time that Abe Cahan deigned to write in his paper about a religious service in a synagogue.

A native of Zhlobin in the Guberne (province) of Mohileh, where he was born in 1866, the son of a very pious father, who himself was a very good and pleasant-voiced "Baal Tefilah (reader)", the young lad began his apprenticeship singing in the choirs of Yoel Selig Pinsker and Boruch David Kertcher (Kranhaus), both of whom were among the best known and most talented cantors of their generation. The latter a disciple of Nisi Blumenthal and Weintraub, was one of the truly great cantors who occupied positions in Wilna and St. Petersburg.

Once Boruch David and his choir were invited to a festive celebration in the palace of Duke Paskewitch. The special attention of the princely mogul was evoked and particularly centered upon the lad Aryeh Leyb, whose voice rang out with singular sweetness from among the other voices and he requested that the boy sing a selection by himself. Rutman was willing to show off before the potentate and his noble guests and he chose to sing the popular aria from Stanislaw Manuszko's opera, "Halka." His presentation was a resounding success and he found such favor in the eyes of the duke that he decided to take the young fellow under his wing and afford him the opportunity of receiving a thorough musical education, the total cost of which the prince was willing to underwrite.

However, nothing came of the plan. For when Aryeh Leyb's father found out about this, he hurried to his son's side and took him home before anyone knew what was happening and could stop him. He delivered a strongly worded lecture to the apple of his eye about staying away from dukes no matter how well-intentioned they were. He advised him to forget about opera and other such nonsense, because no good could ever come of it. Jews were Jews and gentiles were gentiles and of different world and the twain would never meet, if he could help it.

Nevertheless, Rutman never lost his interest in opera, as well as in secular music in general, and he was not averse to occasionally using some foreign motifs, albeit surreptitiously, in his compositions. It was thus that a phrase from the "Pearl Fisher," crept in by the back door into his well-known phonograph recording of "Ki Le-Kach Tov" (For I Gave You Good Doctrine) which is being recited when the scroll of the law is returned to the Ark of the Covenant.

He lost a great opportunity for achieving fame and fortune through his own carelessness and indifference. He was the first cantor to receive a contract from the highly regarded "Sonophone" company to make phonograph records. But after having recorded only several selections, he became disenchanted and disgusted with it. The idea had lost its charm for

him. The technique of the new invention was still in its infancy and required patience and effort on the part of the singer because of the frequent retakes that were necessary. There was also criticism in some quarters of the propriety of recording and thus profaning of religious hymns. All these circumstances combined to make him reconsider and drop his option precipitately. It was Zavel Kwartin who eagerly grasped the opportunity and inherited the contract which Rutman gave up, and it was Kwartin, who gained a world-wide reputation through his numerous records.

At one gathering of cantors, the discussion turned to the subject of the propriety of borrowing from foreign sources and of adapting operatic or other secular music to hymns of the synagogue. When some of those who took part in the polemics expressed the opinion that such a procedure was unseemly and unwarranted, Rutman pointed out that even the great Nisi Belzer at times was wont to draw from the classic musical literature. In that way he interpreted and illustrated the words, "Vayar-kideym kemoh eygel" (he maketh them also skip like a calf), using for this purpose the devil dance from a Russian opera. After saying this, Rutman proceeded to illustrate it, not only singing that particular passage, but simultaneously dancing as well in time with the rhythm of the dance of the devil and it was indeed remarkable to behold this elderly man move about with youthful agility and grace, not at all like a dignified cantor but rather like a ballerina starring in a stage performance.

Rutman was the typical absent-minded professor. That is the picture emerging from the following episodes which were related by his son Lucien. One time, he officiated at the "Adas Yeshuron" Synagogue of Warsaw during the High Holidays for which services he was paid two thousand rubles in cash. He placed the money in the inside pocket of his jacket, and on his way home to Krementchug in the train, he fell asleep. When he arrived home and reached into his coat pocket to hand over the fruits of his toil to his wife Sorke, who was the one who wore the pants in the family (he always made her the keeper of his earnings), he found there nothing but emptiness staring him in the face. Some pickpocket must have had a very profitable working day. All he could do was cry "Chay vekayom" (cry in vain over spilled milk).

If there was no money to show for all his efforts, there was at least the scant consolation, that he had a great moral success in Warsaw. The congregation was anxious to engage him as their full-time cantor and prevailed upon him to bring his family with him to the Polish capital. Rutman accepted the post and soon afterward they all moved to the resort town of Volomin on the outskirts of Warsaw.

Shortly before the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashono), Rutman entered a barbershop and in his broken Polish asked the barber to trim his beard. The latter apparently misunderstood what his customer wanted and the extent to which he desired his hirsute adornment reduced. So he went to his task with great zeal, taking off considerable patches of hair from all sides so that by the the time he was through, there was hardly anything left of the nice beard, which Rutman had all along sported. During the whole

operation, the patient was napping, his eyes closed, entirely unaware of what the barber, most likely an anti-Semite, had done to his appearance. When he at long last looked at himself in the mirror, he was horrified by the realization of the loss he had suffered at the hands of the bungling artisan of the scissors. But what could he do? No amount of even the harshest bawling out of the guilty culprit could place back around his chin the clipped off hairs that lay scattered on the floor.

When he came home and his wife saw his almost entirely naked face, she fainted. His manager was summoned to the house and they went into a huddle to decide, what was to be done. Their main concern was, what the strictly religious officials and members of his congregation would think about their cantor's action in suddenly, and just before the High Holidays at that, clipping off and shortening his beard beyond recognition, leaving only a few lonely hairs hanging down from the center of his bare chin. It was agreed that there was no other way out of the dilemma, but to procure from a wigmaker a false beard and paste it on to what was left of the original foliage and hope for the best. This was done and Rutman conducted the holiday religious services on the days of Rosh Hashono (New Year) with the false beard securely affixed to the lower end of his face and the worshipers none the wiser.

But if the cantor got away with the deceptive masquerade this time, he was not so fortunate on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Whether it was the heat generated in the sanctuary by the throng of congregants, who filled the house of prayer to overflowing or the fervor with which Rutman chanted the prayers, something or other caused the glue which held fast the false adornment to thaw and loosen its grip. The mishap occurred during "Neehla," the concluding service of the holiest day of the year. Completely oblivious of the precarious state of his synthetic beard, which made the excessive moving about of his head quite hazardous and throwing caution to the wind, Rutman reverted to his usual fiery manner of delivery, which had the effect of shaking repeatedly the beard which was just barely hanging on to its base. It wavered and finally dropped to the floor without Rutman realizing what had happened.

What a commotion broke out! For quite some time following this incident, there was a general uproar and turmoil all over town about Rutman's bogus beard. The thus created shaky situation even reached a point, where there was serious talk about summarily dismissing the cantor from his post. It was only due to the great reputation which he enjoyed in musical circles that his devoted friends and followers succeeded in smoothing over the painful affair. His explanation was investigated and was duly accepted after it was found to have been truthful.

At the time when he was connected with the central congregation in the city of Poltava, a festive celebration was arranged on the occasion of the anniversary of the memorable victory of Peter the Great over the Swedish Army. Tzar Nicholas, the Second, also came to town for the purpose of attending the historic event and Rutman was scheduled to offer a prayer appropriate to the grand patriotic occasion.

The governor of the province, all the invited nobles and high civilian and military officials were already assembled. Only one of the designated participants in the festivities was missing. You guessed it. It was none other than our absentminded Rutman, and here at any moment the ruler of all Russia, the "Batushka" himself, was about to make his entrance. Messengers were hurriedly dispatched to look for the elusive cantor and they found him sitting at his table immersed in the act of writing a new composition. In his zeal to mark down the melody that happened to come to his mind just then, he had entirely forgotten about the affair and his appointment with royalty.

This was typical of Reb Aryeh Leyb. He was devoted to his music and cantorial art with heart and soul and he gave it priority over everything else. In spite of the fact that he himself was a noted composer, a master of the liturgical recitative, he was constantly on the lookout for new compositions. If he heard some cantor chant a recitative in which he detected a new phrase, a fresh original thought, he would not rest until he got hold of that particular opus, which caught his attention, and he was ready and willing to pay even a considerable sum in order to secure that liturgical gem, even though he was hardly in a position to incur such extracurricular financial expenditures.

When he heard me on one occasion chant one of my own selections which he liked, he kept asking me to let him have a copy of it. I was surprised, albeit highly complimented, by this strange request of his. But I demurred, protesting, "What? you, the great celebrated master needs my humble composition? You must be joking." But it was no use. He would not take no for an answer and did not desist until I gave it to him, although I doubt very much that he ever used it.

Once when I was riding with him in the subway, he began regaling me with the humming into my ears of his newest opus. The car was filled with people, but that did not deter Rutman from continuing his singing, and as he warmed up the rumbling of the wheels of the subway train drowned out his impromptu recital. Evidently forgetting where he was, he gradually lifted his voice until he eventually sang with full force and he became the center of attention for all passengers. Only when the train stopped, causing the noise to suddenly subside and he saw that all eyes were focused on him, did he realize that he had been singing aloud and with an embarrassed smile he abruptly fell silent.

He was a truly good-hearted person and he loved his profession and the liturgical art. Above all he had high regard, deep affection and respect for a gifted cantor, a professional, a competent practitioner of the sacred calling. He was a modest man and this trait was not an affected one, but rather real and natural, an integral, genuine characteristic of his personality. He was never self-satisfied. He used to say, "I don't know anything. I have a lot to learn yet."

He was a well-known, celebrated cantor when he went to Berditchev with the sole object of visiting the famous Nisi Belzer. He went in to the great revered master and asked him to take him into his chorus as one of

the tenors, since only serving under his auspices for an extended period would enable him to acquire the imperatively needed knowledge, which he felt he was still lacking. He was quite distraught and disappointed when Nisi thought the idea was bizarre and would not take him seriously in spite of his repeated protestations that it was his fervid wish to serve him.

When I first knew Reb Aryeh Leyb, he was already well up in years. On one Saturday when I happened to officiate at the Forest Avenue Synagogue in the Bronx which was located in the neighborhood where he lived, he came to hear me. After the Shacharis (morning) service, he complimented me on my performance and surprised me by adding that in return for the "Oneg Shabbat" (pleasure) which I had given him with my chants, he would reward me by volunteering to make an unscheduled guest appearance at the concert, which I was to give the following day, Sunday evening.

The trustees naturally were very happy when they were apprised of this generous offer and with glee they announced it to the delighted worshipers. Immediately after the conclusion of the religious services, they phoned the newspaper office asking them to change the "ad" in the Sunday edition so as to include the surprise development of Rutman's participation in the affair.

This was the first time that I had the chance to hear him. He recited the long prayer from the "Haleil" service "Min Hameitzar" (Out of my straitness I called upon the Lord) from beginning to end and although his voice did already show some evidence of deterioration due to his advanced age, it still can be recorded that this time it was by no means a "Turmanesque" performance, but rather without question in the best tradition of the genuine Rutman brand.

On one occasion, he and his wife were our guests for dinner and when after the repast we were sitting in the living room entertaining Mrs. Rutman, I suddenly realized that Reb Aryeh Leyb had disappeared and I went to look for him. I found him in the bedroom looking out of the window. When I asked him what he was looking for, he replied that he was not looking for anything. He was just trying to inhale some fresh air. He was addicted to pure air and opened windows. He also believed strongly in the beneficial effect of consuming stewed prunes, which he included as often as possible in his diet. Whenever he dined with us, he would ask for a dish of stewed prunes.

Once he remained overnight in our home and he used the opportunity to demonstrate for us his own special method of reciting the "Krias Shema," the prayer ritual prescribed for prior to going to sleep. Lying on his back on the bed, he would to the rhythm of each word stretch out alternately a hand or a foot in nimble graceful movements, in this way combining the reading of the prescribed Hebrew religious text with the execution of gymnastic exercises which he considered imperative for the preservation of physical fitness.

On one occasion, I was walking with him and some other colleagues of ours in the street, when suddenly there was no sign of Rutman. We

looked around and when we spotted him there he was holding on to the pole of a street lamp with both hands while kicking his legs alternately outward and back in methodical, rhythmical exercise fashion. He was unconcerned with the stares of the curious passersby. He halted, leaving us to go ahead, and he remained behind to continue stretching his legs.

He was very naive in the ways of the world and was unable to adjust to the alien and new surroundings. The sophisticated American methods of publicity and of creating a glamorous image were abhorrent to him. He disdained them as unworthy of a member of the clergy. This circumstance may have been one of the reasons, why the general public heard very little of Rutman and did not properly evaluate and appreciate his great qualities.

Besides, there was also the fact that the plain folks did not really understand him, for the simple reason that his brand of cantorial art was above their heads. In the words of Shakespeare: it was caviar to the general public. One had to be well versed in liturgical music, a so-called "Menagen" in order to be able to appreciate it.

He had hard times as the weight of the years fell on his frail shoulders and made it progressively more difficult for him to find lucrative employment. He felt sidetracked, left out of the main stream of the cantorial field and this made him bitter and disillusioned.

When in 1933 the tragic news of the sudden death of Joseph Rosenblatt in the holy city of Jerusalem reached New York, the Jewish Ministers and Cantors Association arranged a memorial service in Carnegie Hall. I was given the sad assignment to recite the "Moley" for Reb Yossele. As the audience was pouring out from the Hall after the conclusion of the mournful tribute to the great departed, there was understandably talk, discussion coupled with expressions of sorrow, pain and distress on the part of some of the cantors at the great misfortune that had befallen the Rosenblatt family and their own fraternity. "What a great tragedy," remarked one of the group, "that a world famous figure like Yossele should have been torn away so unexpectedly in the prime of life and when he was away from home."

Rutman, by then a hollow-cheeked, shriveled old litle man, who was walking with the group, chimed in with his dissenting observation. "And I tell you that it wasn't so tragic after all. On the contrary. In my opinion he died just in time, at the height of his career. From here on, he had no place to go but down. You can't live a legend. After that, one becomes commonplace, vochedik [weekday'ish] cheapened and forgotten. Nobody has any use for you or pays any attention to you any longer and you move about aimlessly and are stared at like a superfluous, ancient relic or a fossil of some extinct species." It was quite clear to all the cantors in the group who he was talking about: himself. The parade has passed him by and he bitterly resented being consigned to the limbo as a "has been."

Rutman passed away soon afterward while he was vacationing in the Rockaways. He had just returned to his bungalow from the Bronx after having led the congregation which had engaged him for the oncoming

High Holy Days in the Selichoth midnight devotional prayer ritual. He was 69 years old when the Maloch Hamoves pounced on him and put finis to his life in September 1935.

Only several hours before the fatal heart seizure, he was still busy at his desk writing the music of a new composition in the famous, well-worn, blue notebook which contained a collection of his best recitatives. He always watched over this precious possession of his, like a hen over her brood.

In the ensuing confusion, as the community learned of the demise of the celebrated temporary resident, as people came in and acquaintances, friends and colleagues mingled with total strangers, the open notebook left lying on the desk somehow disappeared into thin air without a trace. It was never recovered. Some unscrupulous character must have stolen the priceless notebook and gotten away with it before any member of the family could have noticed that it was missing. It is a pity and shame that anyone could square with his conscience the utilization of such a sad moment for committing such an unspeakable act of thievery. But there remained a great legacy of his compositions in manuscript. At any rate nothing got into print of the undoubtedly numerous liturgical creations of this uniquely fertile mind. Rutman's line was like no other in the treatment of prayer interpretation and he ranks among the greatest cantors of his time. Especially did his colleagues take him to their hearts and many of them are attempting to emulate his example with more or less success. Honor to his memory.

Rutman's greatness like that of Rozumny's was largely based on his interpretative skill of the works of the excellent composers of liturgical compositions that have become classics of Jewish musical literature.

There was however a difference between the handling of these compositions by these two giants of cantorial art.

Rozumny not being an innovator recited the work in the form in which it was written by the author. There was no need for him to add or delete anything from the original version.

Once he took it into his mouth he breathed into the dry notes a soul and spirit that made it come alive with irresistible sweet charm.

Rutman on the other hand, often was wont to take a part of one recitative, combine it with another part of an entirely different one and adding something of his own, come up with an ingenious brand-new authentic masterpiece which bore the characteristic stamp of his own style.

Meyer Machtenberg, who was his choir leader in his first yearly position in America, in relating his experiences with Rutman on the high holidays, gives a characteristic illustration.

Prior to going up to the altar to chant the Mussaf service on Rosh Hashana, he remarked to his choir master: "You have never heard me yet recite the 'Ki Keshimcho' of Weintraub. Today is the day." To which Machtenberg replied, "Karniol used to say that recitative, enchanting the audience with his marvellous delivery."

"Well," said Rutman proudly, "I don't know about others, but when

it is lucky enough to fall into Rutman's 'Maylech'l' [mouth], it gets the only proper treatment."

His curiosity aroused, the choir leader watched intently for Rutman's recitation of that prayer. To his surprise he realized, that while Rutman was indeed beginning with a phrase from the composition of Weintraub, suddenly switching signals he continued with a passage from Moshe Ber's version and so it went back and forth. He lifted the best from both alternately and the end result was a recitative, that bore no resemblance to either, but nonetheless was a tremendous hit with the listening worshipers.

Equally did he take the beginning of Weintraub's "Umipney Chatoeynu" and combined it with the latter part of Peyse Chotiner's musical treatment of the same prayer and in his hand it became a masterpiece of liturgical art.

Mevinim (expert critics) were of the opinion, that when he was in a good mood, it was possible to detect in his variations the sounds of a whole forestful of bird-nests on a bright summer morning.

He took Nisi Belzer's "Veal Hamedinos" and for a while stuck to the notes as written by the great master. But halfway through the text he turned in a different direction, interpolating musical phrases from some other source or perhaps of his own fantasy and then suddenly changing course again with a dexterity of a magician he was once more back on the track of Nisi's original version. The effect was exhilarating.

When he was the cantor of Bobroisk, the funeral of Dr. Freitag was attended by the whole community. He was the mayor of the city and as a physician not only treated poor people free of charge, but even provided them with medicine at his own expense. And not only did he give assistance in the form of his professional services, but if the patient needed post-medical recuperation in some institution he provided the required financial means too, from his own pocket.

No wonder, therefore, that when he passed away the whole city mourned the great humanitarian mayor. The gubernator (governor) and all city officials came to pay him the final tribute.

Rutman officiated and his chanting of the laments of the burial ritual made a deep impression upon all the Christian dignitaries. He received a personal letter of thanks from the governor, in which he extolled Rutman's contribution to the solemnity of the funeral by writing that he was moved to tears by his rendition of the "Moley" (Dirge).

Rutman was engaged by the New Lots Talmud Torah of East New York for the High Holy Days of 1939. A choir had already been elected prior to his appointment. It was the ensemble under the direction of the leader Laskin.

As is customary, the cantor and choir got together to discuss the repertoire to be prepared for the services of the oncoming Days of Awe. Rutman had his own ideas about the compositions which are worthy to be chanted.

But the leader, who did not make a living from his musical activity and was not in a position to spend a lot of time and effort in revamping his

standard repertoire, was reluctant to start rehearsing new compositions, which were unfamiliar to his singers.

One of the bones of contention was the "Lechu neraneno" being recited at the "Slichoth" (forgiveness) midnight ritual. Laskin's choir knew and always sang the one by Boruch Schorr. Rutman had a poor opinion of that compostion and insisted on one of his own choice. He also wanted the choir to chant his own "Bemotzoey." The impasse was not resolved.

Rutman left in a huff and sent the choir leader a letter in which he wrote, that Schorr's "Lechu neraneno" isn't worth the paper it is written on and Laskin ought to give the music sheets of that worthless composition to the owner of a delicatessen store for the purpose of wrapping in them the herrings, which he is selling to his customers.

In the interim, up came the Sabbath on which the month of Elul is being announced. On that Sabbath it is customary for the congregation to introduce to the worshipers the cantor, whom it had appointed as their "Sheliach Tzibur" (emissary) for the high holy days.

Aryeh Leyb was on hand and officiated with the assistance of the choir. But one of the soloist boys misbehaved at the altar and nervous as the cantor was and angry at the leader to the bargain, he slapped the unruly singer in the face. A scandal ensued and the most irate and outspoken criticism of Rutman's action was voiced by Laskin, whose son happened to be the boy who got slapped.

The choir leader now declared that it was either he or Rutman. The congregation chose to retain Laskin and to settle with Aryeh Leyb his contract which called for a compensation of $1500.

The President Jacobowitz, offered to pay him $500. He insisted on $1000. The president of the cantors' association, Jacob Rappaport was called in to mediate the dispute.

Meanwhile the congregation on the lookout for a substitute cantor for the fast approaching important festivals, found a suitable candidate in the person of Mordechay Nemensky, who was well known to them, having at one time served as their steady cantor.

Having at that late date still not found employment, he was glad to accept the offer of his former congregation to pay him $1500 for the High Holidays.

When Rappaport found out that Nemensky was negotiating with the "New Lots Talmud Torah" and was willing to accept $1500 for his services, he bawled him out for underhanded behavior on three counts: "How dare you," he lectured him "negotiate with a congregation, which signed an agreement with another cantor?"

"Secondly, I am the president of the cantors' association and was called in to mediate a settlement. How dare you go behind my back and try to sign a contract before I succeed in settling the matter to the satisfaction of the two concerned parties?"

"And thirdly, what is this I hear that you are willing to sign up for $1500? Meshuga Meine Sonim? (Are you off your rocker?) A great cantor

like you? Did you sink that low already?"

This latest stinging rebuke was the clincher. Nemensky upped his asking price to $2500. At the same time Rappaport egged on Rutman to stick by his demand of $1000 in return for releasing the congregation from its contract with him.

The congregation was thus caught in a pincer movement. The maneuvers of the sly Yankel Rappaport resulted in the appointment of himself as the cantor for the holidays in return for which he promised to persuade Rutman to accept $700 as settlement in full of his claim.

When Aryeh Leyb and especially his better half Sorke, who was a "Breindele" cossack type, balked, Rappaport reminded them, that this was not Warsaw, but America and he was lucky to get anything. "And moreover," he told him "there would be another position for you at the Malta Street synagogue. The officers of that congregation can only afford to pay you $500. But having received already as settlement $700, you will have a total compensation of $1200 for the High Holidays, which under the circumstances should be quite satisfactory to you." Willy-nilly Rutman yielded. The only loser was Nemensky who was left without any position because in his vanity he fell for the flattery of Yankel Rappaport.

Shalom Tzvi Zemachson, one of the greatest authorities and renowned author of liturgical works said in rather bluntly comparing one of the very popular cantors with Rutman: "Whereas the famous cantor, who shall remain unnamed begins with gold and finishes with excrement, with Rutman the exact opposite is the case. He starts out with (you should excuse the expression) what we call in Hebrew "Tzoah" and finishes with gold. Like a real thoroughbred he comes from behind to finish with a flash. He begins pianissimo and closes with sparks flying. He comes in like a lamb and goes out like a lion."

When he was the yearly cantor in Detroit, the prominent cantors David Katzman and Mendel Shapiro came to hear him conduct the Sabbath Morning service. They were very disappointed. Rutman was not in the mood and made short shrift of the whole ritual.

After the conclusion of the prayer session the visiting cantors could not hide their feeling of frustration and frankly told Rutman that they had walked a great distance, hoping to hear something from him. So being fully aware of their presence in the synagogue, how come he ran through the whole rite like the Shames (sexton)?

"For them I should daven?" Rutman replied pointing to his congregation. "What do they understand about "Chazzonuth?" "For you I will daven," he continued. "Come with me to my home for 'Kiddush' and I will repeat the whole service 'a la Rutman.' " And true to his word after a tasty Sabbath meal he regaled his colleagues with all the Sabbath musical goodies in his arsenal.

In his early years he made frequent forays into the province towns and villages. It was as an outcrop of just such an excursion into the "hinterland" that he was literally grabbed and not let go of by the Jewish community of Krementchug, as if he was a pot of gold.

The highly respected and beloved cantor of that city for quite a span was Avremele Orenstein. His constituents thought the world of him and the feeling was mutual.

Avremele couldn't have wished for a more appreciative congregation. It held him in high esteem and showered him with deep affection and superlative compliments as well as with tangible tokens of their steadfast loyalty and gratitude.

The idea of leaving his comfortable post would've never even entered his mind, were it not for the outbreaks of pogroms in the early eighties of the nineteenth century which did not spare the vicinity of his town either.

This suddenly developing rash of antisemitic hooliganism impelled him to have second thoughts about the advisability of continuing in his post. His instinct told him that it would be the better part of wisdom to make a change.

Acting on his conviction that things are more likely to get even worse than to right themselves, he decided on a sudden impulse to fold his tent and get out.

Being that all roads of the fleeing victims of the bloody excesses were at that juncture leading to the new continent overseas, he too took a boat to America.

His congregation was taken by surprise by his unexpected sudden departure. Not being able to make peace with the "fait accompli," they set in motion a great campaign to persuade their beloved cantor to change course and return to them.

They sent word to him, that they would wait a whole year for him before they would even give any thought to the choosing of another cantor to fill the created vacancy.

It was their calculation that Orenstein, being a very pious Jew, would not easily take to the ways of the materialistic new world and after having had his fling, he would after a while prefer the home atmosphere, to which he had become accustomed and be glad to return to the fold.

Alas it turned out to have been a forlorn hope. Avremele became acclimatized to the golden land, influenced and encouraged strongly in his resolve by the members of his family. He soon found his right niche in the fraternity of his colleagues in New York, where he served several prominent congregations with distinction and after his retirement in 1940 he lived to the ripe old age of 104.

But true to their resolve his congregation waited for a whole year in the vain hope that he would change his mind and come back to the hearth.

Only after the expiration of the grace period did they admit aspirants to the pulpit to give auditions. Dozens came and went. Krementchug was a valuable plum and prominent cantors tried their luck, but none of them made the grade. The people invariably shook their heads, remarking with disappointment in their voices: "It's not Avremele!" It seemed a hopeless case and it looked like the orphaned "Omud" would remain unoccupied a long while. For the stalwart fans of the "chazzon," who deserted them, nothing would do but another Avremele, and there seemed to be no such

candidate to be found anywhere.

But as the saying goes "Gott iz ah footer," (God is a father) and just when man is about ready to give up already, help appears out of nowhere.

So one day a young man blew into town claiming to be a cantor from Poltava and asking the "Gabbay" of one of the small houses of prayer to allow him to make arrangements for giving a "Mincha-Maariv" concert. It was none other than, as you might have already guessed, our Aryeh Leyb.

Since admission was by ticket only, not too many came to the prayer session, which was held on a plain Wednesday to boot. Who has the time and, more importantly, the money to spend on an unknown wayfarer?

But the adventurous small crowd that did wager on the "dark horse," found that they hit the jackpot. They heard a "Mincha Maariv" of extraordinary artistry and passionate fervor. They couldn't get over it.

They came out from the "Beth Hamedrosh" singing the praises of the stranger in most enthusiastic terms. They alerted the whole town. "Here is a veritable sorcerer," they told all and sundry "and he was sent to us from heaven."

Naturally, with the whole town agog, the trustees of the central synagogue prevailed upon the so extolled Aryeh Leyb to remain for Shabbos and chant the devotional rites.

The upshot was that the congregants shouted "Eureka! We have found him. The only one who is worthy and able to fill the shoes of Avremele." They didn't let him out of their sight until they made him sign on the dotted line and that's how Krementchug acquired as their new cantor Aryeh Leyb Rutman.

And sure enough it didn't take long before he made the Jews of Krementchug forget their adored Avremele. It was now Rutman, who had brought off the feat of completely capturing their hearts.

At the time when he was serving as cantor in St. Petersburg, the head of the Royal Conservatory advised the students of voice-culture to go and listen to the cantor of the Guinsburg Temple.

Among those who came to hear him was also the famous tenor Mazini, who was so impressed and enchanted, that he remarked that Rutman's throat was something very special, almost super-human. His trills sounded like that of a bird and his breath control was remarkable. He could hold a note for a minute and a half. Quite a feat.

He was invited to a small town for a guest appearance. He conducted the Sabbath services, but he ran through the prayers like any everyday-Jew and one-two-three he was done. The worshipers were stupefied by his antics.

The leaders of the congregation went to the Rabbi with their complaint. "We brought down Rutman at great sacrifice to the community at an exorbitant fee and he made 'Choyzek' [fun] of us, short shrift of the whole Sabbath devotion, saying nothing."

The Rabbi decided that Rutman should recite a certain psalm "Thilim" on the stoop of his house. The word went out to the congregants to assemble in front of the Rabbi's residence, where the guest-cantor would



compensate them for the debacle of the holy day of rest. After his impromptu open-air performance everybody was happy.

In 1922 he was engaged by the Forest Ave. Congregation of New York. He had to come in from the Rockaways, where he spent the summer. As often was the case with him, he this time too was late for the Slichoth (midnight) ritual. The worshipers were there and so was the choir, but there was no sign of the cantor. After waiting for an hour, the president motioned to the sexton to mount the "Shtender" and begin the service. Suddenly Rutman rushed in breathlessly. Up he strode to the podium and roughly pushing aside the already chanting "imposter," he began with the finishing sentence of the introductory prayer of "Ashrey:" "Veanachnu nevoreych Koh, meato vead olom Hallelujah," whereupon the bezgramatno (unmusical) quartet chimed in with an accord of such false notes, that in his rage Rutman turned to the leader and in a loud voice said: "Herr Kapelmeister (Mr. orchestra master) let me chant the entire 'Slichoth' service by myself and after I'll be all through, you may sing as long as you want."

He once brought the choir leader Brody and his ensemble for an audition to a meeting of the ritual committee, at the same time whispering into the ears of the President, "And if you don't like him, I can bring you some more 'Kalikes' [cripples] 'Klotz'es.'"

An old member of the Thatford Avenue "Ohav Sholom" Congregation of Brownsville, Brooklyn recalls with nostalgic sighs the time when Rutman was the cantor of that prestigious synagogue. The recitation of the "Hoshanos" on the Succoth festival was one of the highpoints where his artistry shone brightly. "No cantor in the whole wide world," declares this veteran "Meyvin" of chazzonuth, "can even come near Rutman in his incomparable chanting of the 'Hoshanos.' "

He had a new set of teeth made. But when he came Friday evening to officiate in the "Slonimer synagogue" of Norfolk Street, the brand new plate fell out. That mishap of course ruined his service. At the conclusion, he turned around to the worshipers and said: "You must excuse me. This evening I sang on my basso voice, but tomorrow I'll chant with my tenor voice."

The following incident occurred after new cantors began arriving and Rutman's star was already fading. But he still had stalwart patriots. One of them, a Mr. Feitel arranged for him a Sabbath service in the "Kalvarier synagogue" on Pike Street. Since the passing of the great Israel Cooper, that synagogue had been on the downgrade.

He brought with him the choir of Meyer Machtenberg, who was familiar with his repertoire like the "Mimkomcho" of Pitze Abrass etc. Friday evening he rolled out his big gun (Kanyok) "Lo Sevoyshi" (be not ashamed). He was in very good form and made such a hit, that at the conclusion of the service the people broke out in loud applause.

The Rabbi thereupon kept knocking with the psalm of his hand on the surface of his "shtender." "What is this?" he thundered, "applauding in a house of worship?"

Now Rutman got up his Irish and rose saying: "Nishkoshe! It's perfectly all right. Why not? Applaud all you want! The 'soldatkelech' and the 'Feiferlech' are nowadays marching at the head of the popular parade (Hershman was called "Motke Soldat" and Rosenblatt's main forte was his "Feiferl" the falsetto) and think that they are the only smash trump cards. Let them know that there is still a Rutman to contend with."

He blamed them for his eclipse and at every opportunity would belittle their talents. Especially was he critical of Hershman, who in his opinion possessed not much else besides his beautiful voice. But there came a time, when he felt obliged to revise this estimate of his colleague's merit.

Hershman came to the Forest Avenue synagogue in the Bronx for a guest appearance. When he entered the synagogue on Sabbath morning and saw Rutman (who lived in that neighborhood) he remarked to the choir leader, "Oy ah klug!" "Oh! woe is me! the 'Meshugener' is hounding me here too? What ill wind blew him in to my hard luck?"

But he need not have been concerned and worried. If admittedly in his early years in America he was not great shakes as a cantorial artist, he did make great strides and ripened into a master interpreter of the prayers, as he grew older. Rutman always spoke his mind and gave the devil his due and what he on that Sabbath heard from Hershman was enough to change his mind. He ran over to him after the conclusion of the "Schacharis" part of the ritual, and exclaimed for all to hear, "Motke! I must confess that you have at long last become a truly great Chazzan."

Not long after Aryeh Leyb arrived in America, he officiated at a Sabbath devotion in the Bialystock synagogue of Willett Street and soon after that in a large hall, which was located across the street from the "Ohab Zedek" congregation on 116th and Lenox Avenue. His fame spread through New York like forest fires and a great multitude of people came to hear him, among them a great number of cantors.

He went to town in earnest and gave generously from his God-given talent. He capped his smash performance with a "B'rich Shemay" (may be blessed the name) which was the ultimate in virtuosity.

When he finished this prayer, which concludes the first part of the Sabbath morning service, the prominent cantors Meisels, Kirchner and Kanevsky rushed over and in enthusiastic enchantment they hoisted him up to their shoulders with Kanevsky lifting his eyes heavenward and exclaiming: "Lord, if you were a cantor, even you would be unable to top Rutman's artistry."

His first yearly position was with the congregation Kehilath Yeshurun of East 85th Street, but when the choir was dismissed because of a regrettable occurrence, he too left in a huff and transferred to Detroit.

But soon after that, he came back to New York for a Sabbath rite at the "Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol" of Norfolk Street. When the news broke, that Rutman will officate, such a huge mob streamed to the synagogue, that police had to be called out to restore order. But as it turned out they had all come for nothing, because Rutman had contracted a cold and was in no condition to go on. The guest appearance had to be

postponed for a week. But then he paid up double for the delay.

A melancholy footnote was related by Rabbi Horowitz, an intimate friend of Rutman. He was already over the hill, when the Rabbi one day happened to meet up with him. "You look so sad and disheartened, what is the matter?", the Rabbi inquired. "My dear friend!" Rutman replied, "When I had the goods, I didn't want to give out and now that I would gladly give, I haven't got the goods any longer."

He passed away on Friday, Elul 8 1935 at his summer cottage in Far Rockaway and was interred at Mount Zion Cemetery.

CHAPTER 18

KISHINEV

Kishinev, one of the principal centers of Jewish song — Famous cantors began their careers in that city — Nisi Belzer officiated in the Turkish Synagogue — How Pinye Minkowsky became the successor of Nisi, his teacher — He switches over to the pulpit of the temple in Kishinev — But he is obliged to quit the city and he flees to Cherson — The high point of Pinye's career in Odessa.

Having now concluded our visit to Odessa, we have another goal, to wit: an excursion to another great center of cantorial art, so that we may learn at first hand what is going on there, which in turn will enable us to acquaint you with some significant occurrences in the world of Chazzonuth.

So we should be on our way. But in this instance, it is a long way off. The distance to be covered is of such huge proportions that even with a jet airliner it would take us quite a while to reach our destination. Moreover, it so happens that the High Holy day season is fast approaching and how can one, and particularly if he happens to be a cantor, even contemplate setting out at such a time on such a lengthy journey?

But where there is a will, there is a way. We saddle our mythological wonder horse Pegasus, mounting his broad back and holding on for dear life to his iron wings and, hayda! we are off. We are flying and the Medusa offspring carries us with the speed of light to where we wish to go. We do not even have to utter a word. He can read our mind. We are galloping over mountains and valleys, over rivers and oceans, over cities and countries. We leave behind in rapid succession entire continents and even generations. It is a wonderful experience. We are flying at such a fantastic

speed, that we seem to be standing still. We go around the world and see the many wonderful places without even having had to purchase a ticket and before we know it we have already arrived at the destination of our flight.

We are descending from the clouds and to our amazement we find ourselves in the middle of the capital of Bessarabia — Kishinev — the exact spot we had aimed for. The elapsed traveling time, a mere few seconds. Isn't it marvelous? Now before we go any further, let's look around, learn something about the country, about its turbulent history.

In 1812 Yekaterina the Great annexed the Moldavian province of Bessarabia. After the conclusion of World War One in 1918 it was returned to Roumania. However, according to the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939 Russia was to gain possession not only of Bessarabia but also of Northern Bukovina with its capital Chernowitz. When Roumania balked, Stalin sent her an ultimatum demanding that she hand over the provinces within twenty-four hours or face the consequences. Confronted with the threat of war, Roumania was forced to yield and the territories were incorporated in 1940 into Russia. Bessarabia was made one of the Soviet Republics under the name of Republic of Moldavia and Northern Bukovina was made an integral part of the Soviet Ukraina.

Bessarabia historically and ethnically belonged to Moldavia, which in 1859 merged with the Volach tribes, thus forming the linguistically as well as ethnically almost completely uniform Rumania.

Bessarabia — a Soviet Moldavian Republic instead of an integral part of Moldavia, which it historically has always been, constitutes a cynical spoof played on the Rumanian people and brutal utter disregard of the just aspirations of the sovereign Rumanian state. But what can you expect from perfidious "fonye ganef?" To take our mind off the depressing thoughts let us take a stroll through the streets of the city. Maybe here we'll get more cheerful, pleasant information. But alas and alack it does not seem very likely. I'm afraid we are in for some even worse data. Ominous recollections intrude into our consciousness. Is this actually the famous Kishinev? Or shall we use the adjective, infamous? For is there anybody who has not heard of Kishinev? Wasn't that name at one time splashed in huge headlines across the front pages of newspapers all over the world?

It was a sad, lamentable occurrence that put Kishinev on the map and caused the city to become the talk of humanity in all corners of the world. It happened in the year 1903. Krushevan, the editor of "Bessarabetz," at the instigation of and with the close collaboration of the head of the ruling national cabinet — the Jew-baiting Van Plehve, and with the connivance of the governor of Bessarabia, Von Rabin, organized the peasants and the Muzsiks and prepared them for patriotic action against the foreign, separatist element, the meaning of which phrase was only too clear to all concerned. When his intensive indoctrination seemed to Krushevan to have sufficiently caught on and he thought that the opportune moment for carrying out his devilish project had arrived, he sent out circulars openly

conveying to his hoodlums the joyous news that the Batyushka (dear father), the Tzar, had graciously granted permission to his beloved subjects to let off some steam and stage a nice little pogrom with the despicable Jews as the victims.

The date for the pleasurable event was set for the three days of the Easter festival. It had been well rehearsed like a well staged theatre production. Detailed instructions were given in the widely distributed pamphlets, even down to the explicit notification that the signal for the beginning of the punitive action would be given by an agreed upon code, transmitted by the sounding of the church bells.

Like an experienced stage manager or like an ingenious general, Krushevan had mapped out his strategy with meticulous care. He deployed his obedient army of hooligans in strategic positions, ready to strike at the given signal. On the sixth day of April, the bells kept ringing, giving the signal to the bestial, incited mob to overrun the Jewish quarters, murder the defenseless "exploiters of the people and enemies of the fatherland" and pillage their ill-gotten possessions and put to the torch their homes. The whole world reacted with horrified indignation. President Theodore Roosevelt in a message to Tsar Nicholas II, strongly condemned the massacre and demanded severe punishment of the perpetrators. The Tsar ignored the protest of the President.

But that was not the end of the story. It was not a one performance show. The base actions of the scoundrels and murderers were so successful that the organizers thought that a repeat performance, a second presentation of the identical bloody scenes was indicated. So they made all the necessary preparations and arrangements for another, improved version of the play, which took place on schedule two years later, with equally excellent results, at least as far as the cruel, damnable, bloodthirsty instigators were concerned. The second edition of the horror-play evoked a universal outcry of revulsion and this time the American Congress adopted a resolution accusing the Russian government of aiding and abetting the criminals in their wanton enterprises, and when the pogroms continued unabated President Taft in 1911 in retaliation rescinded the trade pact with Russia.

But enough of these horrendous, nightmarish tales. The Kishinev which we are now visiting, presents an entirely different appearance, it looks peaceful and safe. Nobody in this city had yet heard of a brute by the name of Krushevan, or a Van Plehve and a Von Rabin, for that matter. There are still quite a number of years left before the nineteenth century will be ready to give up its ghost. At that time, Kishinev counted approximately forty thousand Jews among its inhabitants, who lived in complete harmony with their Gentile neighbors, who in their wildest dreams could not have imagined that there was a possibility of a potential pogrom directed against their Jewish friends.

When there was a protracted dry spell, the farmers would turn to their Jewish friends, importuning them to go to their synagogues and say "Thilim," recite psalms and pray for rain. In any serious crisis, they were

apt to seek out the Jewish Rabbi and solicit his wise counsel, for they believed in his power more than in that of their own priests.

Because of the harmonious relationship between the two peoples, the question naturally arises, how things could have deteriorated to the point where massacres were committed by the very peasants on the innocent people, who not so long ago were their esteemed friends. The enmity of the Gentile population toward the Jews had not evolved spontaneously. Rather had it been artificially injected. The poison of hatred and hostility was methodically fed over the years to the naive Moldavians and infused into their hearts in regular doses by scoundrels, who had an ax to grind.

In an effort to divert the attention of the enslaved, poor devils from the misdeeds of the tyrannic high echelons that were responsible for their miserable status and their inadequate standards of living, they used the convenient device of pointing to the damnable Jews as the source of all evil and as the cause of all their difficulties. The anti-Semitic propaganda machine worked with such persistence and with such an elaborate organization, employing hordes of professional agents to drum ceaselessly into the ears of their audiences the fiery slogans of hatred, that they gradually overcame the reluctance and the natural inclination of the common folk to trust their neighbors. They succeeded instead in making them believe the libelous allegations about the so-called "treachery" of the Jews.

But even with all the various means and publicity media at their disposal and notwithstanding their continuous spreading of fabricated "evidences" and rumors, they failed to convince the more intelligent and better educated citizens and to persuade them to join their ranks and take part in the bloody riots designed to liquidate or at least to crush the evil Jews.

They appealed only to the lowest instincts of the ignorant rabble, the guttersnipes, the dregs of society. The orders came from the government. As the saying goes: "the bad odor of a dead fish originates from its head." Not only did the authorities not lift a finger to stop the outrages but they even assisted in perpetuating them. But only the lowest element, led by governmental instigators, were actively involved. The upper classes would have nothing to do with violence and condemned the actions in no uncertain terms. In many of the cities where the professional rabblerousers attempted to stage similar outbreaks, they were obliged to import professional terrorists to perform the criminal deeds, for the simple reason that they could not find anybody among the local citizens who were willing to perpetrate acts of violence against their Jewish neighbors.

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In the era with which we are concerned, Kishinev was a congenial place in which to live with no sign of the kind of Machiavellian intrigues which years later brought in their wake such grave consequences.

The Jews led a pretty good life there. The rich soil of Bessarabia yielded a bountiful harvest of wheat, corn, vegetables and fruits. Corn meal was a particularly popular staple used in various forms in the preparation

of Roumanian delicacies, and all these gifts of a benevolent nature were so abundant that they were available at ridiculously low prices, which even the most indigent could afford. Wine was generally used for quenching one's thirst in place of water. The rich fodder of the farms made for choice meat products, high grade animal hides and various other valuable by-products that greatly benefited the economy of the territory, which was the envy of its neighbors. No wonder that throughout the years it continued to be the coveted pawn in the rivalry between Russia and Roumania and they fought bloody wars for its possession.

As for the role which the Jews played in the economy of the country, it was an important one. They had no reason to complain about their financial status. Most of them made a good living and their congregational dignitaries also reaped some benefit from the general prosperity of the membership.

The Bessarabian Jews loved to show off with their affluence. At a joyous family occasion, they used to go all out in celebrating the event and giving expensive parties for the entertainment of their invited guests. Lavish parties, arranged in grand style, were the order of the day. Not only was a sumptuous meal with every kind of rich food served in overflowing quantities at these affairs to satisfy every conceivable taste, but they were also considerate enough to provide some spiritual food for the soul. The chants of the cantor and his "Kappelye" were an indispensable feature of all "Simchas" (joyous affairs). No social or family celebration was complete without their participation. Their presentation of a varied program of songs, suitable for the occasion, was an essential treat provided by the host and designed to put his high spirited guests in the proper festive mood. That the cantor and his assistants did not go home emptyhanded goes without saying. They made hay while the sun of merriment and cheerfulness was shining and the yield of these fringe benefits was substantial.

As was the custom in the Ukranian city of Berditchev, here, too, a plate was passed around, but unlike their Russian co-religionists who used to drop a few kopeks into the collection dish, the Bessarabian sports were in the habit of throwing in precious silver coins and if they happened to be in an unusually good mood even a paper banknote was liable to find its way into the utensil containing the concrete tokens of appreciation of the celebrants for the entertainment furnished by the singing ensemble.

The cantor was a highly regarded, important factor in the life of the community, whose services were sought after in every walk of life, greatly appreciated and rewarded.

Kishinev, just as Berditchev and Odessa, was considered a stronghold, one of the primary bastions of "gefeel chazzonuth," which placed the emphasis on depth of feeling, on the stirring up of the soul and the moving of the hearts of the praying worshipers to exalted religious fervor, as against the "chazzonuth haseyder" (or order) school of thought which originated with the communities of Western and Central Europe and which had as its principal aim the introduction of modern musical prin-

ciples and orderly processes into the liturgical ritual. To make sure that they should be consistent with generally accepted musical rules and current fads was a more weighty consideration than the soul of the song and the effect, the spark of devotional ecstasy conveyed by the reader to the congregation, on whose behalf he was praying.

Kishinev was an entrenched fortress of Chazzonuth, where young and old, men and women, whether scrupulously pious or freethinking, were apt to break out anywhere, any time, in songs, which they heard in the synagogue from their beloved cantor and where no Jews could enjoy the pleasures of the leisure and the rich foods of the Sabbath, or a festival, before they filled up their hearts and souls with the enchanting melodies of the cantor and choir in the house of worship. In the old holy edifices of Kishinev, even the walls and the benches sang, having absorbed in the course of many years the wondrous, heartrending, traditional chants of some of the greatest exponents of liturgical art, who functioned at their pulpits.

A great number of cantors, who eventually soared to world fame, began their careers in Kishinev. There they served in their formative years, in the course of which they gained experience to further their careers. Kishinev was the most suitable testing ground for their talents, a convenient place for making the preparations that are essential for conquering new horizons in their ambitious march to recognition and fame. In the genuinely Yiddish, tradition-true, song-filled, chassidic environment of that old musical city, they had the opportunity to incorporate into their repertoire the beautiful, tingling, melodic, feelingful "Nigunim" (table songs) which were heard in the courts and "Kloizes" of the wonder Rabbis. Here they also had a chance to learn the age-old "Nuschuos," the traditional modes in their original, pure form, as they had been handed down from generation to generation, and preserved for posterity and in which somber and moving strains the deeply religious devotees used to pour out their hearts in joy and in sorrow.

They also learned the characteristic, nostalgical "Volach" (Moldavian) tunes, dongas and "Doynes" which have already become part of the music sung in Jewish homes and which managed in time to penetrate even the walls of the synagogue, have eventually become an integral part of the ritual and the treasure of our liturgical heritage.

Kishinev was also the city where a cantor who was ambitious, had to complete successfully a postgraduate course, pass the rigorous tests and get "Smicha" (authorization) to be ordained, to get the approbation of the public. It was well known that the world at large had great confidence in the uncanny judgment and the ability of the Kishinev liturgical experts to take the measure of a cantor's competence. If they put their stamp of approval on a cantor, it gave him a considerably enhanced standing in the profession and influenced the musical world to take notice of his claim to be counted among the elite of the fraternity.

That was the main reason why talented cantors were eager to submit to the scrutiny of the discriminating, sensitive, sharp ears of these natural-

ly gifted critics, because they learned a great deal from the reaction of the Kishinev audiences to their presentations. They were fully aware that if they got a sympathetic reception in the Bessarabian capital, they were sure to be successful everywhere.

They learned, in a sense, the "art of haircutting" by practicing on the beards of the Kishinev experts, and only after spending several years of apprenticeship in study and in the gathering of experience in the inspiring atmosphere of the various chassidic kloizes (combination house of prayer, learning and socializing) which dotted the Jewish quarter of the city, the cantor felt at long last sufficiently prepared to qualify for a more prominent cantorial position. Later on, there was a possibility of going to still bigger positions with a good chance of ultimately making the grade and working his way to the top of the "Meleches Hakodesh" (the sacred craft).

Thus do we find among the roster of the cantors of Kishinev the names of such world-acclaimed giants as Yeruchem Hakoton, Nisi Belzer, Pinye Minkowsky, Zeidel Rovner, Zalman Rozumny, Avrohom Kalechnik, Yehuda Leyb Kilemnik, Froyke Shliepack, Yisroel Leyb Tkatch and Chayim Tzipris.

We have met some of them previously, either in Berditchev or in Odessa, but the lucky break of crossing their path once more affords us a new opportunity to record some additional data and incidents, which antedate the previously related happenings and had occurred in the earlier periods of their lives.

So let's greet our good friend Reb Nisi Belzer, whom we met already once before in Berditchev. But here, in Kishinev, he is still a very young man, at the threshold of a budding career. "Sholom aleychem," (peace be with you), Reb Nisi," we accost him with the traditional Jewish greeting. "Aleychom Sholom" (the same to you), he replies in a peculiarly hoarse, choked voice. According to a widely circulated legend, his originally good, normal voice had been wilfully ruined by Yeruchem, in whose choir he sang in his youth. The latter allegedly became envious of the young chorister, who showed such great promise, and fearing that he might grow up to be too great a competitor for him, Yeruchem made him take too high notes and forced his voice to unwarranted efforts, which overworked the vocal chords, causing a rupture in the tissues of the sensitive organs, with a resulting irreparable damage to his voice. But, as is the case with many other legends, there probably is nothing to substantiate this rumor either.

At his first cantorial position in Belz at the pulpit of the modest "Dovid Leyb's house of prayer," he surely was not living luxuriously, his remuneration having been all of three whole rubles a week. But even though his devotees of that first city, where he functioned in an official capacity, did not and most likely were not able to reward his services adequately, they made up for that deficiency by giving him a name, with which he was identified throughout his life and which proved to have been an invaluable asset, for by it he became known and revered all over the

world. According to Rabbi Simeon of Pirkey Ovos" (the ethics of the fathers), there are three cherished crowns, and the crown of a good name is the best of all. If that is so, then his first congregants of Belz would yet have some change coming to them from the cantor, whose family name of Spivack became entirely obscured and replaced by the monicker "Belzer."

The name Belz has a favorable ring. In a moral sense, in spiritual values it was rich and was pretty influential in the world of liturgy, although in material possessions it was pretty poorly endowed and financially it was not very lucrative for cantors. According to the terms of an agreement entered into with their cantor, Isserl Belzer, by the trustees of the "Beys Hamedrosh Hagodol" of Belz, the complete text of which still exists and bears the signature of twenty-nine officials, the chanting dignitary of the congregation was assigned a yearly salary of one hundred kerblech (rubles or leis) and even this paltry sum had to be scraped and gathered together from various sources. Half of it was raised by passing around the hat on the eve of the Day of Atonement when a plate marked "for the cantor and choir" was placed on the table for charitable contributions in the "polish" situated near the entrance to the sanctuary and the balance was raised by making out a list and taxing the members for that particular fund according to their ability to contribute.

Nisi made his mark in Belz and caught the attention of the musical world to such an extent that when in 1861 Yeruchem left his post and went to Berditchev, Nisi was appointed as his successor at the pulpit of the great central community synagogue of Kishinev, which was also called the "Turkish Temple," for the reason that it had been erected in 1816, at the time when Bessarabia was still under the domination of the Sultan of the Ottoman empire.

In Kishinev, a broader field opened up for Nisi, whose principal talent consisted of the ingenious composition of liturgical works and of the masterful direction of his chorus. He succeeded in recruiting and surrounding himself with capable, gifted singers and he was a genius, a veritable wizard, in training them and bringing out the best in them. He soon gained such an enviable reputation that choristers considered it a rare privilege to serve under his baton and young men flocked to Kishinev from far and near to seek acceptance by Nisi of them as members of his famed choir.

One of these was even ready to trade the status of full-fledged cantor for a place in the master's singing ensemble. It was none other than Pinye Minkowsky. For eight weeks he had already managed to hold down a professional post as the cantor of the "Stepener Beth Hamedrosh" in his native city of Biyela Tzerkov, when he suddenly felt the urge to acquire more knowledge, and what better place could one find to acquire it than Kishinev where, according to reports, an exciting new rising star with fresh ideas and an individualistic style was riding high.

So he decided to journey to the Bessarabian capital, where he became one of Nisi's choristers. But once a cantor always a cantor and when on one occasion the master went out of town, Pinye taking advantage of his

absence used the opportunity to lead in the Sabbath devotion at the synagogue of Prokupetz (market place). His guest appearance evoked favorable comments from all the worshipers, who were quick to spread the news about the talented young man among their friends and neighbors.

When Nisi heard about it, he began taunting his ambitious tenor. Intent on taking him down a peg he found fault with everything he did and humiliated him before the other choristers. At the rehearsals, he used to pick on him, saying, "Such a 'drong', [musical ignoramus], such a 'Kalike' [cripple] has yet delusions of playing cantorial roles."

But in spite of the indignities of which he had become the target, Pinye, being fully aware that there was still very much room for improvement in his musical armor, stuck to Nisi in a determined effort to learn from the master as much as possible. When Nisi left his post in Kishinev and transferred to Berditchev to take over the pulpit vacated by Yeruchem, he followed him there too.

However, the Jews of Kishinev followed with great interest the career of the gifted member of Nisi's chorus, whose successful Sabbath service at the Prokupetz synagogue they still well remembered. Soon afterward, therefore, Pinye received a call from the trustees of the central synagogue of Kishinev, suggesting that he come over for an audtion, as he was being seriously considered for the cantorial post.

The way Pinye himself tells the story, this unexpected development so enraged his teacher and mentor, that Nisi had a tantrum and made a special trip to Kishinev in an effort to prevent his disciple getting the position. It seemed that Pinye was so valuable a singer to Nisi that his loss was too painful to contemplate. So he tried to use all his influence to minimize the chances of Pinye being elected, figuring that if he were unsuccessful in his attempt to win a cantorial post, he would continue to serve in his choir as heretofore. But Nisi's efforts were of no avail. Pinye's trial performance was successful and he was appointed to succeed his teacher at the pulpit of the Central Community Synagogue of Kishinev.

However, he did not function in his new capacity for a very long time. He had from the beginning difficulties with one of the leading lights of the congregation, a trustee by the name of Chayim Velvel, and therein lies a rather involved story, which calls for more detailed clarification, which we propose to do by filling in some background.

Kishinev Jewry was not very homogeneous, but consisted of several different groups, that were quite clannish and did not very much approve of each other's ideas. They frequently clashed in propagating their views and fought the other fiercely. Especially dominant in the city and representing two sharply divided poles of religious and social philosophy were on the one hand the adherents of the grand Rabbi of Tolna and the followers of the Chassidic saintly Rabbi of Bahoosh on the other. The hostility between the two camps was deep-rooted. Pinye, a Tolnaer Chosid, was naturally the favorite of all those, who were of the same orientation. This fact, automatically made him the natural target of the hatred of the Bahoosher camp.

The principal trustee and strong man of his congregation, Chayim Velvel, a devoted member of the latter group, was of course honor-bound to hound the cantor and make his life miserable, and this he did to the best of his ability. Pinye was supposed to get a salary of eight hundred rubles a year, but to try and get any money from the tightly closed fist of Chayim Velvel was like drawing water from a rock, which miracle only a Moses was able to perform. Having had to contend with the deliberate harassing tactics of the dictatorial synagogue officer, who seemed intent on making the state of affairs untenable for him, Minkowsky felt obliged to look for a way out.

Just about that time a group of the intelligentsia, liberal-minded, cultured professionals and members of high society, organized a sophisticated religious association and erected a modern choir temple. They approached Pinye, offering him the post of cantor in their new holy edifice with a yearly remuneration of a thousand rubles.

As it happened, his trustee, Chayim Velvel, just about that time was engaged in an elaborate and extensive renovation job on the old synagogue building. This was an additional indication to the cantor that his considerable arrears in salary payments were not very likely to be paid to him even in a trickle in the near future, but that there was a very good chance that the debt would increase still further before he would see a kopek of it. Under the circumstances, there was no other alternative open for him but to accept the proposition tendered him by the moguls of the new temple.

That a supposedly strictly religious young man, a Tolnaer chosid, who was a favorite of the revered head of the sect, Rabbi Dovid'l Tolnaer, and who was a descendant of the saintly author of "Tosfos Yomtov" should become a turncoat and go over into the camp of the free-thinking, "apikorsishe" temple Jews was the biggest scandal in the opinion of the Bahoosher devotees. They made the most of their God-sent opportunity to humiliate their opponents. They raised the roof, showering invectives upon the transgressor and holding up the Tolnaer camp to public ridicule, taunting them in violent, stinging terms in the most sarcastic fashion over the sensational defection of one of their staunchest pillars to what they called "Yiddishe Goyim" (the Jewish Gentiles).

There was no question about it. It was a serious blow to the prestige of the Tolnaer, who were dumbfounded and dismayed and obliged to hide their faces in shame. It was hard to believe that such a fine, strictly reared, young man would be capable of denying his past and officiating in a reform temple, garbed in gowns and pointed hats, closely resembling those worn by priests in the tzerkve's (churches).

Besides all these changes in the professional status of Pinye, in time there also inevitably occurred a distinct change in his private life and outward appearance as well. His former mode of living and dressing did not find favor in the eyes of his new bosses. They pointed out that a chief cantor of a modern, liberal temple could not follow the backward habits and customs of a "batlonish chosid" (a day-dreaming, shabby, poorly

groomed member of the extremist sect). They tried to impress upon their cantor that to wear sidelocks, broadbrimmed hats and long coats, characteristic vestments of Chassidim, was incompatible with the public image which they would like to see a congregational dignitary of theirs present to the world.

Realizing the validity of their logic, Pinye complied with their wishes and in gradual stages he executed the suggested change-over. His new facade differed so strikingly from his former self, that passers-by used to stop and gape at him in disbelief. The Bahoosher went out of their way to corner him to make fun of his transformation and to show their contempt for the converted "deutsch" (dressed like a German dandy). Things came to such a pass that Pinye was reluctant to show himself in the street.

Throughout this harassment, though, Pinye kept a stiff upper lip. But matters came to a head when one of the prominent members of the temple, a certain Dr. Leventhal, passed away. He was a very influential public personality, highly esteemed even in governmental circles. Not only were city officials expected to attend his funeral, but there was also a notification from the governor, that he too intended to pay his last respects to the deceased. In view of the general interest and desire to participate, it was decided by the arrangements committee of the temple to honor the meritorious leader of the community with a public funeral procession, which would pass through the streets with the rabbi, cantor and choir dressed in their resplendent clerical habits, leading the mourners and chanting appropriate prayers.

Well! That was all that the chassidim of Bahoosh needed. This was the last straw, which completed their case against the deserter, the renegade cantor. There was a thunderous outcry against such a sacrilege from the religious quarters, which shook the city to its foundations. It was the first time that such a profaning of the sacred burial ceremony had taken place in the city and the whole wrath and fury of the outraged overzealous chassidim descended upon the head of Pinye, whom they were almost ready to place in "Cherem," a state of excommunication.

The atmosphere became so explosive, that Pinye came to the conclusion that it would be healthier for him to pull up stakes and run for it, especially as he already had a destination. It was the city of Cherson, where a fine position was waiting for him. But even though he was held in high regard by the membership of his new congregation, who even went so far in accommodating him as to send him, at their expense, in 1881 to Vienna in a further effort to broaden the base of his musical knowledge, he did not tarry long in this position either. He keenly felt the need of a choir which had been denied him in Cherson, so he left.

We find him next in Odessa, sharing the pulpit of the great central synagogue with Zalman Rozumny. But he was not happy there either and when a call came to him from the New World, he eagerly responded, setting sail to New York to take over the cantorial post at the brand new Eldridge Street synagogue, "Khal Adass Yeshurun." He received a five-year contract with the unprecedented yearly salary of five thousand dollars.

But Pinye was not satisfied. In fact it turned out to have been a mismatch on both sides. From the start he had been oversold to the public and he could not deliver. He did not like the American Jews and they were not crazy about him either.

Luckily for him, whenever he found himself in a tight spot, somewhere a suitable vacancy opened up and came to his rescue. At this juncture, it occurred once more in Odessa, albeit in a different synagogue. The veteran Nisi Blumenthal, who had been a fixture of the Broder Synagogue of that city for as long as people could remember, was finally persuaded to retire and make room for a younger man. As chance would have it, when he was asked for his opinion as to who he thought was best qualified to fill his shoes, he named Pinye Minkowsky. That the hardpressed, disgusted Pinye grabbed this opportunity to bid good riddance to his unenthusiastic members, goes with saying. He shoved off at once, before they might change their minds.

Blumenthal was right. What he predicted came to pass. Pinye indeed proved to have been a happy choice, who filled the shoes of his great predecessor with rare competence and authoritative ability, knowledge and talent. Here he at last felt at home and was in his real element. Here he had a membership that understood and appreciated him and with whom he had a strong affinity. For over thirty years Pinye reigned supreme at the Broder Synagogue of Odessa. This was the high water mark, the pinnacle of his career.

We have it on the authority of the renowned "Rav Tzoir," (youthful sage) Rabbi Chayim Tchernowitz, who lived in that city and who was in a position to attest to the fact from personal observation, that no cantor anywhere and at any time enjoyed such high standing, esteem, prestige, affection, and reverence as did Minkowsky in Odessa. He was organizer and president of the "Hazamir" singing society and professor in the teachers' seminary.

In strictly religious circles, to be sure, dissenting, critical voices could be heard at the expense of the cantor of the Broder Synagogue. They suspected him of left oriented tendencies, as witnessed by his habit of running through the "Avoda" (sacrificial ceremonial) of the Day of Atonement service at such a hurried pace and neglectful fashion, as to give rise to the explanation that he did not believe in "Korbunos" (animal sacrifice offerings).

Some criticism was also expressed at his custom of skipping through the most popular prayers, where most cantors as a rule slow up to give their best chants and to which the women look forward as the most suitable occasion to shed a tear, as for instance the prayer of "Unesane Tokef" (We will celebrate the mighty holiness of this day).

On the other hand, he chose to emphasize with elaborate musical interpretation passages like "Veyesoyu" (All the world shall serve thee) and "Al Keyn Nekave" (We hope to speedily behold the glory of Thy might) which foresee the messianic era. Most cantors hardly ever pay any attention to these passages.

But even though this peculiarity of his evoked some dissatisfaction and grumbling, and there were some disgruntled members who characterized him for his unconventional modes as a "Tzu Lehachesnik" (one who deliberately does the exact opposite of what is expected of him, merely because he enjoys annoying and vexing people), he always commanded universal respect. There was no question about his sincerity, dignity and spiritual integrity. Inasmuch as it was a generally recognized, undeniable fact that he was a great scholar, an intellectual giant, who possessed an unusually rich store of knowledge of religious and scientific Hebrew, as well as secular erudition, and could hold his own even in a discussion with the most learned rabbis on matters of ritual law, even his most puzzling action was glossed over with the explanation, "Well, that's why he is Pinye Minkowsky, a non-conformist, with his own independent judgment. But he knows what he does and why he does it. There must surely be a logical reason for his procedure."

He was highly thought of, even by the Gentile population. At the time of the Bolshevik Revolution and the White Russian counter-revolutionary upheavals, when no prominent citizen of the city, and particularly if he happened to be a Jew, could steer clear of trouble and manage to evade imprisonment, his literary works came to the rescue of Pinye. The commissar, Bentzion Duchovny, before whom he was brought after having been arrested for alleged counter-revolutionary activities, happened to be a good Hebraist, something of a writer himself, who had read his articles in the periodical edited by "Achad Hoam," the "Hashiloach." He quickly disposed of the case, summarily dismissing the charges and ordering that Minkowsky be released at once, giving as his main reason, "I could not possibly throw into a prison cell the author of 'Kley Hazimroh B'yisroel' (The Musical Instruments in Jewish History)."

But conditions deteriorated under Bolshevik rule to such an extent that he felt obliged to send his wife to Paris, where his daughter, the wife of a prominent doctor of the Pasteur Institute, lived. He remained at his post, still hoping that things would right themselves, permitting him to go on with his activities as heretofore.

But when the "Yevsectzia," the Jewish Bolshevik membership, went so far as to turn the Broder Synagogue building into a Communist club, which they named after the German agitator, Rose Luxemburg, he knew that there was nothing left for him to look forward to and that it was time to get out.

His intimate friend, the great poet, Chayim Nachman Bialik, who by that time was living in the Holy Land, urged him to join him there, but family ties drew him to America. His four brothers and three sisters, as well as his father, Reb Motel Godis, had emigrated to the New World, and had been established for many years in Philadelphia. He had not seen any of them since they left Europe. His father, who was also a cantor, had passed away the year before at the age of 82. His brother William had also died. But there was still a large family in Philadelphia and a reunion with them after such a long absence was a fascinating prospect for Pinye. This

fact tipped the scale in favor of America. He arrived for the second time on a Friday, December 15, 1922, in the United States. He made his debut at a Sabbath devotion at the "Beney Reuben" Synagogue of Philadelphia. There followed a guest appearance at the "Roumanian Synagogue" of Rivington Street in downtown New York. For the Passover holiday, he was engaged to officiate at the Mariompol Synagogue, "Beth Sholom" of Chicago, and for the "Shevuoth" (Pentecost) services at the Talmud Torah Toras Moshe congregation of Prospect Avenue in the Bronx section of New York.

The net result was a lukewarm response on the part of the public. The prospects for a suitable position for the newcomer were not very bright. Having no alternative, he signed a contract to officiate on the following High Holy days in a seasonal, converted house of prayer in "Tammany Hall" of New York, which was a political club all year round. It was an ironical twist of fate, that a man who fought all his life against the profanation of the sacred cantorial craft should have been forced to conduct religious services on the holiest day of the year in a mushroom synagogue. He ultimately decided that he would not be able to go through with it and would much rather pay a fine to get a release from the promoter, which he finally obtained.

At the last moment he succeeded in finding a pulpit for the High Holy days in Boston, where he led the worshipers of the "North Russell Street Synagogue, Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol Beth Jacob," in the devotions of the holy season of the Jewish calendar. This congregation was financially not in a position to engage a cantor for all year round service so after "Succoth" Minkowsky was again at liberty. The cantors of Boston decided to arrange a grand concert for their celebrated colleague. So Pinye stayed on to await the affair.

One day when he was walking down the staircase of the hotel, he slipped and slumped down the flight of stairs. As he was not severely hurt, he thought nothing of it, but on the next day when the cantors came to see him about a scheduled rehearsal in preparation for the concert, they found him in bed in great pain and he had a high temperature. Greatly alarmed, they alerted his former pupil, Boris Moros, who had sung in his choir in Odessa and who at that stage of his career was professor of music in the conservatory of Boston and later became a big shot in movies. They also called to his sick bed a Dr. Kogan of Roxbury, who had also known Minkowsky in Odessa, and who diagnosed his malady as a neglected fracture of a bone and also found that septicemia (bacterial infection of the blood stream) had set in. The patient was taken to the Beth Israel Hospital in a critical condition where he died on Friday, January 18, 1924.

The members of the cantorial fraternity of Boston traveled with the casket containing the earthly remains of their deceased collegue until they got to New York, where members of the "New York Cantors Association" took over the watch and forming an honor guard accompanied the hearse with the lifeless body of the great master on its way to Philadelphia, where he was buried in the family plot in "Mount Nebo

Cemetery" near the graves of his father and brother. But strange to say, the inscription on his headstone contains no indication whatever, that he was a cantor in stark contrast to the prominently displayed word "Shatz" (Sheliach Tzibur) on the tombstone of his father. Such a deliberate omission on the part of his relatives surely does them no credit. Pinye was proud of his sacred profession and his family had every reason to take pride in it too.

His sudden death came only a few days before the grand concert of the "Jewish Ministers and Cantors Association of America" arranged in celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of its founding, at which Minkowsky was to be one of the principal soloists. The deep mourning of his bereaved colleagues was poignantly symbolized by the black-draped chair on the podium of the fully packed Madison Square Garden on which was placed Minkowsky's cantorial hat and robe, together with his ritual prayer shawl, on the silver band of which were weaved in the words, "Vehoyo k'menageyn hamenageyn" (And it came to pass when the singer intoned). Tears glistened in the eyes of all when the veteran Yechiel Alter Karniol, who at one time also functioned in Odessa, in a choked, broken voice chanted the memorial prayer for his departed colleague in the midst of the joyous festivities of the occasion.

Hardly had the "Shloshim," the thirty days of mourning for the beloved singer of Israel ended, when once again the grave diggers, armed with shovels, arrived at the cemetery plot of the Minkowsky family. Another brother, Avrohom Minkowsky, who was the cantor of the Congregation "Shaarey Zedek" of Detroit, felled by grief and heartbreak, followed Pinye in death on February 27th and was also buried near his dear ones in Philadelphia. He was only 54 years old, when the end came.

But to get away from the sad and tragic recollections, let us close this tearfilled chapter on a more cheerful note by quoting Pinye anent the relationship that existed between his teacher Nisi Belzer and his "Meshorer" (chorister), the mainstay of his ensemble, the famous basso "Nochum Matenko." "Nisi," said Pinye, "is a woodcutter and Nochum his axe." The world at large expressed the same opinion and thought by stating that "If not for Matenko, Nisi could not have functioned as a cantor." But the world too can be wrong sometimes, as witness the fact that Nisi did not throw in the towel, did not even think of shutting up shop, but carried on and even managed to go on to bigger things after Nochum left him to strike out on his own as a cantor at the synagogue which the Poliakoffs of Moscow built especially for him.

When Minkowsky's choir master, the renowned David Novakowsky, author of "Shirey David," a former disciple of Yeruchem Hakoton, was asked his opinion of the two great masters of Berditchev, he gave his evaluation of the outstanding representatives of the cantorial world in the following terms, "Yeruchem is a wonderful, highly gifted genius of traditional Jewish liturgical art. As for Nisi Belzer? Well, Nisi is a Litwak and enough said. (He is a Lithuanian which fact speaks volumes)."

CHAPTER 19

ZEIDEL ROVNER

The decree of the Makarover Rabbi caused Zeidel Rovner to embark on a cantorial career — His mother wanted him to become a rabbi — The Zaslaver "Shochet" had a hand in this mission.

Zeidel Rovner (1857-1943) was one of the brightest figures in the pleyade of famous cantors, whose shining example of reverent conduct and of dedication to principles may serve as a guideline and inspiration to cantors of our time and of generations to come.

The life story of this outstanding cantor abounds in moments that strongly resemble and are reminiscent of the wondrous and mysterious fashion in which the prophet Samuel was appointed to his holy mission. As related in the sacred scriptures, he was sleeping in the house of God when he heard a heavenly voice which called to him "Shmueil, Shmueil" and he replied, "Hineyni, I am ready."

The name of the hero of our story was also Shmueil. He was none other than Yaakov Shmueil Maragovsky, better known in the world as "Zeidel Rovner." He, too, was sitting in the house of the Lord — "al hatorah v'al huavoda" — immersed in the study and the practice of the laws of the Bible, when a heavenly call came to him, transmitted through the inspired mouth of a saintly rabbi, "Shmueil, Shmueil, you have been chosen to serve the Lord as a practitioner of the 'Mleches Hakodesh' [the holy craft] before the altar of the sanctuary. As did his namesake, this Shmueil, too, unhesitatingly complied and answered, "Hineyni, I am ready." On each and every Rosh Hashanoh and Yom Kippur thereafter, he repeated again and again the same "Hineyni" (Heoni Mimaas, I, the destitute of good deeds have come to supplicate thee.)

The name "Zeidel" had already become familiar to me in the earliest years of my life and thereby hangs a tale, a vivid memory from my childhood days. As it often happens, we children used to discuss among ourselves the question of what fields of endeavor we would choose to enter when we'll be grown up. My brother Avrohom, who was the first born, always prided himself on the fine quality of his voice and quite naturally declared that he expected to become a famous cantor. I, on the other hand, if I may say so without appearing too boastful, did excel with my pretty good "Gemoro Kep'l" (Talmudic perception) and it was my ambition to in time become a rabbi.

My sainted father habitually used to take down from the shelf one of the big fat partitura volumes as soon as the midday repast had been consumed and grace had been concluded. This accomplished, he summoned and if it became necessary even dragged my brother and me to the open folio and made us read the music of some well-known composer.

I must make a correction. My brother he did not have to drag to the book. To him, this ritual was a sheer delight and he used to look forward to the opportunity to learn music and to sing the compositions. Therefore, he ran with great gusto in response to my father's call for the musical interlude.

It was quite different with me. I had no desire for this exercise in futility, upon which I looked as an unnecessary and unwelcome nuisance. I always used to argue with my father and beg him not to include me in this practice. I pleaded with him, "I can well understand the need for learning music in the case of Avrohom, who intends to make cantorate his life calling. But for me, who hopes to embark on a rabbinical course, what advantage can there possibly stem from the study of cantorial compositions. Why should I waste my time on a subject which will never be of any use to me?" But it was no dice. My father would not budge, rejecting my arguments and protests by stating with categoric finality, "Never mind what you think. There is no such thing as a useless subject of learning. It is good to know everything. You can never tell when a certain knowledge of any science may be useful."

That my father's homely voice of experience did not convince me goes without saying, and if I did comply with his wishes in the matter it was certainly not with any great measure of enthusiasm. He literally had to drag me forcibly to the music partituras, which I hated. And thus it happened that I acquired a goodly measure of musical erudition in spite of myself, because of the farseeing eye of my father, who was a wise man, even though he was, as you might have already guessed, a cantor, a member of the professional fraternity which is not especially noted for its extraordinary insight and perspicacity.

The big books from which my father made us read contained compositions of many celebrated cantors of olden times and of contemporary famous craftsmen, which he had copied from the libraries of the cantors under whom he had served his apprenticeship in his youth. A goodly number of them were works from the pen of Zeidel Rovner, who was one

of my father's favorites. I received many slaps and had my ears boxed often enough for the mistakes which I made while reading Zeidel's notes for his name to have stuck indelibly in my memory.

The first time that I set eyes on Reb Zeidel was when he came to hear me recite the "Yom Kippur Koton" (miniature Day of Atonement) service at the "Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol" Synagogue of Norfolk Street, shortly after my arrival in New York. I was introduced to him before I was about to go up to the pulpit to officiate. He peered at me with a searching scrutinizing, quizzical look, measuring me from head to toe with a critical eye, remarking to me and to the people who stood around us, "I came to see who that 'Chutzpahnick' [nervy] young 'Schneck' [whippersnapper] was who had undertaken to perform this service. It is difficult enough to find someone even among old experienced cantors who can do full justice to it, let alone among the new crop."

After the conclusion of the service, he came over, pressed my hand warmly, and said in a loud voice, intended more for the group of professionals who pressed forward to hear his opinion than for my ears, "If I was able to sit through to the end and listen to your chants, it is the best proof that you know your onions and are well qualified to say 'Yom Kippur Koton' and you have my full approval."

It seems that Zeidel Rovner's attesting to my qualifications, the "Smicha" (professional authorization) which he graciously bestowed upon me, impressed the cantors, choir leaders and managers. The whole liturgical world looked upon him as one of the greatest authorities in the field, whose word carried considerable weight.

Having received his stamp of approval, I gained the reputation as something of a specialist in matters of Yom Kippur Koton. After that time, whenever a cantor was needed to lead in that particular service at concerts, it was considered a foregone conclusion that no matter who would be engaged for the Mincha or the Maariv services, for the Yom Kippur Koton service, which comes sandwiched between the two, the logical choice of the managers would be your humble servant. That honor was usually reserved for me for the most likely reason that there were few who wanted to tackle the risky task. Only I, as Reb Zeidel so poignantly said it, had the nerve and temerity to attempt it.

But I believe in the adage, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained," and in my daring enterprise I only followed the example set by Zeidel himself. He was not yet twenty-five years old, having been born in 1856 when he obtained his first position solely on the strength of just such a service. He came to Zaslow in the year 1881, chanted the prayers of "Yom Kippur Koton" on "Erev Rosh Chodesh Elul" (the day preceding the advent of the month Elul) and was promptly elected to the post of chief cantor of that city. This was no mean achievement for so young a cantor, especially in Zaslow. For in the front of the venerated altar of that sanctuary, the rostrum of which was built entirely of red brick, had for many years stood and prayed for his people the "Tzadik" (saintly) Reb Mordche'le Zaslover. He enjoyed such a high reputation that his pious, devout follow-

ers journeyed from the farthest corners of the country to Zaslov, just so that they could be privileged to hear the inspiring prayers of the High Holy day ritual, as they issued from the pure lips of Reb Mordche'le.

After he passed away, the congregation was unable to find a candidate, worthy and qualified enough to take his place. The membership became split into two camps, which could not see eye to eye and were unable to reconcile their differences in the question of choosing a successor. Violent quarrels broke out, which gradually degenerated to such an extent that the rabbinical authorities felt obliged to intervene and a "Beth Din," a religious court of law, placed the whole community of Zaslow in "Cherem" (state of excommunication). Finally, they succeeded in finding a device to break the deadlock. A compromise was reached. Both parties to the long raging controversy agreed to appoint a neutral arbitrator, who had taken no sides in the quarrel and enjoyed the full confidence of both camps. They would entrust to him the mission of searching for a suitable cantor who would possess the required virtues and abilities, and who would in his opinion rate the singular honor of filling the shoes of the revered and lamented, saintly Reb Mordche'le.

The man chosen for the thankless task of special emissary was Reb Yaakov, the head "Schochet" (ritually authorized slaughterer), a Makarov'er "chossid" (an adherent of a wonder rabbi). First of all he made a pilgrimage to the court of the grand rabbi of Makarov in order to solicit his advice. After listening to the presentation of the great responsibility which the messenger from Zaslov had assumed and the dilemma in which he found himself as a consequence thereof, the rabbi reassured him, saying, "I have just the right man for you. Go at once to Zeidel Radomishler and tell him in my name that he shall journey with you to Zaslov and pray at the altar, which was sanctified by Reb Mordchele. He will succeed in healing the division in the ranks of the congregation and find favor in the eyes of both sides, they will be reunited as a direct result of his prayers."

That is exactly what happened. His chanting of the "Yom Kippur Koton" service was so impressive, so full of sincere pathos and pious fervor, that all previous strife was forgotten. There was unanimous approval and satisfaction with the young candidate, whom Reb Yaakov had brought with him. Without a single dissenting vote, he was appointed to fill the coveted, vacant position in the holy synagogue of Zaslov.

How did Zeidel get to know the Makarover rabbi, and impress the saintly man so strongly that he thought of him as the most suitable individual for such an important post as the pulpit of Zaslov? The way it came about points up the providential aspect of the rise of Zeidel to world fame. It all began in Radomishel, the city of his birth, where there was, among others, also a "Kloiz", (combination house of prayer, of learning and of socializing) of the followers of the Makarover rabbi. There, the young boy used to sit day and night and study the Torah.

On all joyous occasions (and in a Kloiz, the devout always manage to find some cause for celebrating, imbibing and making merry) Zeidel, who had a sweet alto voice, chimed in, joining the "Chassidim" in their singing

of the beautiful and inspirational Makarover tunes, which were very popular in the chassidic world.

The head of the Makarover rabbinic dynasty was a musical genius. The way his followers related it, he did not create the tunes. They came to him by "Ruach Hakodesh," heavenly inspiration. Thus did he acquire the unique, ingeniously original Makarov musical version of the "Haggadah" which is sung at the Seder on Passover. How, why and when these celestial melodies reached the holy man of Makarov is shrouded in mystery. According to the legend, the souls of the five "Tanoim," the great sages, used to descend to the seder of the Makarover saint. A story in the "Haggadah" relates how once when in B'ney B'rak the big five were recalling the wonders of the deliverance of the Jews from the slavery of Egypt all night, they became so engrossed in their conversation that they did not even notice how time was flying by. They kept up their discussions and tales until their disciples arrived and called to their attention the lateness of the hour and the fact that it was time for the morning devotional prayers. The presence of these holy souls at the seder sessions of the Makarover rabbi was taken by his followers as an indication that the melodies handed down to him, which he used to sing on those nights for his celestial visitors, probably stemmed from them and that these tunes might be as old as that Passover ritual mentioned in the Haggadah, which was celebrated in the ancient city of B'ney B'rak.

Zeidel absorbed all these melodies of allegedly supernatural origin in the course of the long years which he spent in the Makarover Kloiz of Radomishel, and kept humming them while studying the sacred volumes and circulating among the chassidim, all of whom took a great liking to the young man who could sing their beloved tunes so beautifully. On one occasion (it was shortly before the High Holy Days) when they were getting ready to set out on their customary annual pilgrimage to the court of their venerated rabbi, Zeidel expressed a desire to join them and they readily agreed to take him along with them.

When they arrived in Makarov and were let into the presence of the holy man, Reb Yaakov Yitzchok Twersky, his patrons and mentors in introducing Zeidele, told the rabbi what a talented young man he was and with what deep feeling and sweet charm he was able to sing. The rabbi expressed the wish to hear him. Zeidel intoned a prayer from the Rosh Hashonoh ritual, "Ashrey ish shelo Yishkochecho" (Happy is the man that doth not forget Thee). When he had concluded his chant, the rabbi said, "I want you to lead the 'Slichos' (forgiveness) service in my Kloiz." Zeidel was taken aback by this unexpected development which frightened and confused him. He attempted to get out of this assignment, excusing himself for having to decline the great honor by professing to having no experience in the chanting of the midnight service and not knowing the "Nusach," the traditional liturgical tunes that are obligatory for those particular prayers. But the rabbi assured him, "Never mind. You will know them, God willing." What could he do? The rabbi's wish is a command, so he reluctantly complied. Somehow, to his own surprise, he man-

aged to do justice to the unfamiliar task. As it turned out, he did much better than he expected.

But if he thought that with this accomplished, his ordeal was over, he was greatly mistaken. There were more surprises in store for him. For on the following day, he was called in to the study of the rabbi who, after complimenting him on the ability, talent and competence which he revealed in his first test, proceeded to give him another, more trying one. "Zeidel," he concluded the interview, "you will officiate in my Kloiz on the "Yomim Norooim" (days of awe) at the "Mussaf" (supplementary) services."

"But rabbi," the distraught and bewildered Zeidel protested, "How can I, when I don't even begin to know how to chant the prayers of the Rosh Hashonoh and Yom Kippur services?"

"You will know, God willing," was the only answer he received from the saintly man.

Zeidel was in a state of perplexity when he was dismissed from the presence of the rabbi. He complained to his pals, that he couldn't see how he could possibly satisfactorily fulfill the mission, which the rabbi had given him, when he did not have the faintest idea how to go about it. At his urging, the chassidim of Radomishel went before the rabbi to plead the case of their protegee and to try to induce him to relieve Zeidel of the task, which he had entrusted to him, since he did not feel up to it. But they accomplished nothing.

The rabbi was adamant and insisted that nobody else but Zeidel would stand before his altar on the coming holy days and pray for the devout, who assembled in his domain. He hinted that this was a heavenly decree, which he would not and could not countermand. He also assured them that Zeidel was destined to become a "Chad Bedoro" (the one of his generation) whose name would be revered throughout the world.

Having thus had no other choice left but to obey the order, Zeidel, being fully conscious of his shortcomings, looked for ways and means to acquire at least some additional knowledge in the short time that was still left. He sought out the permanent "Baal Tefiloh," the regular reader of the Kloiz, in an effort to get from him quickly at least some of the most basic tunes. With great misgivings and with his heart pounding violently from fear, he ascended the pulpit like a lamb being led to the slaughterhouse to chant the "Mussaf" service of Rosh Hashonoh. But to his great relief, no sooner had he began to pray, than he had the curious feeling as if someone had grasped his hand and was leading him over an iron bridge with secure, unfaltering steps. It was as if the melodies kept flowing into his mouth from some mysterious source, as if somebody was standing behind him and whispering into his ears the tunes which he automatically repeated.

This distinct impression which he had, lingered on through the High Holy days, and so it happened that Zeidel with the providential assistance, the origin of which was only known to the rabbi, completed his assignment with flying colors. All the worshipers had only praise for the young

man, but most of all delighted with his success was the rabbi, who sent Zeidel away with his blessings.

Long after that occurrence, the inhabitants of Radomishel were still talking about the wonderful experience which they had in Makarov, thanks to the unusually impressive talents which the prodigy of their town revealed at the court of their venerated rabbi. On his return home, Zeidel was greeted like a hero coming back from a triumphant victory. His name became known in the whole vicinity as the fledgling canary, who recieved the great Makarover rabbi's assurance of a brilliant future.

Zeidel was at that time all of sixteen years old and already a married man. His grandfather had married for the second time and his step-grandmother had a granddaughter who was of the same age as Zeidel. The enterprising old lady saw in the gifted boy a good catch for her granddaughter. She talked so glibly and maneuvered so shrewdly and effectively that before he realized it and caught on to her devious plan to unload the young girl on him, Zeidel found himself to have become a new "Balebey-sel" (husband). But lest anybody jump to any kind of unwarranted conclusions, let us at once add that even though the youngster did not even have a chance to get a good look at, let alone to get well acquainted with his future bride, the match proved to be a very successful and happy one. A half a century later they celebrated their golden anniversary in blissful harmony still very much in love with each other. But let us not put the cart before the horse.

To return to the unfolding events of his youth, of course, one does not at sixteen years of age get to be a married man, and praying before the Makarover rabbi suddenly. So, I will attempt to trace for you, step by step, his family tree, and acquaint you with the high points of his early years and with the events which led to the point, where he became a family man and subsequently had his fateful encounter with the Makarover rabbi.

His father, Yitzchok Maragovsky, died when Zeidel was an infant, only a year and a half old. His mother found it impossible to take care of the baby, because she had her hands full attending to the little store, which her husband had left her. It remained her only source of revenue for the maintenance of herself and her son, whom she called "Zeydele" (little grandpa), for the simple reason that he strongly resembled her sainted father, after whom he had been named.

Luckily for her, an old friend of the family, the cantor of their town, Moshe Shpilansky, took a great interest in her critical situation. He was sorry for the hard-pressed woman, and said to her, "I see, Chana, how you are struggling. Give me the child, I'll take him into my home and my wife and I will take good care of him. We have two children, so we'll have a third one."

Thus it happened that Yaakov Shmuel grew up in the home of the cantor of Radomishel, who cannot be said to have enjoyed even the most modest measure of affluence in material necessities. But whatever they did possess, the members of the Shpilansky family gladly shared with the

youngster, whom they considered as one of their own.

Reb Moshe was not a great musician but he had a primitive knowledge of notes and frequently, particularly when the high holy day season drew near, he used to become immersed in his thoughts, pondering and trying to hammer out novel versions of tunes for the texts of the prayers. Sometimes, when he had a brainstorm and thought that he had hit on an ingenious new approach, he would even get up in the middle of the night and jot down his composition with his goose quill, a pen which was made out of a goose feather.

Zeidel, who slept in the same room, was aware of what was going on, but he did not stir, making believe that he was fast asleep, but with his sharp ears he would listen intently to the cantor who, while writing down the music, hummed the tunes over and over again. Zeidel caught the drift of the music and showed off with his new treasure before his pals the following day in Cheyder (parochial school). He also used to slide over surreptitiously to the drawer where the cantor hid his music to catch a peek at it, but when Zeidel tried to decipher the scrambled writing on the papers strewn about by Reb Moshe, it was all Greek to him. He could not understand how anybody could make head or tail out of the mixed up signs that looked to him like hieroglyphics.

Once the cantor, unnoticed by the boy, caught him red handed, singing his melody, which he had only the night before composed and jotted down. Puzzled and astounded, he whispered to his wife, "Just listen to Zeidele singing. It is unbelievable. Why it is the tune that came to me last night. He must have heard me hum it while I was writing it down. What a genius! What perception! 'Kein eyin hore' (knock on wood)."

Reb Moshe came to the conclusion that it was time to take Zeidel into his choir as a "Meshorer." But he was never permitted to carry out his well intentioned decision. It was countermanded and nipped in the bud by a higher authority, the boy's mother. Her dream was to raise him to become a rabbi. Zeidele's own inclination was also to stick by his religious studies and if this coincided with the wishes of his dear mother, then so much the better. By doing so, he would also fulfill the commandment, "Honor your father and your mother."

And so the years went by with Zeidel continuing to hold down a seat on a hard bench in the Makarover Kloiz of Radomishel, enriching his mind with a varied treasure of knowledge from the sacred folios of the Talmud, its great number of commentaries, and the age-old volumes of the venerated ancient sages containing their inspired teachings and profound wisdom with their guidelines for a life of morality and piety, and the principles for God-fearing conduct.

But even though Talmudic erudition was his main goal and uppermost in his mind, his secondary love, his neglected and suppressed talent, still found an outlet. As he was poring over the heavy volumes, learning with great diligence and pondering over a difficult passage in the "Gemore," "Rashi" or "Tosefos" (commentaries) in the customary humming singsong, he would occasionally and unintentionally sing out louder

and there would inadvertently escape from his throat a spontaneous outpouring of a string of elaborate and intricate musical phrases that were a pleasure to listen to. It was proof and convincing evidence that there was lurking in his subconscious mind an irrepressible desire to give expression to his feelings in song.

Whenever there happened to be a religious celebration in the Kloiz, he would, at the least encouragement from the merry Chassidim, comply with their suggestion, that he lead them in the singing of the "nigunim" (pious tunes) of their religious sect. In time he gained a reputation as a gifted musician with a fine pleasant voice, a perceptive ear, and a knack for rendering Hebrew chants. It was not for nothing that the visitors from Radomishel spoke so highly of Zeidel's prowess and skill, when they first presented him to the Mararover rabbi.

Now that we have caught up with our story and have learned some pertinent and relevant details of the early years of our hero, let us follow his further progress from this point, where he left for home with the blessing of the "Makarover" in his possession.

When he returned to Radomishel from his successful debut as "Baal Tefilo" (reader of prayer) in the great rabbi's Kloiz, Zeidel, who by then had become a father, had to begin thinking of "Tachlis" (essentials), practical ways and means of how to procure the wherewithal with which to provide the everyday necessities for his wife and child.

His father-in-law was a merchant and a storekeeper, who used to roam the countryside, journeying from village to hamlet, and buying up produce from the farmers and delivering it to the mills for processing. The flour which he thus accumulated in his store, he sold to his customers. Business was good and even expanding, and he could use an assistant, so he decided to take in his son-in-law to help out. Zeidel occasionally would go along with his father-in-law on his purchasing excursions to the neighboring localities, but mostly his duties consisted of minding the store during the absence of the boss and attending to the customers.

But this new mundane occupation, dictated by practical considerations, did not entirely satisfy his artistic nature. He felt the need of some spiritual stimulation. He made the acquaintance of a singer, a member of the chorus in the local synagogue, who volunteered to give him lessons in sight reading and to teach him all he knew about the fundamental principles of music.

Pretty soon his pupil was proficient enough to be able to write down his own musical thoughts and creations in note language. Whenever there was a slack period in the store and Zeidel was able to snatch a little free time from serving the buyers for his own personal use, he would sit down and indulge in his favorite pastime of inventing new tunes and melodies to texts of prayers.

In no time at all, he had completed his first composition, "Tisborach Lonetzach Tzooreynu" (Be Thou Blessed Eternally, Our Rock). In an elated mood, he rushed to Yaakov Marmer, who was at that time the cantor of Radomishel and a cultured musician, to show him his composition.

The cantor was pleasantly surprised and greatly impressed by the considerable talent, skill and phantasy evinced by the fledgling composer in his first work. He complimented him on his promising effort and readily corrected his musical mistakes. The local cantor took a great interest in him and henceforth aided him immeasurably in his burning ambition and eager endeavor to enlarge his horizon and to acquire as much knowledge as possible in the field of theory, harmony, and other branches of the science of sound.

Zeidel and his father-in-law, branching out, did business with some of the biggest flour merchants of Kiev, who were aware of the fact that the young man, in addition to being a businessman, was also a very fine amateur cantor. They invited him to function in the capacity of seasonal cantor for the High Holy days in their synagogue. He accomplished this mission with such success that for five years in succession, the holy days invariably found him in that city, officiating at the pulpit of different synagogues of Kiev.

On one such occasion was also present the celebrated violinist, Aaron Moshe Podhootzer, better known as "Podhootzer zsitomirer," whose orchestra was one of the great attractions for Jewish audiences. The young cantor's original style of chanting the prayers found great favor in his eyes. He was so impressed with Zeidel's refreshing presentation, his apparent gifted qualities and ability that he invited him to his home.

His youthful guest took advantage of this opportunity to open up his heart to the sympathetic master, confiding in him that he was still pretty deficient in musical subjects and felt the urgent need for supplementing and augmenting the meagre treasure of knowledge, which he had managed to accumulate so far. Podhootzer thought it worthwhile to assist the ambitious youth in his praiseworthy goal. He gladly agreed to help him and did his best to fill the gaps and flaws in Zeidel's armor of musical equipment. In later years, his grateful pupil had occasion to repay to a certain extent the favors, which he had received from the famous fiddler and maestro and the courtesy he had shown him, by using his orchestra exclusively at all of his concerts, where instrumental music was required.

But even though Zeidel took to music with the enthusiastic eagerness of a tired wanderer in a desert, parched with thirst, when he discovers a spring of water, he had no intention of making it his main profession. It was a hobby, a pastime, which gave him a lot of pleasure, relaxation and amusement, but he had no intention of using it as a "Kardom lachpor bo" (a spade, hatchet or pickaxe to do digging with).

He continued, of course, to make periodic pilgrimages to the rabbinical court of Makarov, in the company of the other members of the chassidic sect of Radomishel. On one such occasion he was summoned to the presence of the saintly head of the religious movement, who turned to him with words of fatherly advice which, he was fully aware, amounted to a command. "Listen, Zeidel," he addressed him seriously so as to emphasize the importance of what he had to say to him, "the time has arrived for you to give up your dabbling in business affairs and to turn your full

attention exclusively to 'Chazzonuth.' Start recruiting a group of singers and proceed to organize a choir at once and my wish for you is that you shall find favor in the eyes of all the people."

The unexpected, unqualified order of the rabbi caught Zeidel unprepared. When the far-reaching implications of the Makarover rabbi's words penetrated his consciousness, he stammered and muttered incoherently, finally managing to say that to exchange a well-established business for a craft that yielded only an uncertain, modest, and in the majority of cases downright poor living, could hardly be considered an improvement.

On the contrary, it would be an undesirable and daring step, that could not be justified by common sense and logic. Almost in tears, he begged the rabbi to let him go on with his business activities and let him continue to assume the functions of a cantor only on a temporary basis during the season of the High Holy Days.

When he realized that his arguments had not had the slightest effect on the holy man and it became clear to Zeidel that he stood his ground determinedly and would not change his pronouncement one iota, he left for home and made one last effort to get a reprieve from the verdict which he, as well as his wife and in-laws, considered unwarranted and injurious to his interests. He induced some of his friends, who were "Mekorovim" (members of the inner circle) of the rabbi's entourage to make a special trip to Makarov in an attempt to get the Rabbi to reverse his decree. But their journey was in vain, it failed to produce the desired result. The rabbi sent back with them the message that the time had arrived for Zeidel Radomishler to get out from obscurity into the open, to be discovered, and to take on the holy mission, the calling for which he was destined. He would bring untold happiness and blissful inspiration to the world with his heaven-granted talent and ability, and as a reward for his meritorious deeds in the service of the Lord and of mankind, he would be blessed with long life.

All the pieces now fall in place like a reassembled jigsaw puzzle. It thus becomes clear as the noon-sun on a day in July that it was by no means pure coincidence that the Schochet of Zaslov happened to betake himself to the Tzadik of Makarov to get his wise counsel as to where to look for a suitable cantor for his strife-torn, divided community and that the saintly rabbi sent him to Radomishel to fetch Zeidel for the purpose of installing him in the hotly contested post of "Sheliach Tzibur" (emissary of the community) of Zaslov. There was a deliberately planned link between these events.

It was divine destiny, providentially ordained in heaven, and the Zaslover Shochet, as well as the Rabbi of Makarov, and all who had a hand in bringing about the events, were but the instruments and tools, the middlemen and executors, of the mysterious celestial will, the ways and logic of which are shrouded and veiled in impenetrable secrecy and are incomprehensible and way beyond the capacity of the limited mind of the inhabitants of the insignificant planet to fathom.

In this way did Zeidel Rovner start out with his first hesitant steps on the preordained and predestined path of his life career, which carried him far in the esteem and regard of the Jewish people to whose service his talent, ability and energy were dedicated.

CHAPTER 20

HOW KISHINEV "KIDNAPPED" ZEIDEL ROVNER AND AFTERWARD HIS CHOIR SINGERS ALSO

Where his power as cantor lay — The competition between him and Nisi Belzer — The anti-Semitic Krushevan became an adherent and patron of Zeidel.

The strangely wonderful, almost mysterious manner in which the cantorial career of Zeidel Rovner began decided the direction for the subsequent development of his professional activities in the sacred calling in particular and for his whole future life journey in general, which turned out to have been formed in a remarkably colorful and interesting pattern.

The blessings and inspired assurance of the wonder-rabbi of Makarov, who induced Zeidel to choose a life devoted to the service of the Lord, guided the fledgling cantor on the path he was destined to follow throughout his life. Zeidel indeed became the most famous of his generation (a crowd-pleaser of incomparable renown). He dispensed spiritual joy through his music to Jews all over the world and he lived to a ripe old age, just as the saintly sage had predicted. But no blessing on earth is infallible. For each and every instance of good fortune, one usually has to pay a certain price and even Zeidel was no exception to the rule.

Since it was not possible for the Jews of the world to come to him, Zeidel, if he was to fulfill his destiny as divined by the Makarover Rabbi, had to take to the road and visit them in their towns and villages, just as "lehavdil" (to make the proper distinction) Mohammed, if Reb Zeidel

will pardon the comparison, was obliged to betake himself to the mountain, when the mountain would not or could not come to him.

His boundless ambition which drove him on constantly to spread liturgical music won him new laurels but also compelled him to live the life of a gypsy and would not let him settle down in any one spot. He kept on wandering all over the face of the earth. He became literally a "Chazzon medini" (universal cantor, minstrel of all lands). Of course, this kind of life had its compensating advantages and good points as well, as almost each change in his professional life brought about an improvement and had the effect of raising him up one rung higher on the ladder of world recognition and universal fame.

Things that had happened to him resembled in a way those that occurred to the patriarch Abraham, whom God directed to leave his home and betake himself to the land, which the Lord would eventually designate as the one he was to settle on. God Almighty at the same time assured our forefather that notwithstanding the fact that for a period he would have to become an uprooted wanderer, his name and fame would nevertheless continue to grow (veagadlu shemecho).

Zeidel had a similar experience. In spite of being almost constantly on the road or perhaps as a direct consequence of that fact, his name became ever more well known, and his fame grew by leaps and bounds. But this was only true as long as he confined his travels to Europe. However, when he crossed the Atlantic Ocean and set as his goal the conquering of the last, strongest and most formidable fortress — the citadel of America — it was a different story. It was the beginning of a new but by no means illustrious chapter, with an entirely different outcome. But let us not again put the cart before the horse, but rather proceed in an orderly fashion.

He had as yet scarcely warmed up his seat in the cantorial chair of his first position in Zaslow, when he was lured away by the community of Rovno. In his new post, he began to prepare himself with the utmost diligence for the important role which he was to play in the cantorial world.

He began to study with feverish zeal musical theory, the technique of composition and accompanying arrangements, and the art of orchestration. Having by now become convinced that his compositions were not musically sound, he began to rewrite and improve them. He also composed new wonderful works for performances in the synagogue and some for concert appearances with arrangements for orchestra accompaniments.

It did not take long for the musical world as well as the liturgical circles to learn of the emergence on the horizon of the rising new star, who bore the name of Zeidel Rovner. Rovno boasted with pride about its famous cantor, and Zeidel, too, on his part apparently reserved deep in his heart an enduring warm feeling for the city, where he made his first great strides and successes and the name of which stuck to him. For when he eventually grew tired and weary of all his wanderings, he returned to Rovno once more, and remained there until the magic phantasmagoria of the golden land with its magnetic false glitter succeeded in blinding and draw-

ing him to it with irresistible force. He finally succumbed and set sail for the New World.

But in the early stages of his career, Rovno, too, was only a small, insignificant station on the traffic line of his life where the express train that carried him on his way could halt only for a brief, breath-catching interval, after which pause it had to move on.

One Sabbath morning after the conclusion of the religious service, a stranger approached him in the synagogue and introducing himself, said that he was the sexton of the great synagogue in Kishinev. Unbeknown to the cantor, he had sat in a pew in the rear listening intently to his chants which overwhelmed and bewitched him.

"When the Jews of Kishinev will hear you," he blurted out with enthusiasm, "they will carry you on their shoulders." Zeidel was cool to the proposition of the visitor and declared, "I am very sorry to disappoint you but right now I wouldn't be able to leave for Kishinev. I have other pressing commitments."

But the emissary from the Bessarabian capital became insistent and would not take no for an answer. "I must bring you to our city, cost what it may," he retorted. "I cannot possibly return without you as I promised my officials and members that I would deliver you without fail. Now you understand, Reb Zeidel, what a spot I am in. You cannot let me down."

Well, Reb Zeidel did understand and sympathized with the predicament of the poor devil. Besides the idea appealed to him. Being a practical person, he knew very well that Rovno could not compare with Kishinev in importance and prominence, and should he be fortunate enough to get the position, it would mean a considerable advancement in prestige as well as in monetary reward. The probability of his landing the plum was enhanced by the information revealed to him confidentially by the sexton of Kishinev. According to him it was none other than Nisi Belzer himself, the former cantor of the central synagogue of Kishinev, who just then had accepted a new post in Berditchev, who had recommended Zeidel as the most worthy candidate to succeed him.

Taking all this into consideration, he accompanied the overjoyed stranger to Kishinev. Not only did he officiate at the Sabbath service, but he also gave on Saturday night a grand concert which had been scheduled to take place in the elegant, largest hall of the capital where the elite of the gentile nobles, the peers of high society, used to meet. It was the first time that a Jewish concert had been allowed to be held in that exclusive auditorium, which was located across the street from the headquarters of the fiercely anti-Semitic "Znamia" and periodical, "Bessarabetz."

The editor, Pavel Krushevan, happened to be in his office, and having accidentally looked out and observed that great masses of Jews were streaming into the hallowed hall of the Christian nobility, his curiosity was aroused by this unusual occurrence. Sensing an interesting story, he, too, went in to see what was going on and what the "Zsides" (damn cursed Jews) could have to offer at a concert. Like Billam he came to curse but stayed to bless. He came with the intention and sole purpose of belittling

the value of their cultural achievements, to mock at their efforts in the musical and artistic field and then to publish a report poking fun and ridicule at the Jewish community.

But the Jews of Kishinev knew what they were doing when they went out of their way to present the guest cantor in an auditorium frequented regularly and overwhelmingly by gentiles. It was a calculated, shrewd move of public relations. They were convinced that any Christians who would be present, could not help but become deeply impressed by the wonderful experience that was in store for them.

In spite of himself and his ingrained prejudices, even Krushevan fell under the spell and magic of Zeidel's artistic performance. As the concert progressed, he gradually warmed up to the excellently executed program. Just as the rest of the audience, he too was surprised and amazed by the high level of musicianship and great talent evidenced by the guest-artist. He was so overcome by what he heard that after the concert he went over to Zeidel and congratulated him warmly. He admitted that he would have never believed that among Jews there could be found such a rare specimen of a gifted musician. He even went so far as to publish an article in his newspaper about the musical event in which he had nothing but the highest praise for the cantor of Rovno, his choir and orchestra.

Not content with this tribute, Krushevan even arranged another concert for the Jewish cantor in the so-called "Dworianskaya Sobranya" club of military personnel, at which festive affair Reb Zeidel directed the military orchestra stationed in the city. On this occasion, there was present the cream of the Four Hundred, elite magnates, the high brass and officers of the military forces, and high officials of the government, and the heads of the municipality, together with the Governor of the province flanked by his entire entourage of assistants and advisers.

Zeidel basked in his glory, and all assembled were astounded and enchanted, and rewarded the hero of the evening with thunderous applause for his performance, in the course of which he had revealed himself as a master virtuoso in practically all branches of musical art.

Krushevan, on whose initiative the musical event had taken place, was delighted with the success of his protege, and for a long time after that he remained a warm, staunch admirer and friend of Zeidel. Needless to say that Jews of Kishinev held on to Zeidel, and the editor of the "Bessarabetz" was only one of the tens of thousands of the gentile as well as of the Jewish residents of the metropolis who took him to their hearts and showered the new cantor with their sincere, warm affection.

It is hard to believe, although regrettably it nevertheless is a fully documented historical fact that this great patron and admirer of Zeidel Rovner's musical genius, turned out to be also the notorious, infamous chief instigator and principal leading evil spirit, who directed the bloody pogrom against the Jews of Kishinev in 1903.

There were several other occasions when Zeidel had the opportunity to lead a military orchestra, but in one instance there developed an obstacle. The problem was one of protocol. It occurred in Tarnopol.

Zeidel was scheduled to present a concert-program at the club rooms of the military brass of that city. But this was in Galicia, a province which was an integral part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, where the rigid, inflexible rules of protocol of the code of ethics of the military caste were zealously guarded and had to be observed to the letter. One of those proscriptions strictly forbade any civilian to ever serve in the capacity of the conductor of a military orchestra. How to overcome and clear this hurdle was a braintwister. Nonetheless after much deliberation the dilemma was resolved. Somebody found a solution to the problem. It was decided that Zeidel would in fact conduct but the regular conductor would sit next to him and also make motions to Zeidel's rhythm. In this way, the regulation was literally complied with, and the audience at the same time could enjoy the artistic presentation of the guest-conductor. It was a case of the wolf's appetite being satisfied with the lamb still staying alive.

But to return to Kishinev, where Zeidel Rovner had just made his debut with a Sabbath service followed by two concerts. As originally planned, his visit was to have been a short one, but things got out of hand and he was persuaded to prolong his stay in Kishinev for several additional weeks, during which time he was lionized by the delighted Jews of the city.

He officiated at religious services in various synagogues, among them the house of prayer of the drivers, the sacred edifice of the tailors, and that of the shoemakers. (In Europe, the members of each and every craft prayed in a sanctuary of their own, because of the existing caste system.) Wherever he made a professional appearance, Zeidel was the recipient of enthusiastic adulation. He was the talk of the town and he was pressured from all sides to give his consent and accept the post of chief cantor of the Jewish community. But Zeidel was in no hurry to commit himself. He had second thoughts about the advisability of making the change. Before making up his mind, he wanted to return home to Rovno and consult his advisers and confer with his dear ones. He bade farewell to his newly found friends and admirers in the Bessarabian capital promising to consider and weigh their offer and in due time advise them of his decision. It would seem that he was holding out for a larger salary than they were willing to pay.

The most prominent cantor in Kishinev at that time was Avrohom Berkowitz, generally known by the nickname of "Kalechnick," because his father was in the business of selling chalk and quick lime. Reb Avrohom enjoyed the reputation of being an excellent interpreter of the prayers and a fine musician. But Zeidel's resounding success overshadowed him, and the derogatory witticism, at their own cantor's expense, that "there came to town a little Polish Jew and with one blow of his mouth succeeded in extinguishing the burning 'kalech'" was heard often in the musical circles of the city.

The tailors and the shoemakers, supposedly the most competent critics, launched a campaign of harassment and hounding against the seemingly firmly-entrenched incumbent chief cantor with the result, that Kalechnick, realizing that Zeidel had undercut his position, which thus had

become untenable, decided to voluntarily relinquish his post and leave town. He had a long standing invitation to come to Mohilev Podolsk, where he once had made a guest appearance with great success. So he now picked up his option tendered him by the leaders of that community to become the cantor of their congregation.

Meanwhile there was great commotion in Kishinev which grew in intensity now that Kalechnick was out of the way, having of his own volition left the field of contention in the possession of his adversaries. They were now contending that it was imperative to make every effort toward the achievement of their goal, which was to secure the services of Zeidel for the Jewish community of Kishinev at any cost. A committee was dispatched to Rovno with authorization to negotiate and conclude an agreement with Reb Zeidel. Since their instructions were that money was no object, they quickly settled the matter to the satisfaction of the cantor who knew how to drive a hard bargain.

There was however still a stumbling block to overcome. Rovno would not part so easily with their beloved cantor. They watched him closely like hawks and did everything in their power to detain him. To evade detection, the emissaries from Kishinev slipped into Rovno clandestinely and came for Zeidel in the darkness of the night. Under its benign cover, they made off with him and his family before anyone got wind of what had happened. If the fans of Zeidel would have caught the "kidnappers," there is no doubt that they would have inflicted bodily harm on them. One thing is certain. They would not have gotten away unscathed from the enraged citizens of Rovno. But they were in luck. Nobody caught sight of them and they succeeded in completing their task of transferring the cantor to Kishinev without a hitch.

But Rovno still held a trump card in its hand which potentially could've decided the game in its favor after all. When the Jews of that city realized that their canary had flown away, they put the members of Zeidel's choir under an around-the-clock close observation. They were determined to hold the members of that group captive for ransom. They knew how dependent Zeidel was on his "Meshorerim" (singers of his chorus) and it was their hope that without them he could not possibly remain in Kishinev and consequently would have no other alternative but to return to Rovno.

A contest of wits went on thereafter between the Jews of Rovno, who vowed not to let go of the "Kapelye" (choir) on the one hand and Kishinev which sought ways of means to get hold of the singers on the other. The latter tried every trick. Finally, they devised a plan to rescue the members of the chorus from the hands of the alert watchmen, who were guarding them constantly. It took time and patience but their efforts were eventually crowned with success. One by one the members of the choir were spirited away. A gentile driver and his horse and buggy were hired for the delicate task. The singers succeeded in slipping out clad in ladies' dresses, their faces rouged and powdered, their heads covered with wigs. They looked like "Purim shpielers" (masquerading players on the jolly

feast of Purim) and since nobody suspected or had any inkling of their true identity they were surreptitiously whisked away until gradually all of them were reunited with their master in his new home.

Well, there was no use crying over spilled milk and Rovno had to take its loss philosophically. After all, you cannot hold a man against his will and there was no denying that Kishinev could undoubtedly do more for Zeidel than Rovno in every respect. So Kishinev got its way and there was a holiday atmosphere in the air.

Meanwhile in Rovno the defection of Zeidel rekindled the squabbles that had been going on all along but seemed to have been toned down during his tenure between the common folks, the working class, who were sworn "Zeidelists" and the affluent strata, and the intellectual circles, who were devotees of his predecessor, the former Cantor Frohman, the socalled "Yankel'ists."

The latter faction, bringing to bear their influence and power succeeded in putting over the selection of their candidate to the post vacated by Zeidel. The newly installed cantor's name was Hoffman. Great shakes he was not.

The Zeidel'ists were dead set against this inheritor of the mantle of their idolized hero. They declared that he was totally unfit for the post and vociferously demanded the rescinding of his appointment. Great scandals broke out. The Zeidel'ists enlisted the cooperation of Reb Mot'l, the assistant cantor and shames. On "Rosh Hashono," when Hoffman went to his dressing room to don his festive garments he found that his white cantorial high-domed "yarmulka", as well as his white silken robe (kitt'l) were missing. He suspected that Reb Mott'l had something to do with the "geneyve" (theft).

There was no question but that Zeidel was sorely missed and much more appreciated by Rovno after his departure than when he served that community. The Jews of the victorious city were in high spirits, celebrating the happy outcome of their maneuver to snare into their net the celebrated new star of the liturgical world. Just as the sexton, who first approached Zeidel with the proposition, had predicted, the Jews of the Bessarabian capital did indeed literally carry their newly acquired cantor on their shoulders.

That being the case, it perhaps is high time for us to find out what they saw in him and what it was that he possessed by means of which he was capable of holding the world in his hands and making the masses practically worship him.

In a fashion similar to Nisi Belzer, Zeidel too was a happy fusion, a singularly successful synthesis of cantor, composer and conductor, all rolled into one whole. In his role as cantor, he enjoyed a decided advantage over Nisi because his was a much better voice than that of the ingenious sage of Berditchev. His lyric tenor, even though small and limited, was nevertheless of a silken quality and pleasing to the ear. His recitations had a sweet sound for he was masterly in the reading of prayers and in interpreting the hymns. What he possessed in natural intuitive musical gifts and

what he knew about the ways of liturgy and the art of chanting the prayers would have sufficed for a hundred cantors.

Zeidel was blessed with an unusual type of coloratura and when he sang them he was in the habit of thrusting out his mouth by twisting his lips in a curious fashion. They were so complex and interwoven in texture that if one was to attempt to write down these roulades and glissendis on musical scores, one such coloratura passage would take up a whole page and would perhaps consist of as many as one hundred different notes.

As a composer also, he was much better endowed, more thoroughly tutored, and in technical terms more competent than his venerable colleague. At the time when Nisi recorded his compositions in a haphazard disorderly fashion without precisely annotated instructions and detailed punctuation, leaving instead much to the imagination of the reader, who was supposed to read between the lines, and only later, at the rehearsal sessions, did he proceed to hammer out, supplement and fill in the gaping voids with appropriate connecting links, Zeidel's every composition was a precise roundly-formed partitura, complete with all the requisite markings with not a comma or a period missing.

That was the reason for the well-known fact, that nobody else was able to sing the works of Nisi Belzer as well as he himself was able to present them, while the compositions of Zeidel Rovner were and are an open book, accessible to even those, who may not possess more than just a working knowledge of sight reading of musical scripts. They have not become antiquated or affected by the passage of time, and are still being sung in synagogues and at sacred concerts with great success.

Nisi's forte was "Tefilah" (prayerful supplication) whereas Zeidel was in his element and excelled mainly in "Neginah" (melodic, rhythmic song). At Nisi's the method and style was declamation, recitation, and what is commonly called "saying" (zogen). At Zeidel's the conception and aim was singing and tuneful chanting. Nisi's school was placing more emphasis on recitative, Zeidel's on the other hand was more in favor of melody. To Nisi it was the soul that counted the most; for Zeidel the heart and feeling were predominant, and it was that organ of flesh and blood to which he tried to appeal rather than the elusive spirit toward which Nisi turned his whole attention. But all the cited differences between them notwithstanding, they were both great and highly fertile masters, who created works of immortality. One was as sweet as sugar, the other as sweet as honey.

Zeidel borrowed from diverse sources and adapted a lot of Slavic melodies, rhythmic waltzes and military marches, often clothing the religious hymns with musical vestments derived from some of these borrowed tunes of foreign origin. But mostly the themes of his compositions flow from the pure and rich chassidic wells, a continuous refreshing source of inspirational, typically Jewish, musical motifs. This precious raw material in Zeidel's competent hands, and after having undergone his ingenious treatment and formulating metamorphosis, invariably turned out to be something to behold and to cherish.

His presentations never failed to impress his audiences into whose hearts they stole and were invariably able to find a most sympathetic echo. In spite of the fact that he had never served any period of apprenticeship as "Meshorer" (helper) in a chorus of a cantor, he created more musical works for the Jewish liturgy than any other composer among his contemporaries, works full of sweet, melodic content and characteristic Jewish charm, which will endure for generations.

But just as in the case of Nisi, his great success also was in large measure due to the high quality of the singers with whom he managed to surround himself. To prove this point, we only need to mention that among the members of his choir were singers like Hershman, Roitman, Tkatch and Breeh, whose names later became household words. From his private conservatory, generations of talented, notable, pupils graduated, who became cantors, some of them gaining world fame.

Zeidel was a master of orchestration, in addition to possessing an innate flair for harmony and counterpoint. He was, of course, greatly aided by his constant search for knowledge and musical education. He was a tireless student who spared no effort in his determination to become a well-rounded, competent musician. He was especially effective in his concerts which used to draw large audiences. Oddly enough sometimes they were patronized by more gentiles than Jews. On such occasions he employed, in addition to his enlarged choir, an orchestra, consisting of at least fifteen instrumentalists.

The son of Isser'l Belzer, the cantor, relates that his father, who was also a matchmaker, whose matrimonial activities were spread out over many regions and often even embraced the whole country, a so-called "Lands Shadchen", was in Berditchev as one of the guests at a lavish wedding reception. Belzer had been the matchmaker for this couple and needless to say the sumptuous meal was not his sole reward. It so happened that on the Tuesday following the wedding, Nisi was scheduled to give a grand Chanukah concert. As he was an old friend of the master, having yet known him from the time when he occupied his very first position in the city of Belz, Reb Isser'l went to visit Nisi Belzer and also attended his concert that evening. He had planned to return home the following morning. But Nisi was against his leaving on Wednesday, giving as his reason that he would like him to attend also the Chanukah concert scheduled to be given that evening by Zeidel Rovner in his synagogue, which was located in the new section of the city. On Thursday morning, Nisi was anxiously awaiting the verdict of his old friend and confidant. "Tell me the honest, unvarnished truth," he begged him, "I value very much your opinion." Isser'l, not mincing words, replied, "Nisi, your concert was beautiful, but Zeidel's was even more so." Taken aback by the frank opinion expressed by his sincere friend, Nisi fell silent as if in deep thought, and then mused as if talking to himself, "There must have been in Zeidel's family-tree some good 'Klezmer' [instrumental musician] from whom he inherited his talent in that field."

Driven by jealousy, doubtlessly, Nisi used to refer to Zeidel as the

"Klezmer" and the latter paid back Nisi in kind by calling him that "Litwak" (Lithuanian). It was a generally current opinion, rightly or wrongly, that a native of Lithuania had two strikes against him and could never be expected to become an outstanding cantor.

Notwithstanding the fact that Nisi was the one who recommended Zeidel and gave his blessing to his taking over the position in Kishinev, which at that time he had abandoned, when that very Zeidel came to Berditchev to succeed Yeruchem at the pulpit of the synagogue of the new section of the city, the antagonism and hostility, which the devotees of Nisi had shown and practiced toward Yeruchem was now transferred to his successor. Immediately, their poisonous arrows pointed in the direction of the new occupant of the competitive post. When Zeidel arrived in Berditchev to officiate for the first time on a Sabbath, Nisi in a demonstrative move to show his displeasure, left town.

There was no question but that he had good reason to be apprehensive. Zeidel, a new attraction in the town, appointed to the post in 1886, drew away from Nisi almost half of his followers. This unfavorable development called for new drastic measures by Nisi, if he was to reverse the trend, stem the tide and recoup his losses. Fresh compositions seemed to him to be the answer and he commissioned his own son Yudel, who was a highly gifted musician and had graduated from a modern conservatory, to write new works for the synagogue and he began using them at the religious services. In all, Yudel supplied his father with about fifteen masterful compositions, which found great favor with the congregation and contributed considerably to the restoration, more or less, of the "status quo ante" and to the reestablishment of some sort of equilibrium between the two contesting cantors of Berditchev.

Both of them avoided any possibility of meeting and went out of their way to make sure that they would not have to come face to face with each other, not only socially but also in the course of the performance of their professional chores. This strain in their relationship persisted in spite of the fact, that neither did Zeidel kill the geese of Nisi nor did Nisi kidnap the mother-in-law of Zeidel.

The principals themselves, in fact, were not the main adversaries in the conflict which raged around them. It was their respective fans, adherents, the zealous, devoted, faithful members of their entourages, the so-called "Nisiists" and "Zeidelists" who were fostering and conducting a regular war against each other which often resulted in scores of bloody heads in both camps.

The enthusiastic followers of Nisi went to Zeidel's services for the sole purpose of poking fun at his performance, and the sworn admirers of Zeidel placed themselves right in front of Nisi so as to be in a strategic position to laugh in his face. As a natural consequence of such tasteless demonstrations, physical battles broke out between the contending groups, which culminated on occasion into assaults of such warlike ferocity, that the police had to be called out.

But the contemptible, irresponsible actions of their courtiers and

henchmen notwithstanding, neither of them fundamentally nurtured any really hostile attitude toward the other. On the contrary, deep in his heart Zeidel had a great regard and respect for Nisi and equally did the latter have a very high opinion of the abilities of Zeidel as witness the following two episodes. It was something akin the case of Brahms versus Wagner. While Wagnerians and Brahmsians were flaying each other in print, the two composers respected each others as musicians.

One of the intimate aides of the wonder-rabbi of Sadigora, at whose court Nisi breathed his last, told the story of how shortly before his death Nisi called him to his bedside and whispered in his ear a message for Zeidel. "Tell him when you see him," were his last words, "that after my death he will be the only one of the giants still left and that I'm leaving this vale of tears with a light, relieved heart for I am confident that he will continue with great competence the task and work which I began and was privileged to carry on throughout the lifetime that had been allotted me on earth."

Musing about this legacy and last will declaration of Nisi Belzer, which had been related to him by the "chossid" of Sadigora, Zeidel added the comment, "I cherish these last words of Nisi just as much as the amulet, the golden coin, which the Grand Rabbi of Hoosiatin blessed and then gave to me, which I always carry on my person as my talisman."

When Zeidel had the first opportunity to be in Sadigora after some time had elapsed since the funeral of Nisi Belzer, the first thing he did was to visit the grave of the great master. It happened to be a bitter cold winter-day with an icy wind blowing and the knee-high snow covering the deserted streets with a thick white blanket. When Zeidel told the members of his chorus and his friends where he intended to go, they tried to dissuade him from carrying out this act of venerating remembrance and gracious tribute. They warned him that it was a hazardous undertaking to venture out in such inclement weather.

When Zeidel refused to listen to reason and seemed determined not to let anything keep him from offering a prayer at the final resting place of his great departed colleague, his pupils and friends insisted on going along with him to make sure that no harm would befall him. But when they finally arrived at the cemetery, frozen to the bone and totally exhausted from trodding in the wet, bottomless snow with the icy wind blowing in their faces, they found that all their efforts had been in vain. They had made the long difficult journey needlessly, since the snow had fallen with such density and to such height that it covered the top of the monuments. No matter how long they searched, they were unable to distinguish between the tombstones and to locate the grave of Nisi. Greatly disappointed, they could only say a prayer where they happened to be standing and make their way back through the storm without having accomplished what they had set out to do.

Nisi succeeded in breathing a new spirit of life into the long neglected, antiquated, deteriorating Jewish liturgical music. After he passed away in 1905, it became the historical mission of Zeidel to pick up the flag of "Te-

filah'' (prayer) and ''Neginah'' (chant) which had fallen from the lifeless hand of the grand veteran leader and to carry on the holy crusade to which the departed master had dedicated his life.

To Nisi's orphaned pulpit, his grieving congregation called Meyer Pisack, who at that time was residing in Yelisevetgrad. He was engaged to occupy the post with the proviso that he must chant at his services the compositions of Nisi to the complete exclusion of any other ones. However, even though he had been one of Nisi's outstanding pupils and he was thoroughly versed in and completely familiar with the works of his master, in addition to which favorable circumstance he was also the possessor of a wonderful mighty tenor voice (which surely could not be said about Nisi), still the congregants were not overly impressed with his performance. They kept shaking their heads, raising their eyebrows, and lifting their shoulders, thus signifying their disappointment. It somehow did not come off as perfectly as they had been used to. ''It is not Nisi,'' they were wont to say, expressing the generally prevailing view, that he lacked the charisma of the departed master, which proved once more the old adage that voice is not everything. It soon became evident, that Pisack was no match for Zeidel, who thereafter reigned supreme.

Thus came to pass what Nisi confided to the ''Chossid'' of Sadigora, ''After me, Zeidel is the only one left.'' This opinion coincided exactly with the prediction of the saint of Makarov, who had helped launch Zeidel's career and prophesized, that he would become a ''Chad bedura,'' the one and only of his generation.

CHAPTER 21

THE LAST YEARS OF HIS LIFE ZEIDEL ROVNER SPENT IN THE UNITED STATES

under conditions of want and need — He nevertheless never lost his sense of humor — His unusual success in his heyday — The banquet rendered him by his former pupils and singers who used to be members of his choir after his American debut in Carnegie Hall — Franz Joseph honored him with the award of a medal — His visit and reception at the White House.

The course followed by Zeidel Rovner's career reminds one of the axiom expressed in Ecclesiastes, chapter 1, verse 5: "The sun riseth and the sun goeth down and striving to regain its place it riseth again." As applied in this case, it may be recorded that no sooner was the sun of Nisi Belzer setting than up rose in its full glory and began shining brightly the sun of Yaakov Shmuel Maragovsky. And it came to pass what the Bible states in the Vayishlach portion of Genesis (chapter 8, verse 25), "and Yaakov was left alone" in the sense that he was left as the only legitimate heir to the mantle and to the unfinished work of the departed master of liturgy, on whose shoulders rested and to whose lot fell the mission of disseminating the Jewish religious music throughout the world.

Since his congregation in Berditchev was not in a position to pay him a salary which would be sufficient to cover the expenses of his household and to also provide for the expenses connected with the maintenance of the large chorus he always considered essential, the heads of his community were willing to compensate their cantor by inserting into his contract with them a clause which gave him the privilege of absenting himself from his pulpit for as much as six months

in the year. Zeidel made use of this period of freedom from his cantorial duties to his Berditchev congregation for extensive travels for the purpose of making guest appearances.

He always had more invitations than he could possibly accept. Communities from all over Russia, Poland, Galicia, Bessarabia, Moldavia, Roumania and Hungary were anxious to have Zeidel, together with his famous "Kapelye" come to them for a visit. Even from as far away as the British Isles, he received invitations to honor them with a visit.

Eventually he decided to make the journey at the request of the Congregation "Machazikey Hadass" (strengtheners of the faith) of London. In addition to the appearances in London, he also gave concerts in Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, and other Jewish communities in England, with great success. The cantors' association arranged an elaborate reception in Zeidel's honor. When his colleagues who attended the banquet pleaded with him to grace the occasion with the chanting of one of his compositions, he responded with the presentation of a timely group of selections.

Inasmuch as the season of Passover happened to be just around the corner, he chose to regale the audience of professional musicians with his interpretation of a large portion of the "Haggada" (which is recited at the Seder service beginning with "Avodim Hayeenu" [Slaves We Were in Egypt]). It was a masterful performance which evoked extraordinary admiration from all who were present, and when he finished they rewarded Zeidel with thunderous applause.

Being that he was a "chossid," a devoted admirer of wonder rabbis, Zeidel always gave preference to a call from their courts and he not only responded with prompt acceptance if and when he was summoned to the court of the saint of Makarov, to whom he owed so much and to whom he gave his primary allegiance, but he was also a frequent visitor at the residences of the grand rabbis of Sadigora, Tolna, Tchortkov, Podhaitz and Chorostkov. There were also may occasions when he journeyed to Hungary at the request of the sages of Munkatch and Hunyad.

But among all the cities, he liked best the Bessarabian capital of Kishinev, where he occupied the cantorial post at the central community synagogue for ten years which was a longer period than he spent in any other city in the course of his long career. He left Kishinev solely because he could not get along with the chief trustee of his congregation. This official was the same one who previously was the sole cause of the departure from Kishinev of Pinye Minkowsky. His dictatorial conduct and behavior and his shady deals and actions drove both those prominent cantors from the city.

About this creature, Chayim Velvel, who pretended to be a selfless public servant, there were circulating rumors in the city to the effect that he was feathering his nest with plumage lifted from sources that did not belong to him and that his hand was in the habit of straying occasionally into the cookiejar of the treasury of the congregation. Zeidel knew about his manipulations. When he failed for several weeks to remit the salary which was due the cantor and choir with the bland explanation that he had

no money to pay it with (which is the best possible excuse), Zeidel dispatched a gentile woman to the house of the tricky trustee with instructions to deliver several quarts of milk to him. The puzzled Chayim Velvel declined to accept the consignment, protesting to the messenger, "I did not order any milk from anybody. It evidently is a mistake." When the woman returned to Zeidel with the report of the failure of her mission he sent her back again to the trustee, asking her to say this time who it was that was sending him the milk as a present. The trustee, sensing a gag at his expense, came running to the cantor and in an enraged mood demanded to know, "What is this, Reb Zeidel? Some kind of a trick? You are making fun of me?" To this outburst, the cantor retorted in a cool-headed manner, "No, Reb Chayim Velvele, no insult intended. But when you claim that there is no money to pay our salaries, I am astounded. How come? For so many years you have been milking the synagogue and you still have no milk? So here take it, have some."

One verbal duel led to another and the relationship between them became strained to the breaking point. There were also other reasons that prompted Zeidel to consider leaving the post. There was a movement afoot in the ranks of the membership to introduce some modern reforms into the rituals of the services which were not compatible with the principles and beliefs of the strictly religious, scrupulously observant Zeidel, so he decided that the best course for him was to quit.

But the Jews of Kishinev were yearning for their beloved cantor, and even after he left town he did not sever his connections with the city, for which he always retained a warm spot in his heart. Yielding to the summons and demand of the populace, he frequently used to return for a guest appearance, and once he was there his devoted admirers of Kishinev would not so easily let him go. They would make him extend his stay in their city for months at a time, and he would be prevailed upon to delight the Jewish residents at Sabbath services in various synagogues. He would also give several concerts on weekdays.

The Jews from the neighboring villages and hamlets of the Bessarabian countryside, too, were wont to exploit the opportunity and somehow manage to lure the famous master together with his choir into spending a day or two in their midst. They were enchanted by his musical presentations. He had been granted a permit by the governor of Bessarabia, which was valid for an unlimited time and allowed Zeidel to travel throughout the province and arrange concerts wherever it pleased him. He made stops for one night stands in Bender, Kupshan, Bertchan, Chotin, Soroko, Belz, and other cities and villages in that region. The lucky Jews, and gentiles as well, of the places which happened to be on the route traveled by the famous cantor invariably gave him and the members of his excellent choir a royal reception on his arrival and an enthusiastic farewell on his departure. They rewarded them in addition with anything that their hearts desired in the way of hospitality during their stay and generous monetary compensation upon their departure. It was a rare festive occasion for the people who led a drab existence when they were afforded the opportunity

occasionally to greet such a celebrity and to enjoy his God-given great gifts and they made the most of it. On one occasion, when he was on a concert tour through Galicia in the year 1904, he was prevailed upon to extend his sojourn in Lemberg for over the Passover holidays. Zeidel's services on the festival of Freedom managed to evoke in the hearts of all the congregants such a fervid, enthusiastic response and acclaim that there was a general vociferous demand in all circles of the Galician metropolis that the leaders of the synagogue of the suburban community should exert every effort toward securing the agreement of the visiting cantor to settle down among them permanently.

They broached the subject to Zeidel. After weighing the pros and contras, he still remained unconvinced and would not give them a final answer. He told them frankly that before he could decide whether or not to accept their offer, he must first consult his patron, the saintly Rabbi of Makarov, without whose consent and blessing he never made any important move. He left at once for the court of the sage to ask his advice. The verdict of the wonder rabbi was that he should make the change and accept the steady cantorial post in Lemberg. "But," he added a word of caution, "You'll have to be careful to curb your tongue and not make any sarcastic remarks, for the Galician Jews do not understand jokes and witty sayings and they do not take kindly to humor at their expense."

After having received the approval of his revered rabbi, he returned to Lemberg to tell the trustees, that he was ready to occupy the pulpit at their synagogue. He remained in the service of the Lemberg community until the year 1911.

He brought along with him to his new post the same singers of his choir who had served under him in Berditchev. But there were also additional new recruits from among the talented youngsters whom he had discovered in Galicia. The most important one, who now joined his group, was the "Galitzianer," Yisroel Breeh, who later became one of the well-known cantors in the United States. To be accepted as a member of Zeidel's choir was not one of the easiest things in the world to achieve. Quite the contrary and it was a coveted privilege, particularly for cantorial hopefuls. Zeidel was very particular in his selection of his singing aids and his standards, which a candidate had to meet, were high.

When Breeh applied for admission into the exclusive fraternity of the famous singing group, Zeidel withheld his consent, giving as explanation for his refusal to engage him the fact that he already had enough tenors and had no need for another one. But Breeh was very anxious to be accepted by the great master and to achieve his goal he volunteered to serve without any compensation. Zeidel was not one to turn down a deal which would net him something for nothing. So Breeh was accepted and being that he was an excellent sight reader he was permitted to join in the chanting of the services on the very first Sabbath of his apprenticeship. He did not have to serve the usual probational period of just listening, learning and keeping his mouth shut. He was also allowed to participate in the concert at the Gimpel Theatre which was scheduled for the following Sunday

and which starred Zeidel and his choir accompanied by an orchestra.

In addition to the obvious reason that prompted all singers to seek admission to Zeidel's so-called "home conservatory" and made them even willing to make sacrifices if necessary to reach that goal, Breeh had an ulterior motive in going to such great lengths to be accepted into the notable musical emporium. The reason he forfeited any claim for pay just to be able to induce Zeidel to reverse his rejection of his application was that he wanted to lay his hands on the precious compositions of the master. Eventually, he managed to become a confidante of the cantor and his librarian, to whom was assigned the task of handing out the musical scores to the chorists at the rehearsals. He gained free access to the partituras, and whenever he had the opportunity, he would clandestinely copy the valuable musical manuscripts of the master, including the famous Kinos (laments) and other well-known works coveted by many cantors, who, however, could not obtain them from Zeidel.

Abe Kaplowitz, who was one of Zeidel's chorists in those years and sang the soprano solos of his compositions, related the following incident: A certain impresario came to Lemberg to see Zeidel Rovner and negotiated a contract with him. He engaged the cantor and his choir for a concert tour of fifteen appearances, which were to be given in many cities, including Kishinev, Odessa, Berditchev, and other Jewish communities in the province of Wholin in Russia.

However, there arose the problem of how the twenty-four singers were to be taken across the boundary separating the Galician province, which was part of the Austro-Hungarian regime, from the cities to be visited that were located in territories ruled by the Russian Tsar or the Roumanian monarch. The difficulties that stood in the way of accomplishing this feat were yet compounded by the additional complication that two of the singers (one basso and one baritone) happened to be refugees from Russia and on the "wanted" list. One of them had fled the country in order to evade military service. He was scheduled to appear for the physical examination prior to induction and not relishing the thought of donning the soldierly clothes of the Batyushka (father of the country), he escaped by crossing the frontier on a moonless night. The other one had been mixed up in revolutionary political activities and rather than risk deportation to the mines of Siberia, or a fate even worse than that at the hands of the espionage agents who were after him, he made off and managed successfully to cross the border ahead of his pursuers.

There was no conceivable way for these refugees from the wrath of "Fonye" (nickname of the hated Russian emperor) to legally return to their native land and they happened to be essential members of Zeidel's ensemble.

Ways and means had to be found somehow to smuggle them through so as to remain unobserved by the watchful eyes of the frontier guards. The day was set when the risky operation was to be attempted. The machinist who was scheduled to be operating the engine of the night train on that particular evening, as well as the conductor, were contacted and

taken into the confidence of the conspirators. In return for "greasing" the hands of these meritorious employees of the railroad with a bribe of a fat roll of greenbacks, they agreed to cooperate. It was decided that they would allow the members of the contraband human cargo to hide in the wagon where the mail and parcel post packages were stored. As soon as the train would have crossed the Austrian frontier and reached the haven of the opposite side of the border, the engineer would gradually slow down so as to make it possible for the singers to emerge from their hiding place and jump down, one at a time, so as not to draw any undue attention. The engineer would proceed at a snail's pace until all the members of the smuggled group have safely descended from the slowly-moving train. It had been arranged that the impresario would wait for them at the prearranged rendezvous point with several horse and buggie vehicles. The jumping-bean fellows would be picked up as soon as they hit the ground and whisked away in the assembled vehicles to rejoin Reb Zeidel who would have already arrived in Russia and waiting to be reunited with his helpers.

Everything had been carefully and meticulously planned down to the last detail, to make sure that nothing would go wrong. But as luck would have it, at precisely that very moment the Russian patrol from the platoon of military guards that had the responsibility of watching the boundary had been alerted by their opposite numbers on the Austrian side of the border, that criminal bandits were allegedly making ready to escape and cross from Austria into Russia under cover of the darkness of the night.

The gendarmes not only were not asleep at their posts but were alerted to pick up the slightest movement or noise that would disturb the silence of the night. They were prepared to pounce on any suspicious character who would try to enter the country illegally.

When they suddenly heard the repeated thumping sounds of feet hitting the ground and realized that these were coming from passengers who were jumping from the train that was passing by, they began sending up firecrackers with the object of lighting up the area and simultaneously the faces of the culprits who, they were sure, were trying to escape. They shouted orders to the "criminals" to halt in their tracks or they would be sprayed immediately with deadly bullets, if they ignored the warning.

Upon coming nearer, the militia men were surprised to find that instead of having caught up with hardened criminals, as they were led to expect, they had bagged more than a dozen frightened youngsters, together with several young men, who did not look at all like formidable, dangerous, underworld characters. Nevertheless, their well-laid plans had collapsed. Illegal immigrants they unquestionably were and the military policemen who caught them redhanded took them to the headquarters of the border patrol, where their case was to be dealt with.

The questioning began, with the presiding officer asking who the leader of the offending group was. In response to this question, Alec Maragovsky, the son of Zeidel, stood up and assumed the responsibility for the illegal entry. "Who gave you the right and where did you get the

nerve to let children jump off a moving train?" thundered the enraged officer. "What if some of them had been killed by the bullets from the guns of the border patrol that had every right to shoot at them. Could you have brought them back to their parents?" And presumably to underscore his abhorrence at the thought, he slapped Alec's face several times and ordered that all of them be put in prison cells.

The impresario, together with his companions, who had come to meet the singers realized when they saw that the choristers were arrested that they must flee the scene as fast as their horses could carry them, if they did not want to also become implicated and charged with aiding and abetting lawbreakers.

When Zeidel was apprised of what had happened, he enlisted the help of influential people who in turn mobilized a battery of most capable lawyers. They moved heaven and earth in a determined effort to free the incarcerated innocent victims of an adventure that had backfired. There was also an attempt made to gain their release and freedom by bribing the officials in power, but it was unsuccessful. "When der uhrel nemt nisht", when government officials refused to accept bribes it boded no good for any Jew caught between the prongs of the wheels of Russian justice. His chance to get fair treatment was slim indeed.

Zeidel's helpers, as well as his son Alec, were eventually deported "po etapob poriadkob" (by foot) in police custody and each of them was returned to the place of his birth. But that was only the concluding chapter of the odyssey. The long road of suffering and misery which they had to travel, the deprivations to which they were subjected, the wallowing in one dirty cell after another as they were transferred from one prison to another was appalling. They were put through the hell of fourteen different houses of correction. The continuous travails piled one on top of another almost made mental wrecks of the suffering youngsters so that it was a great relief for them and their folks when they were finally reunited with each other.

There was also a tragi-comic twist to this sad tale. When the sadistic guardians of the prisoners found out that they were singers by profession, they ordered them to chant for them and amuse them. Otherwise, they said they would let them have the taste of their fists instead of bread. Having no alternative, the choristers took revenge on their tormentors by chanting for them "Shivisi" (I have set the Lord always before me), "Adoshem ma odom" (Oh Lord what is man), "Keil moley rachamim" (Oh God full of compassion), "Ha-tzur tomim poolow" (the creator his deeds are perfect), "Yosheiv baseyser elyon" (he who dwelleth under the shelter), and similar hymns and laments, all of which are from the ritual recited at funerals. It was lucky yet for them that the "goyim" did not catch on to the macabre sarcasm.

One would presume that after having gone through such a harrowing experience, with all their plans having gone awry, the young singers would not ever again want to rejoin their former unit under the aegis of their teacher and patron. But anyone who thought that the pupils of Zeidel disgusted and disillusioned by their nightmarish experience were going to

give up their singing careers and desert their master, was greatly underestimating the strong hold which he had on the loyalty of his disciples. All he had to do was to issue a call for all his former choristers to assemble in Berditchev and to no one's surprise, least of all Zeidel's they all rallied to his side as if nothing untoward had happened. Like soldiers at the bugle call of their general, to a man they came flocking to Berditchev to once again sit at the feet of their teacher, taking up where they had left off. The postponed concert tour was rescheduled and carried out, as originally planned and mapped out. That it was a huge financial, as well as a moral success, goes without saying.

When he resided in Lemberg, Zeidel was commissioned to present a Chanukah concert, which was his specialty. For that affair, the arrangement committee had also secured the services of the military orchestra, which was reputed to be the best in town. The general rehearsal of cantor, choir and orchestra was held in the armory.

Several high officers and two generals came to the rehearsal. After a while, one skeptical general remarked to the other one, "Oh come on, let's go, the little Jew is an amateur and is only making a fool of himself by trying to conduct a fine orchestra like ours." But the other general's interest had been aroused. What he had heard so far did not sound amateurish to him at all, and he preferred to stay on and listen to more of the Jewish cantor's music. And the more he heard of the program, which the bearded little Jew had prepared for the concert, the more he became impressed by the high quality of the chants. When Zeidel completed the rehearsal of one of his compositions, in which there was a wonderful solo for the flute, all of the brass present gave the conductor a spontaneous standing ovation. There was no longer any question about it in anybody's mind. The little Jew revealed himself to be a highly gifted composer and a competent experienced conductor. He had convinced all doubters.

When the day of the scheduled concert arrived, the two generals in full regalia were in the audience and there was a great surprise in store for Zeidel. At the conclusion of the concert, one of the generals ascended the podium, and after expressing his personal delight at the marvellously executed musical performance and the appreciation of the audience for the artistry of the cantor, he presented the hero of the evening with a baton made of special rare timber. It was trimmed with a silver setting on which was engraved the musical score of the solo for the flute, which he and the other military officers had admired so much. This baton remained one of Zeidel's most cherished souvenirs and mementos.

Other honors also came to him in the course of his glorious career. There was the occasion when the Emperor Franz Joseph came to Lemberg for a celebration of his birthday, which had been arranged in his honor. Zeidel was to be one of the participants in the elaborate festive program. His chorus, accompanied by the military orchestra, sang the national anthem "Gott Erhalte" (God may protect our ruler) followed by the twenty-first psalm, "Adoshem beozcho yismach melech" (O Lord! in Thy help may rejoice the King) which he had composed especially for the occasion.

This musical work made a tremendous impression on the whole assembly. The "Kaiser und Koenig" of the Austro-Hungarian empire deigned to receive the cantor of the Galician capital in a special audience and presented him with a golden medal as an expression of His majesty's gracious appreciation.

But all his great successes failed to satisfy our Reb Zeidel. The reason for his discontent was that he had heard that cantors were shoveling gold in the streets of America. He was convinced that by remaining stuck in the Old World, he was missing great opportunities, while others were getting rich.

After the conclusion of one of his concerts in the city of Kishinev, an American Jew, who had attended the affair came to visit him at the hotel, where he was staying and said to him, "With your singing and conducting, you could conquer America. The Jews of the United States are just crazy about liturgical chants. They are in love with 'Chazzonuth.' For a cantorial selection of say a 'Hashkiveynu' (Cause us to lie down in peace) or a 'Kevakooras'l' (as a shepherd watcheth over his flock), they would be willing to trade in their wives and children with their mother-in-law thrown in as a bonus. Why, take our Yossele! He is an uncrowned king, a veritable 'Srorah' (ruler). Whenever and wherever he makes an appearance, there is pandemonium. The walls tremble from the thunderous ovations which he invariably receives. The people are just mad about him."

"Who is that Yossele you are talking about?" asked Zeidel, interrupting his enthusiastic visitor. Zeidel's innocent question affected the Jew from the New World as though he had been knocked on the head with a bat.

"What did you say?" He was taken aback. "Did I hear you correctly? Do you mean to tell me, that you don't know who Yossele is?"

"No, I really do not know," Zeidel answered in jest, for as a matter of fact he had heard of Yossele, knew quite a bit about his great appeal to the American populace. He even had heard his recording of "Omar Reb Elozor" (Rabbi Elozor said).

"Unbelievable," exclaimed the tourist, "Why all America, and I would even be willing to bet that the whole wide world knows who Yossele is. Not only Jews but gentiles as well know of his fame and greatness. Have you any idea what the name Yossele Rosenblatt means?"

The worm of professional jealousy crept into Zeidel's heart. After listening to the outpouring of such admiration from a fan of the celebrated "Yossele," the suggestion of his visitor that he too would be well advised to cross the ocean and try his luck on the new continent of golden opportunity began making sense to him. The more he thought about it, the better it appealed to his inclination for adventure.

The new year of 1914 had just begun. Things gradually worsened in the old world. Conditions, economically as well as politically, were on the verge of general deterioration all over Europe. Contending chancelleries were fanning the flames. War-like winds, smell of gunpowder began blowing, poisoning the atmosphere and threatening to explode into a full-

fledged bloody conflict between blocs of nations.

Zeidel thought that it would perhaps be wise to leave the scene of his present activities for the greener fields on the other side of the Atlantic. According to a well-known Hebrew axiom, the world is the same everywhere (sadnoh d'aroh chad huh) and to make a change may turn out to be for the best. Acting on this hunch, he packed his bags and set out on his way to America.

He had already contacted an impresario in the New World, who specialized in importing cantorial artists of some stature from Europe. Zeidel Rovner was a welcome addition to the roster of celebrities managed by him.

Upon his arrival in New York, Zeidel's numerous former pupils met him at the pier and gave him a very warm reception. His first concert was held in Carnegie Hall. A mammoth chorus, under the assistant leadership of the choir master Cherry, and a huge orchestra, occupied the entire stage. The hall was packed to the rafters. Hundreds of would-be ticket buyers could not gain entrance and were turned away, greatly disappointed at not being able to attend the great musical event.

Zeidel was in his element and gave a great performance. The elaborate program which he presented was enthusiastically received. The affair was an enormous success.

But for Zeidel the real concert began only later in the evening, when he was taken by the members of his entourage to a banquet, which had been arranged in his honor at the hall of the "Hachnosas Orchim" (hospitality for the needy) building, which eventually merged with and became an integral part of the "HIAS" organization. At that time it was located on East Broadway in lower Manhattan. He found there assembled a large crowd among whom were represented not only cantors, choir leaders, professional singers and members of the musical world, but also physicians, attorneys, dentists, manufacturers, bankers, as well as merchants, mechanics and shopworkers. What they had in common was the fact, that they all at one time or another had been members of the fraternity of Zeidel Rovner's musical ensemble in the old country. They brought along their wives and children. They came to greet the teacher, at whose feet they once sat. They came with loving kindness in their hearts to demonstrate their enduring high regard for him and to wish him good luck in his new environment.

When he saw before him so many of his former choristers, Zeidel waited only until the invited guests had consumed the first course. Then, he took over and he gave the familiar signal. All of them immediately jumped up as though they had been waiting for this command, eager to fulfill the master's desire and order.

Once more they had become the choristers of Rovno, Kishinev, Berditchev and Lemberg. Zeidel, baton in hand, began directing, and the gigantic chorus, following his lead, sang song after song. They did not want to stop. They forgot all about the drinks and the food which became cold.

That evening a good half of Reb Zeidel's repertoire was performed by his ex-helpers. The large hall re-echoed with the mighty sound of liturgical chants that continued until the wee hours of the morning. From this impromptu concert, the overjoyed Zeidel drew more comfort, satisfaction and pleasure than from his highly successful debut at Carnegie Hall.

The enthusiastic welcome which he had received there and the grand reception tendered him at the more intimate banquet, made the newcomer to the land of unlimited possibilities very happy and gratified. He was very thankful and appreciative to all who were responsible for making his first days in New York as memorable. But when the festivities were over and the everyday problems of establishing himself in the new surroundings intruded upon his holiday mood, claiming priority and requiring his immediate attention, he was forced to begin surveying the field, assessing and weighing the possibilities and prospects.

What he found was not very encouraging. He was a shrewd observer who was able to size up a situation accurately. After examining the conditions that existed in the cantorial profession in the New World, he came to the conclusion that he and America were not a compatible and congenially matched pair. He saw no future for himself in the new environment which was so strange to him. The new ways and "mores" which he encountered at every turn were alien to his way of thinking. He knew that he could not and moreover would not want to refashion his style to make it conform with the jazzy concepts that had made great inroads through the walls of the synagogue. He wished that he were younger as he soon learned that in America being young was the greatest asset. He was too old and too set in his ways to change.

He regretted having come to America and made plans to return home. But before he was able to complete the necessary arrangements, World War I had broken out, cutting off his retreat and making all his calculations obsolete.

For better or worse, America became his country and New York his permanent residence. How he managed to earn a livelihood is a mystery. He tried to organize a choir and gave occasional concerts with his ensemble. On such occasions, some of his former disciples, who by now had become famous cantors, celebrities like Hershman, Roitman, Breeh, and others, volunteered to participate as soloists. How he got through the war years can best be characterized in the words of that French nobleman who when asked by one of his cronies what he was doing during the years of the French Revolution replied, "I lived and that took some doing." If Zeidel, unemployed as he was, managed somehow to survive those years of World War I without having had any visible means of support, it was something of a miracle. His son-in-law, Osher Chassin, managed a private school for cantors and singers, mainly conducted by a teacher of voice culture Professor Ferentzov and his daughter had a job in an office. With their joint efforts, the wolf was kept from the door.

When the war was over, he received an invitation from the Cantor's Association of Vienna, Austria, among whose members were several can-

tors who formerly served under his baton, to come and settle down in Vienna where he would be assured a generous stipend for the duration of his life.

However, when Zeidel announced in the press that he had decided to leave America and return to Europe to settle in the Austrian capital, his disciples, intimate friends and followers called a meeting of all those interested in seeing that something should be done to detain their beloved veteran teacher in America. A resolution was adopted at that gathering to create a fund for the purpose of publishing Zeidel's musical works under the title "Otzer Haneginah" (Treasury of Liturgical Chants) which would contain all the compositions written by the venerable master in the past forty years of his creative activities in the field of sacred music. Not only would his name be commemorated, but the income derived from the distribution of the books would also provide him with an income sufficient for his everyday needs.

It seems that in spite of all his misgivings and disappointments, Zeidel preferred to remain in the United States, and he gladly gave his blessing to the plan that had been worked out by the organizers of the committee which was formed to carry it out.

In order to raise the sizeable sum of money that would be required for the launching of the proposed fund, it was decided to arrange a grand celebration of Mr. and Mrs. Rovner's golden wedding anniversary. A concert was held at the Hippodrome Theatre in New York City. It was a brilliant affair organized on a grand scale. The participants included the cream of the Jewish musical world. A mammoth chorus and a large orchestra also participated. The date was the fourth of February, 1923. Six thousand people jammed the huge auditorium to witness and to be guests at the golden wedding celebration of one of the most outstanding luminaries of liturgical art. The stars that shone brightly that evening as soloists included such well-known figures as Pinye Minkowsky, Yossele Rosenblatt, David Roitman, Don Fuchs, Yossele Shlisky and Avrohom Katchko.

Addresses of tribute were delivered by such silver-tongued orators as Rabbi Meyer Berlin, Rabbi Leyb Yaffe, the beloved tribune Masliansky and the labor leader Joseph Barondess. Zeidel presented among other compositions, his famous "Ohavti" (I Love) and this appropriate gesture struck a sympathetic chord in the hearts of the listeners, who were heard remarking, "What a devoted, truly faithful bridegroom! After fifty years of married life, he still confesses his enduring love to his mate."

The "young" couple were presented with numerous valuable gifts, one of which was a golden loving cup from the members of the Jewish Ministers and Cantors Association of America with an engraved warm dedication, expressing their high regard for the celebrants and their best wishes for a happy long life together.

In connection with this momentous occasion, Zeidel was also the recipient of the honor of a visit to the White House. He was given a warm reception by President Calvin Coolidge. Zeidel presented him with his la-

test composition, the text of the seventy-second psalm of King David, which contains prayers on behalf of the ruler of the land and which he dedicated to the president, who thanked him for his gift and posed with him for pictures.

The devotees of Zeidel then proceeded to establish a congregation with a synagogue of its own for him on Montrose Avenue in the Borough of Brooklyn. At the same time, they bought for him a house on Willoughby Avenue. However, all these measures that were designed to aid and establish a firm basis and a source of income for the veteran composer and musical genius did not endure for long. The contemplated congregation never really materialized and soon fell apart. The payments on the mortgage also proved to be too burdensome to keep up, with the result that eventually the house had to be sold.

Various other methods were now attempted to achieve the desired goal. Concert appearances were scheduled in several large halls and different synagogues, but even though the sums realized were considerable, the net proceeds were negligible and fell far short of what was needed to even begin the publication of the works of Zeidel. The result was that the "Otzer Haneginah" never saw the light of day.

Out of the monies realized for the many performances in the largest concert halls in New York and in the innumerable houses of worship, the intended beneficiary received very little. All that Zeidel did get was a stack of bills. The expenses allegedly ate up the "chaleh" (white loaf) so that there remained not even "a moytze," enough white bread over which to make the blessing. There was mismanagement galore. The well-intentioned plan turned into a complete fiasco. Things went from bad to worse.

Once he succeeded in getting a pulpit for the High Holidays at a large synagogue which is located in the Bronx. After having rendered his services, he was paid only a small part of the remuneration that he was supposed to receive. The major portion of the salary that had been agreed upon was not paid him. All his entreaties availed him nothing. "Times are bad" was the only answer he got. They also claimed that the proceeds from the sale of the High Holiday tickets were below expectations, as if this were a valid excuse for depriving the cantor of his well earned fee. When one of Zeidel's singers, volunteered to go to the leaders of the congregation to try to collect the balance due him, this helper of the master collected instead of a check a shower of abuse and invectives. "What are you," one of the big shots yelled at him, "some kind of a communist?" The result was that Zeidel never received the considerable sum owed him by the congregation.

But even though he had more than his share of hard luck and went through a string of disillusioning experiences in the declining years of his life, it did not leave him embittered or scornful. Although he was wont to be quite sarcastic at times, he never lost his sense of humor and was poking fun occasionally even at himself. He had a reputation in the world as a wise man and he loved to season his talk with witticisms, that never failed

to hit the mark.

He was once asked, "It is a generally accepted axiom that cantors as a rule are not too bright and even downright fools and the greater the cantor the bigger of a fool he is supposed to be. Now you are considered to be one of the greatest and yet not only are you far from being a fool, but a very shrewd wise man. How do you account for that?"

"Well," he replied, "that is an easy one to explain. You surely know the Talmudic admonition 'ein meviyin rayoh min hashotim,' according to which one should never draw any conclusion or cite any proof from fools, so you cannot use me, a cantor, as valid evidence, with which to prove anything."

For many years he resided in the apartment maintained by his daughter which was located on Seventh Street in downtown Manhattan. It was a two-family house. Downstairs was the shop of a shoemaker and Zeidel and his daughter occupied the upper floor. A friend who came to visit him complained to Zeidel that he had a hard time finding his residence, to which the latter replied, "How could you miss it? When you saw a shoemaker's workshop downstairs, you should have known that on top of his shop could live none other but a cantor. You see, in America, when evaluating the merit of a cantor the first thing people are apt to inquire is, 'Sheester?' [Can he shoot?] They want to know whether or not he possesses a powerful, piercing, high register. That is all that counts. One who can not shoot into the high spheres and make great noises, may his voice be no matter how sweet and artistic, it is of no value in the eyes of the populace and he might as well place his teeth on a shelf. So if you find a shoemaker [in Yiddish: 'Shees-ter'] downstairs, the only logical deduction one can arrive at is that somewhere around here is also located one who is supposed to be shooting [sheester] from his throat."

Oscar Julius, the choir leader who for several years was one of Zeidel's choristers during his stay in New York, relates an incident that occurred at one of the rehearsals. They happened to be working on a new, particularly difficult and complicated musical score. One of the outspoken, older singers, observing how easily the young Oscar was able to master and sightread the unfamiliar music, burst out with the crude remark at his expense "Oh, what a mamzer" (a colloquialism literally translated, an illegitimate child, but generally used in a sense that denotes an unusually capable person).

Notwithstanding the fact that Zeidel was fully aware that no insult was intended, he still strongly disapproved of any use of such rude expressions, no matter how innocently meant, and to smooth over the embarrassing silence that followed the inconsiderate remark, he proceeded to explain away the unpleasant implications inherent in the foul word. In an extemporaneous, witty way, he intimated that the letters of the word "Mamzer" (M m z r) were in reality spelling out the first letters of "Meshorer Makhelas Zeidel Rovner" — singer in the chorus of Zeidel Rovner.

At the wedding of the youngest daughter of the famous cantor David Moishe Steinberg, I had the privilege of sitting at one of the dinner tables

next to Reb Zeidel. When the young couple made the rounds and visited all the tables to greet their assembled guests, they eventually came over to where we were sitting. Zeidel, who could always be counted on to use any such occasion for putting over one of his practical jokes to get a laugh, wished them that no later than a year after the wedding their union should result in an increase through a visit from the stork, that would deliver to their home a male. "Of course," he said, "I expect to be invited to the circumcision ceremony," and leaning over he whispered into the bridegroom's ear, "But nevertheless, young man, do not rely entirely on my blessing."

Zeidel had three children, two daughters and one son. The oldest daughter, Chaye Sohre who was married to Chassin, died early in the very bloom of her life. Osher Chassin, nevertheless, remained very close to his father-in-law even after the death of his wife though he later remarried. He was originally a bookkeeper, a very capable person, who organized and headed a school for cantors, the leading spirit of which was his father-in-law.

Reb Zeidel was not very proud of his son Alec. He did not have a high opinion of him. He was not a very accomplished musician although he occasionally functioned as a sort of choir leader. He was also one of the teachers in Chassin's music school, instructing cantors in voice production. He also tried his hand at selling insurance policies. As a human being and particularly as a business man, he did not set the world on fire and was what is called in Hebrew a "Lo Yootzlach" (one who seldom succeeds in anything he attempts); in a word a "shlemiel," a failure. Speaking of his son, Zeidel once remarked, "All of my compositions made the grade and were hailed as successes but my "Kadish" (son so called because only a male heir is obliged to recite the memorial prayer [kadish] for a departed parent) somehow did not turn out very well. This production of mine cannot be termed a success."

Once when he was talking about his colleagues, Reb Zeidel posed the question, "How is it that all societies usually own a cemetery, but the Cantors' Association does not?" He answered the question himself, "They do not need a cemetery for the reason that they all are trying to bury one another."

The Cantors' Association held a convention in the month of July in Atlantic City. The heat was unbearable, but Reb Zeidel wore a heavy, black felt hat. Cantor Hillman of Yonkers, who was at that time the president of the Cantors' Association, asked him, "Reb Zeidel, all the cantors present are wearing straw hats, why are you wearing a heavy felt hat in such an oppressive heat?" Zeidel replied, "In our old country, Jewish homes usually had shingle roofs. When one saw a house or a hut which was covered with a roof of straw, the generally correct assumption was that the occupant was most likely a "goy" (gentile) and I don't want anybody to take me for one."

It is a sad fact that in the last years of his life Reb Zeidel suffered deprivation. In order to somehow relieve his material needs, Cantor Yitz-

chak Sheyn, one of his intimate disciples, together with his son-in-law Chassin, organized a quartette which consisted of some of Zeidel's most devoted singers — Grunoff, a basso, Liaznoff and Freedman, tenors, and Edward Mann, baritone, and they arranged a series of concerts in synagogues. But these musical recitals were sparsely attended. The expected great masses did not show up. Financially, the affairs were failures. The proceeds barely covered the expenses.

After one of these appearances, a member of the audience came up to Reb Zeidel, congratulated him and said, "Ihr hot oisgenumen mit eier concert" (You made out very well with your concert). But Reb Zeidel sadly replied, "Woos toig mir, az ich hob 'oisgenumen' az ich hob nit eingenumen." (What good is my having "oisgenumen" — scored a moral success — when I did not "eingenumen" [take in money]). It is a word play in Yiddish.

One day on Second Avenue in lower Manhattan, Reb Zeidel met his colleague, Cantor David Moshe Steinberg, who inquired of Zeidel where he was coming from. He replied, "I'm just coming from a funeral, where I performed the service and it was a case of a "mitzwah toyt" (when one who is in great pain and not expected to live anyway and is better off dead, his death is called "mitzwah toyt" — a merciful death).

"Are you telling me," Steinberg asked, "that the departed had been suffering so terribly before he was mercifully delivered by his death." "Oh, no," replied Reb Zeidel, "He was a healthy young man and died suddenly. But it was a good deed and a charitable death for another reason. You see I had to pay my rent, which was overdue and I did not have the money and his death came to my rescue, for I have now earned twenty-five dollars with which I'll be enabled to square my debt. So his death was a mitzwa."

Cantor Yitzchok Sheyn, who often used to visit him, invariably noticed that Zeidel's wife would be sitting in a chair with her eyes closed as though she were napping. When he asked Zeidel why his spouse was always sleeping, even during the day, was it due to some illness? Zeidel replied, "There is nothing the matter with her. She has been sleeping constantly in this manner for the past fifty years of our married life, sitting in the same chair, and that is the most lucky stroke for me during all those years enabling me to write my compositions in peace, undisturbed by her flow of chatter.

"Had she more often stayed awake, not only would I have been prevented from concentrating on my professional work, but I would by now also probably have produced a dozen or more children. So let her keep on sleeping. I'm lucky to have a mate who is silent most of the time. It is a blessing in disguise." One could go on ad infinitum relating the witticism of Zeidel Rovner.

But even though Reb Zeidel tried his best to present publicly a pleasant, jovial facade and play a merry, cheerful tune to the sad tragic play, this was only a transparent cover-up, a truth-concealing device. When he laughed, it was like the guffaw of Pagliaccio. There were tears hidden under the cover of the merry mask.

CHAPTER 22

ADDITIONAL INTERESTING EPISODES OF ZEIDEL ROVNER'S CAREER

When Zeidel transferred to Lemberg, he occupied the cantorial post at the "Forshtetishe" (outskirt suburb) Synagogue. His salary was a paltry 1800 Gulden. Since he could not possibly make ends meet from that compensation, he was obliged to make frequent excursions together with his "Kapelye" into cities and villages of the "Hinterland" for guest appearances, like Sabbath services or liturgical concerts.

Usually he hired a "Baal Aguleh" who would take them to their destination in his horse and buggy. The driver would also stand on the "Bimah" (Rostrum) together with the choir, but of course keep his mouth shut during the singing.

His mingling with the members of the ensemble was a device to assure him too a Sabbath meal at the table of one of the worshipers, who after the conclusion of the services, were supposed to take home with them a chorist or two, each, as his "Orach" (guest).

On one occasion when a member of the congregation had the burly "Baal Aguleh" assigned to him, this "Balebos", a shrewd observer, voiced his supicion to Reb Zeidel, that he doubts very much that this guy can sing at all: "Why! I watched him and he never opened his mouth during the whole service."

But Zeidel indignantly refuted the very thought and with a straight face replied: "What an absurd idea! Why it's he, who leads and carries my whole choir and me." (er fiert doch mein gantzen choir.)

To the choirboys who were kept on a very lean diet at home, the prospect of eating out as the guests of, in most cases, well-to-do families was

something to look forward to with pleasurable anticipation and as a rule their expectations proved to have been fully justified. The "Balebuste's" usually put their best foot forward and stuffed the famished singers with their choicest "Patraves" (Goodies).

His absences from Lemberg were of such long duration that when he came home at last, people used to tell their friends: "Have you heard the latest news? For this coming 'Shabos' we'll have a 'guest cantor' to chant the ritual."

On weekdays the chorists ate at Zeidel's table. Each singer received one slice of bread. If one hungry lad asked another piece of bread, Zeidel's mother would silence him by saying: "What a chutzpah to demand such a privilege." So the others took the hint and never dared ask for extras.

Only one of them somehow managed to put things over on the stern old matriarch. All members of the ensemble were already sitting around a long table. Suddenly they noticed that Yisroel'ke Breeh was missing. That he should miss a meal was unthinkable. He was always hungry and the first one to sit down at feeding time.

Two of his best pals were sent to look for him and find out the reason for his absence. He was nowhere to be found. Finally they located him lying in bed with the bedsheet pulled over his head, munching the last crumbs of the half a loaf of bread, which he had succeeded in stealing from the hidden bread basket.

For the Sabbath the chorists were distributed among the members of the congregation for the festive meals. Many of the residents of the villages in the vicinity used to walk miles to town to hear Zeidel.

One time when after the service one of the singers was left standing at the door without having found a patron who would take him home for the Sabbath meal, he was shoved onto the "yishuvnik" (villager) who willy-nilly agreed to let him go home with him.

But when they finally, all tired out arrived home, the yishuvnik's wife opened up with her "mahne loshon" on her husband chastising him: "Where in blazes did you get lost? You went to town to hear a Chazzan? Now the food is ice cold and who the hell is this guy? I have nothing for him." And true to her word she hardly could scrape together some leftovers for the Yishuvnik and almost next to nothing for the unexpected guest.

It surely wasn't worth it to walk so many miles for such hospitality. Consoling the boy, the man said to him: "Get undressed and go to bed and for next Sabbath you will again be our guest." But the starved youngster, you can be sure, did not intend to make the same mistake again.

Day-in — day-out Zeidel conducted rehearsals which began ten o'clock and lasted for several hours interrupted only for the midday meal. More often than not he would hold these musical sessions in the Cantor's and Choir's dressing room or in the vestry of the Synagogue.

On one occasion the composition to the text of "Eshkol" (cluster of

grapes) had to be learned in a hurry for the reason that the following Sabbath was the festive "Shabos Shkolim" on which day of rest the new musical tome was to be sung.

In his effort and eager determination to get it ready in time for its presentation, he kept working with the ensemble all day, forgetting what time it was.

It was not until people started coming into the Synagogue for the "Mincha" prayer session and hearing the loud voices emanating from the adjoining room knocked on the door requesting that they tone down the noise and not disturb the worshipers, that the cantor realized that he had kept his helpers at the rehearsal all day long and that they had gone without food for so many hours.

But that was nothing new. Whenever a fast day occurs in the Jewish calendar, it was strictly observed in Zeidel's household. Every fast day was a "Yomtov", a red letter day for him and especially for his mother. She didn't have to feed the singers.

Zeidel was wont to drag down the composition a notch by his chanting the cantor's solo, which was the reason why he would almost always make the choir begin the rendition of a hymn or psalm in a somewhat higher key than it was written.

At concerts his solos were usually entrusted to Yisroeil Leyb Tkatch who had a very powerful, broad dramatic tenor voice. On the other hand however, he was a poor musician. The partitura-leadership of the tenor section was in the hand of Yisroeil Breeh, a seasoned musician and dependable sightreader.

After he was received by President Coolidge and photographed with him, Zeidel was congratulated by all his friends and complimented at the singular honor bestowed upon him. When he was asked what he talked about with Coolidge, Zeidel replied, "I asked him whether he knew of any high holiday cantorial job for me." "And what did the President say to that?" was their follow-up question. "All he answered me was 'no'. You know how close mouthed he is. So," concluded Reb Zeidel "if even the President of the United States cannot get me a 'Yomim Noraim' engagement even for just a couple of hundred bucks, what good does the picture with him do me? They'll lend me nothing on it in a hockshop."

Leaving the wedding party at the home of Cantor Steinberg late at night together with Zeidel, we had only a few blocks to walk home. But since he lived downtown, my wife asked him why he left and was going to take the subway. "Why didn't you wait for Cantor Katchko to drive you home in his car?" "Oh no," replied Zeidel, who must've had some grudge against him. "This Katchke [duck] is a 'treyfe' bird and I as you know am very particular and use only 'Kosher' fowl."

When Julius became engaged to his bride he asked Zeidel to grace his wedding with his participation in the ritual ceremony. Zeidel gladly obliged and came accompanied by his whole chorus.

But when Oscar wanted to pay him for his services, he indignantly refused to take any compensation from a former member of his ensemble.

Julius however, knowing full well the financial squeeze in which the master found himself, insisted that he at least let him pay for the services of the singers.

But Zeidel would not hear of it and only by running after the fiercely protesting Zeidel did he somehow forcibly manage to stuff a few greenbacks into the pocket of his overcoat and get away before Reb Zeidel could do anything about it.

As is the generous habit of many cantors, they are inclined to be very generous in adding years to the ages of their colleagues. Themselves they are prone to consider young chaps, but others invariably look to them much older, than they in fact happen to be.

Zeidel Rovner lived to become a pretty old man. Being that he has had an unusually long and eventful career, it seemed to many and especially to the members of the cantorial fraternity, that he must be at least one hundred years old — at least that was for how much his colleagues in the profession appraised him. It was said about Zeidel, that "he was born with a gray beard."

Nonetheless when walking in the street he was always moving with a swift pace, like a young fellow. He remained agile and very much alert and active, retaining his youthful zest, "joie de vivre" to the end.

On one occasion a cantor with whom he was acquainted, met him in the street rushing along as was his custom, speedily, as if he was in a great hurry.

His much younger colleague, who was hard put to keep up with him, wondered aloud saying "Reb Zeidel, according to the axiom of our sages: 'Ben Meyoh K'ilooh Meys," a centenarian is as good as dead. How come you are still so very much alive and kicking?"

"Oh! I was dead allright," was Zeidel's rejoinder. "But now I'm alive again and beginning from scratch all over. As you know I am a pious, chassidic Jew and not only do I firmly believe in resurrection of the dead, but as a man, who is always on the run and in a hurry I arranged to be resurrected by special dispensation even before the advent of the "Moshiach [The Messiah]."

Cantor Shmuel Postolov once paid a visit to Reb Zeidel. After having spent a few hours in his company listening to the saga of disillusionment in people on the part of the great master, he got up and took leave from his host. He was standing already in the doorway saying his last goodby on his way out, when Reb Zeidel called him back saying: "Just a minute Reb Shmuel. I have almost forgotten to ask a great favor from you."

"What is it you want me to do, Reb Zeidel?" inquired Postolov. "Any request of yours is a command to me, which I'll be only too glad to fulfill, if at all possible."

"My dear friend and colleague," said Zeidel, "If on your way home you should by any chance happen to meet a decent person, please tell him that Zeidel Rovner sends him best regards."

Then he added a post-script with the skepticism of the voice of experience, "But on second thought I doubt very much that you will encoun-

ter any such individual."

But even though Zeidel in his bitter disappointment seemed to pessimistically judge all mankind, there were individuals, admittedly few in number, who stuck by him through thick and thin.

One of them was Itzik Bloom, the gabbay of the First American Roumanian synagogue "Shaarey Shomayim" of Rivington Street, who would've gone in fire for Zeidel. This stalwart fan and helper of his moved heaven and earth for his idol.

His right hand was of course his son-in-law, Chassin, who even after the death of his wife, Zeidel's daughter and after he had married again, devoted his life to do everything that lay in his power for Reb Zeidel.

He was the moving spirit of many a project that was hatched. So was for instance a plan afoot for Reb Zeidel to emigrate to the holy land and make there his permanent home. It was also envisaged to establish there a school for cantors to be headed by him. It was even announced in the Jewish press, that a grand farewell testimonial concert would take place on the 31st day of October, 1926 in the new Madison Square Garden to honor the venerable master on the occasion of his setting out on his contemplated trip to "Eretz Yisroeyl." But as was the case with other abortive plans nothing came of this project either.

The most painful crushing blow came, when Chassin suddenly passed away. The loss of his main tower of strength, the only one he was able to lean on, made Reb Zeidel's plight grave indeed. He henceforth lived like a recluse. His daughter went to work to keep body and soul together and he remained alone all day with his bitter-sweet memories as his only companions.

I cannot help but conclude the saga of Zeidel with the very same verse taken from the Bible with which I began the story of the ascending phase of his brilliant career, but with the difference that this time the meaning of the sentence "Vayivoseyr Yaakov levado" has to be applied in the literal sense. Not that he was the only one left after the demise of the great Nisi but in the plain translation, that he was left "alone," abandoned and forgotten. He had his ups and downs. He was as the Russian proverb goes: "Nah Konyeh" (on the horse) and "pod Konyum" (under the horse).

The last years of his life he spent like a destitute, lonely recluse in a state of need and want under circumstances of distress and indigence. He was ignored and cast aside as one who did not belong any longer, until his pure soul ascended to heaven in 1943, at the age of eighty-seven to occupy his reserved place in paradise. The world became poorer by the loss of this great musical genius who left the imprint of his uniquely original art upon the liturgy of his generation. He had succeeded in spreading throughout the world the great gifts and innate talents with which he was endowed and he brought joy and pleasure to mankind at large.

It was exactly as had been revealed to the saintly rabbi of Makarov by the holy spirit and predicted by him. The prophecy of the sage that Reb Zeidel would live to a ripe old age also proved to be true.

He did not leave behind any bank books but wealth and riches had not

after all been promised him. Still he did leave behind a rich heritage, not in banknotes, to be sure, but in other kinds of notes, that had the advantage over the former in that they were not perishable. They are immortal. Cantors and choirs all over the world continue to chant Zeidel's compositions and keep on drawing inspiration from the ever-flowing rich well of his musical works.

His heirs donated the wealth of musical works and partituras of his library to the Yeshiva University. It would be only just and a most commendable project and a kind gracious act of tribute to the memory of Zeidel that this precious treasure should not remain hidden away in some obscure vaults. It should be brought out in fitting publications and thus made accessible to the Jewish musical fraternity, for which it was created and intended by the author.

With the passing from the scene of Zeidel Rovner disappeared the guiding spirit, the very embodiment of a firmly founded and established institution which had to its eternal credit, the educating, the tutoring and the equipping of generations of great cantors and musicians with all the necessary tools and knowledge they needed. With Zeidel having been summoned to his eternal rest, a momentous and glorious chapter of cantorial history, an era of great achievements in the field of liturgical music, came to an end. Finis was written to an illustrious life, to a trend originated by the fallen hero, who carried aloft with great competency the flag of Jewish music and the world of the chants of the synagogue will never recover from the loss it suffered by his departure to his heavenly abode and will never be the same again.

In Berditchev Zeidel's yearly salary was two thousand, two hundred rubles. This "huge" compensation was not of course meant solely for his own services. From it he was obliged to also cover the expenses of his choir. As a natural consequence of having at his disposal such a "considerable" sum, there were times when the food supplies in the cantor's house became totally exhausted.

The owner of the grocery store, which his wife patronized, obligingly granted his beloved cantor credit. But being a poor devil himself, there was a limit beyond which he was unable to go in his generosity. He had to pay his bills to the wholesaler and therefore he, too, in turn had to draw the line beyond which he could not possibly hand out merchandise on credit.

That point had already long been reached and passed by the Zeidel family. The storekeeper had to put his foot down. Either he gets some payment at least on account of the long past-due bills or there'll be no more credit.

Zeidel, however, was in no position to make any kind of payment. There was no money in the till and with the credit stopped cold the cupboard was as bare as the actresses in the present-day off and on Broadway shows and X-rated movies and the hungry chorists were on his neck. "If only we had a cup of tea" they wished. Well, that surely was a modest enough request. But how to get around the refusal of Reb Chayim, the gro-

cery man, to grant any more credit, that was the question.

The war-council of Reb Zeidel and his "Kapelye" after much deliberation sent one of the singers into the lion's den to charm and soften up Reb Chayim into lending the cantor at least some "sweetochny" tea bags for the gang. After much haggling the "Meshorer" successfully completed his mission. He got the desired tea bags but in return he had to pawn his hat as a "Mashkon" (pledge and guarantee).

Happy as a lark, even though minus his "Kapelyush" he ran home with the precious complement of tea to the anxiously waiting group. When they saw him coming with the package under his arm, the ensemble broke out in song.

Their joy, however, soon was spoiled by some killjoy in their ranks who complained, "But where is the sugar?" "What good is tea without a grain of sugar?"

Gloom was written over all faces. The sad glances from their eyes were focused on the "shliach" (messenger) imploring him to finish what he successfully had begun. He could read their unspoken words.

"But I had enough of a hard time to lay my hand on the tea bags," the just returned emissary moaned. "How do you expect me to squeeze out from the 'Gazlen' (literally "robber", shylock) yet sugar also? What else is there that I could leave with him as a 'Mashkon?' With 'Leydige hent' [empty hands] there is no use me going back."

Taking inventory of what valuables there were left that could appeal to the adamant Reb Chayim, Zeidel hit upon the idea to offer his "Tabakpushke" (snuffbox). It was a fancy, multicolored hand-carved, receptacle which was given him as a present by one of his admirers. Back ran the messenger, pushkle' in hand to the store. "What do you want now?" was the gruff Boruch habo (greeting) from the supicious Reb Chayim. "Sugar of course," this from the "Meshorer" of Zeidel, dangling the precious object before the eyes of the grocer. The Tabak pushke did the trick, making his assignment a cinch and so the story having had a happy ending, the "Chevrah Chorists" drank cup after cup of tea. At least their thirst was stilled, if not their gnawing hunger.

Having had a good lesson from the sad experiences of his arch rival Nisi Belzer, who often after having put a lot of time and effort in tutoring, polishing and refining a raw singer and transforming him into an experienced, accomplished and professional Meshorer, would wake up one day to find that his ungrateful disciple had flown the coop, leaving the master, to whom he owed his acquired knowledge, flat. Zeidel in an effort to prevent such unloyal behavior on the part of his helpers, made every one of them on taking them on as members of his ensemble sign longterm contracts.

He would also incorporate into the contract a provision that would specify that the singer was to pay a certain large sum as indemnification for the loss of his services to the cantor in case he should at any time prior to the expiration of the contract default on his obligations by leaving the ensemble without the consent of the cantor.

It was on the basis of the terms of such a contract that Zeidel brought a lawsuit against the singer and well known writer and music critic of Warsaw, Menachem Kipniss, attaching his household goods and collecting the specified indemnification for having failed to honor his duties to Zeidel Rovner, which he assumed at the time he joined his chorus.

Menachem Mendel Kipniss, (1878-1942) who prior to joining the chorus of Zeidel Rovner was also a member of Nisi Belzer's ensemble was the son of the Strikover cantor. Both his parents died when he was only eight years old and he was raised by his brother, who like his father, was also a cantor, who allegedly served as the inspiration for the story "Peysi Dem Chazens" by "Sholom Aleychem." Menachem grew up to be a slight, short pockfaced youth. He was a very talented "meshorer" (choirboy). It was said that when he sounded off with a solo, his honey-sweet alto voice so charmed the worshipers, that under its impact their hearts melted like butter under the rays of the sun.

When he defected from Zeidel's kapelye in 1900, he left for Warsaw, where he became in time the most influential music critic. He enlisted as chorist in the Nozsik Synagogue Chorus of Avrohom Tzvi Davidowitz and in the the chorus of the Warsaw Opera. In 1902 he succeeded in being admitted to the Conservatory of Warsaw. To round out his musical knowledge he subscribed to the correspondence courses in theory and counter point given by Avrohom Behr Birnboim of Chenstechov. He also made a reputable career as a concert singer, together with his wife, Zimrah Zeligfeld, whom he married after the death of his first wife. The popular duo gave concerts all over Poland and neighboring countries.

His prime activity, however, was as a newspaper writer on the staff of "Heint" (Today). Especially was he considered the undisputed authority in the matter of liturgical art. Cantors feared the sharp acid pen of Kipniss. He could make or break them. In 1934, the 25th Jubilee of his literary and artistic career was celebrated in the Coliseum with the participation in the program of cantors Sirota, Koussevitzky and Borenstein. There was also choral music rendered by the ensembles of Dovid Eisenshtadt, Avrohom Davidowich and Moshe Shneyer. It was a gala affair as the cream of Warsaw Jewry paid tribute to one of its prominent public figures. Kipniss also published a rich collection of Yiddish folksongs.

He, together with his wife were caught in the net of the surprisingly swift blitz of the Nazi occupying forces, which cut off all roads of escape from Warsaw. He was yet lucky to die of natural causes and to be buried in a grave of the Jewish cemetery which, just like the Tlomatzka Synagogue remained located outside of the two ghettos on the Aryan side of the city. Much more lamentable was the fate of his wife. She was deported to Treblinka where she was gassed to death by the mass-murdering Nazi hordes!

Chassin organized a quartet of Reb Zeidel's staunch, loyal chorists who stuck by him through thick and thin. Concerts were arranged in several sections of New York, Brooklyn and the Bronx. But as if Satan made it his particular project to frustrate all efforts on behalf of the

Master, the weather invariably was playing the role of the spoiler. Either it was raining or it was snowing. The streets covered with ice and snow or slush were slippery or muddy and unnegotiable. The result: a very small audience.

Osher Chassin even organized a "Judea Film Company" and directed a talkie film, "Di Stimme of Yisroeil" (the Voice of Israel) with several cantors. It not only was no money maker but a considerable sum was lost and when he died, long before Reb Zeidel, cantors Steinberg, Roitman and others had to contribute and pass the hat to raise the expenses for the funeral. He arranged a big affair in the Brooklyn Premier Theater which was held on March 18th, 1924 with the participation of Rosenblatt, Kwartin, Roitman, Hershman, Steinberg, Chagy, Shorr, Kachko and Don Fuchs accompanied by Zeidel, his choir and an orchestra.

A young fellow came to Reb Zeidel as an applicant seeking admission as a tenor to his choir. The master happened to be in need of a good tenor so he asked the visitor to read some music and give out with his voice.

After listening to the singing of the eager candidate Reb Zeidel without mincing words told him: "My dear young man: You have no voice, you cannot read music, your 'Ivreh' is very poor, consequently I cannot possibly accept you into my ensemble." "So" said the disappointed fellow, "What do you think I should do?" "My best advice to you would be," replied Reb Zeidel, "that you should apply for a cantorial position."

When Zeidel Rovner set out for America he came by himself. He had his doubts about the advisability of making the new world his permanent home. So he thought it more practical to travel by himself and only after having surveyed the new environment and found it promising would he arrange to bring out his family.

He made his temporary home with some friends and devoted admirers of his, a family by the name of Baras. They catered to all his needs and gave him the run of the house on Avenue "B". It was the habit of Reb Zeidel to take a nap after lunch regularly. There were young children in the family: Morris and Jack, both of them musicians of note nowadays. But they were warned by their parents to walk on tiptoes and dare not disturb the sleep of the honored boarder of the Baras'es. To make doubly sure they were shunted out of the house for the duration of Reb Zeidel's period of midday rest.

"Judging by my long experience," said Reb Zeidel Rovner, "all cantors are convinced that they themselves are the greatest masters. That self-confidence gives them the 'chutzpah' to go up to the altar. It brings to mind the wise 'psak-din' [decision] of Reb Yossl Loksh, the chief Rabbi of Chelm.

"One day the poor inhabitants of Chelm banded together and declared a strike. They would not go into the synagogue, they threatened, where they were assigned seats on the back benches. As a matter of course the front benches, the socalled "Mizrach" [east] seats were reserved for the

prominent, wealthy men.

"They demanded that they too be given seats in the Mizrach pews. (All synagogues are so built that the face of the worshipers is turned eastward to Zion and Jerusalem). Otherwise, they will boycott the religious services in the synagogue and rather than sit in the back, stay at home and pray in private.

"After much soul searching and deliberation Reb Yoss'l hit upon an ingenious solution. He called together the membership into the synagogue interior and solemnly declared all the walls of the sanctuary to be 'Mizrach vant', east walls.

"From now on," he declared, "there won't be any longer any western, southern nor northern wall. Everywhere in this holy edifice there will be only 'Mizrach.' " With this Solomonian decree the back of the strike by the "Kaptzonim" (poor devils) was broken. Henceforth they were all sitting near the "Mizrach wall" and they were "meyuchosim" (noble men) even as the "Negidim" (the rich men).

The "Nimshol" (similarity moral) is, that each and every "chazzon" is convinced that where he is sitting is the "Mizrach vant" and that his place is in the front row.

CHAPTER 23

YERUCHEM HAKOTON

Yeruchem Hakoton, the great cantorial wizard was a sincerely pious Jew — small in body but tall in spirit — His generous, good heart — Modest and humble he was not — His great influence on Zeidel Rovner.

Kishinev lies not far from Odessa. There was always a heavy traffic, a lively intercourse and an exchange of goods between the two cities. Just as Kishinev used to deliver and export to Odessa the surplus of her varied agricultural products, which then were carried from there by a fleet of ships which jammed the humming port on the Black Sea, to all ports of the world, Kishinev also provided for the large synagogues of Odessa prominent cantors, who had ambitions to advance and to make progress in their holy calling, and were anxious to get to the big cities.

As far as the cantorial profession was concerned, Kishinev played the role of a waiting room which led into the reception room, Odessa. The relationship between these two cities was exactly as our sages so aptly prescribe the required proper procedure: "Haskeyn atzmoch be'pruzdor, kedey shetikoneys letraklin" (prepare yourself in the waiting room, meaning this world, so that you will be ready to enter the reception room, the world to come). Kishinev was the preparatory school for Odessa. As an illustration, it may suffice to mention only the names of Minkowsky, Rozumny, Kalechnick, Bachman, Swet and Steinberg, all of whom came to Odessa by way of Kishinev.

A similar relationship existed between Kishinev and Berditchev. The latter city, too, got her famous cantors from the private "heymishe" homey-conservatories which flourished in Kishinev, as was the case with Yeruchem Hakoton, Nisi Belzer, Zeidel Rovner, David Moshe Steinberg

and Ephrayim Shlepack.

There was, however, a distinct difference between the qualifications which these two cities sought in selecting a cantor. Odessa stressed and put the emphasis on talent and ability. Berditchev, on the other hand, underscored Jewish education, talmudic knowledge and the fear of God (Yiras Shomayim). The prevalent point of view in Odessa was, "Shucks! Who cares how learned and how pious he is? After all, he is not a rabbi. So what if he is not such a great scholar and a little less than a Tzadik [ultrareligious]? The main thing is to possess a beautiful voice and that he should be able to 'deliver the goods' in a stimulating way." But the Jews of Berditchev used a different yardstick with which to measure and a scale with which to weigh the qualities of a cantor. "Bah! So what if his voice is somewhat weak and his delivery not so artistic. Let him holler and yell a little less. What is more essential and important is that he be a 'Ben Torah', that he should know what he is saying and that his religious conduct should be above reproach."

The first famous cantor of whom Kishinev could boast was, as far as we know, Yeruchem Hakoton. With his arrival in the capital of Bessarabia began the golden age of the cantorial art, the center of which was Kishinev and in the course of which the holy profession reached a high degree of development, and spread its wings over the whole of Bessarabia and in time overflowed the boundaries, penetrating also into other important centers of Jewish religious life. Yeruchem wrote a new chapter in the history of "Chazzonut." He opened up a new style of cantorial interpretation, which had as its object to effect a merger between the traditional chants (nusach) and the new musical forms, thus producing an ingenious amalgam, a happy blend of the two.

He was small-boned and so short that he could've walked under the table with an opened up umbrella. It was necessary to build for him an especially high footstool on which to stand at the pulpit, when conducting the services. From this most likely originated the custom, that everybody who is somebody and considers himself to be a professional cantor usually demands of the trustees before anything else, that they provide him with a platform or pedestal in front of the pulpit, which he mounts with measured, dignified steps before beginning to chant the service.

What lies behind such requests? What is the reason for cantors and quasi-cantors insisting on having some wooden elevation to stand on? What does it do for them? In the first place it is said to be a boon, a help for the voice, which allegedly sounds better if the singer has a wooden podium under his feet. Secondly, standing on a wooden platform one becomes elevated and automatically a taller cantor (at least by several inches). Is this an advantage? Doesn't it say in the scriptures, "Mimamaakim Korosicho Adoshem" (I'm calling to you, O God, from the very depth) which is interpreted as a requisite that the precentor, at the time when he is conducting the services, should be standing at a lower level than the congregation. Well, so you have a valid point there, but just try to convince cantors!

It reminds one of the story about Napoleon who, on one occasion, tried to reach a book on a high shelf, but was unable to, even though he stood on his toes. Seeing his predicament, his adjutant and military aide jumped up and rushed to his assistance, saying, "Allow me, Your Majesty, let me get it down for you. I am bigger than you." Napoleon, taken aback, looked at him piercingly and instantly corrected him, "You mean you are longer, for nobody is bigger than Napoleon Bonaparte." The moral of this story as applied to the matter in question is, that no footstool, no matter how high it may be, can increase the greatness of any cantor. It can only bring him closer to the ceiling.

As for Yeruchem, as small as he was in his physical stature, so great was he in the spiritual and artistic sense. According to the appraisal of Zeidel Rovner, he was the greatest cantor of his time and perhaps of all times. Rovner tells of the time when he first arrived in Berditchev. It was a very cold wintry day. From the depot he rode directly to the inn, the manager of which was an acquaintance of his. Tired from the long journey he lay down to sleep. But he was too nervous and couldn't close an eye. Rather than lie in bed awake he got up, got dressed and went out into the street.

As he was walking through the dark, silent and empty streets of the sleeping city, he suddenly heard in the stillness of the night the strains of a low, sobbing, whining voice mingled with occasional sighs which seemed to come from a faintly illuminated window in the distance. He thought it probably was a sick child in pain, breathing heavily and softly crying and moaning in its disturbed sleep. He turned in the direction of the window whence came the rays of light. When he got close and peered in, he saw on the wall the long shadow of a figure moving back and forth. An elderly Jew with a long impressive beard was sitting on the floor, his face buried in a big prayer book, with his eyes and glasses clouded by tears, softly murmuring a prayer. Zeidel stood for a long while under the window and only when at long last the light was extinguished could he rouse himself to walk back to the rooming house. That night he could not fall asleep at all any more. The sobbing, melancholy melody of that oldster, who was apparently observing the dictum of the sages and the custom of the ultrapious to get up in the middle of the night and say "Chatzos" (midnight prayers), kept going round and round in his head until the early hours of the morning.

The next day his acquaintances took him to the chief cantor of the city, saying that it was advisable for him to first of all pay a visit to "Yeruchem Hakoton" and get acquainted with him so as to gain his goodwill, his assistance and support. It was rumored that he was planning to retire and this might open up an opportunity for him. When he saw the house to which they brought him, Zeidel, to his great surprise, thought that he recognized it as the same one, in front of which he had stood the night before. But if he still had some doubts about the validity of his tentative identification, they disappeared entirely when he saw Reb Yeruchem, who came halfway toward them, his arms out wide to meet his visitors.

He was coatless in shirt sleeves with a high pointed, velvet "yarmulke" on his head (which was most likely designed to make him look somewhat taller than he was), his pants tucked into his shoes which were a cross between shoes and boots, his small frame enveloped in a big, broad "talis koton" (ritual cloth) which was wrapped around his body like a garment. There was no more any question about it. Zeidel now was quite sure, without any doubt in his mind, that it was Yeruchem, whom he had seen sitting on the floor and praying the night before, and his respect for the great cantor grew enormously.

He was an observant Jew in the fullest sense of the word, a true "Tzadik" (righteous and just man) whose chants sprang from the well of his deeprooted fear and love of God. When he was not praying, he sat in front of an open folio studying with great diligence. He was conversant with Jewish laws and entirely at home, swimming lustily in the sea of the Talmud. Even rabbis held him in great regard and considered him a great "Talmid Chochom" (scholar).

But, to be truthful, it must also be recorded that excessive modesty and too much humbleness was not one of his faults as the following episode illustrates: He was once summoned to a Din Torah (religious trial) before the head of the Jewish court (Rosh Beys-Din), Reb Yozif (his title was "head of the Jewish court," for after the death of Reb Levi Yitzchock Berditchever the city no longer appointed an official Rabbi). Upon entering the study, Yeruchem got the impression that he was being slighted by the rabbi, who was sitting immersed in his thoughts and in the books that lay before him, and was probably not even aware of his visitor. The rabbi seemed to ignore the entering cantor, who was not used to such a reception. This treatment aroused his wrath and he gave vent to his feelings by saying boastfully: "What you know rabbi, I know also, but there are many things that I know, that you don't."

But one does not have to be overly generous in order to be able to overlook his flaunting proud self-respect and self-estimation. You have to take into consideration the undeniable fact that he was, after all, truly an unusually talented man. He was not exactly snobbish, but he knew his own worth and expected the recognition which was due him and a correspondingly appropriate treatment.

We had previously had the opportunity to attempt to give some idea of the greatness of Yeruchem as a cantor and a composer. Here we will try to relate Zeidel's impressions about Yeruchem's compositions and of the way he himself recited and interpreted them. Almost every time Zeidel Rovner paid him a visit, Yeruchem used to greet him with the words, "Oh, I have something new for you."

On one occasion, when he proceeded to sing for him a just completed composition of his to the text of "Ato Nigleyso" (Thou didst appear) from the New Year's service, Zeidel was so impressed by his beautiful rendition of the outstanding work that he could not contain himself and impulsively embraced his older colleague and enthusiastically began to kiss Yeruchem.

On another occasion, he chanted in Zeidel's presence the prayer "Ezkero Elokim" (I remember, Oh Lord) from the "Nilah" (closing) service of the Day of Atonement with his unique brand of heart-rending sweetness and ecstasy, which could move a stony heart. His one-man audience remained sitting in utter astonishment, unable to grasp where such heavenly tunes came from and unable to hold back his tears. It appeared to Zeidel as if the "Shechina," the glory of the Almighty himself, was joining in with the lament and wail of Yeruchem's "Ezkero."

It is, therefore, no wonder that, as the story goes, with the help of his prayers on the Day of Atonement, Yeruchem carried the worshipers away with him into the seventh heaven and they forgot entirely that they had not eaten for 24 hours. More often than not, his Nilah service used to go on long after nightfall, but nobody moved from his place. They all sat as if they were glued to their seats. Their hunger was farthest from their minds. Their hearts were satiated and overflowing with the inspired, prayerful, heavenly music, which was flowing from Yeruchem's pearly lips with magical magnetism.

What shall we add, what are the right words to apply and what superlatives shall we use to characterize his famous "Uvyom Simchaschem" (on your festive day), his "Sefirah" (counting of the Omer), his "Lecho Neraneno" (let us go and chant) and his "Himotzey lono (be accessible to us)? Who can even begin to list and enumerate his wonderful compositions? He was comparable to a life-giving spring, a blessed well which the more you draw from it the stronger it runs. And with his phenomenal voice which had no limits, the incomparable master singer was capable of producing the most marvelous sounds and in a fantastically brilliant manner spin out his artistic recitatives.

But Yeruchem was not only a great singer and familiar with the rules and regulations of music theory. He was also one of the very first cantors who could play the piano. On Saturday nights, after he made "Havdolo," the ritual of bidding good-bye and God-speed to the departing Sabbath, he used to sing "Eliyohoo hanovi" (Eliyah, the prophet) and accompany himself on his favorite instrument. People used to gather outside his window in the street and listen to the sweet melodies, with which he was wont to embellish the departure of the day of rest.

He was dedicated with heart and soul to the members of his choir. The relationship between them was like that of a father toward his children. His uppermost worry was always to provide them with all their necessities in the best possible manner. He was once engaged to officiate on the High Holy Days in Poltava. Due to unforseen difficulties and accidents en route, which slowed their progress to a crawl, he just barely managed to arrive together with his choir boys on the very last day preceding Rosh Hashono (New Year's) in the afternoon. All of them being tired and weary from the journey, they naturally could not have been at their best. Consequently, their rendition of the service on the first day of the holiday was not up to par. The disappointed members of the congregation sneaked out of the synagogue at the conclusion of the service, deliber-

ately ignoring the singers, who stationed themselves near the exit, waiting for some of the worshipers to invite them to their tables, as was the custom in those years in the old country. They looked the other way, not caring about the plight of the poor hungry boys, whose performance did not come up to their expectations. When Yeruchem, who was dining at the home of the rabbi, returned to the inn and saw that the choir boys were chewing on a piece of dry bread and a slice of herring which the housekeeper of the rooming house had somehow managed to requisition for them in the emergency, he broke down crying bitterly in anger and pain and pouring out his indignation and helpless frustration by murmuring to himself over and over the question, "Zoo Toro vezoo sechoro?" "Zoo negino vezoo sechoro?" (Is this the reward for our efforts and work of spreading culture?)

On the next day, the second day of Rosh Hashonoh, he began his service not with "Hineni," which ushers in the Mussaf service, but instead, to the great surprise of the whole congregation, he ascended the pulpit earlier and proceeded to chant "Ashrey" which is the conclusion of the "Sahacharis" service. He began reciting "Someich Adoshem lechol hanoflim" (God supports all who are falling down) and when he demonstratively underscored, and again and again repeated and emphasized the words "Veato noseyn lohem es ochlom beito" (and thou givest them their food in time), it became clear to all what he had in mind. They realized that he was upbraiding and chastising them for their cruel act of yesterday.

In contrast to the first day, the Mussaf service this time was a la Yeruchem Hakoton. Both the cantor, as well as the choir, were in excellent form and they evoked in the hearts of the worshipers such a fire of emotional response with their inspired chants, that not an eye remained dry. The enthusiasm was so overwhelming, the impact so powerful, that at the conclusion of the service the Jews picked up the cantor, raised him and carried him on their shoulders in a triumphal procession through the streets of the city to the house of the gabbay (trustee). They feted him, swarmed around him and made merry in his company, until it was time to return to the synagogue for the "Mincha" service.

There also began immediately after the morning service a lively contest among the members concerning the choir singers, for every one of them wanted to have the privilege of taking home one of the boys for dinner as an ornament for his table. The result of his colossal success was that the trustees did not want the cantor to leave. They insisted that Yeruchem remain with them permanently. Their plea was so persuasive that he finally accepted and held down the cantorial position in Poltava for two years.

He was a very charitable man. At one time he arrived in a village for a scheduled guest appearance at a Sabbath service. Listening to the conversations of the people, he heard them discuss sorrowfully the pitiful case of a poor, orphaned bride, who was to have been married. The wedding was supposed to have taken place, but the bridegroom left the bride waiting at the altar because her mother, a poor widow, was unable to deliver the pro-

mised dowry. The soft-hearted Yeruchem was so moved by the sad story that he gave the compensation which he received for his Sabbath service to the widow which enabled her to fulfill her pledge to the bridegroom. The wedding was rescheduled and Yeruchem himself performed the ceremony.

I have purposely refrained for as long as possible from touching upon the unpleasant, painful theme of the feud and strife that went on constantly between Yeruchem and Nisi Belzer and the mutual hostility which existed between them, for those sour and false notes, somehow, do not fit in at all with the harmony of his God-fearing, most ethical conduct and his noble way of life. But when writing about the episodes and occurrences of Yeruchem's private life, one cannot avoid mentioning this matter.

I have already written about it in one of the previous chapters and here I propose to confine myself only to the opinion of Zeidel Rovner. According to him, the reason for the constant fights and enmity was the fact, that Yeruchem did not think much of the musical knowledge of Nisi, of his ability as a composer and deprecated and disapproved of his style of cantorial art. This vexed and embittered Nisi who according to Zeidel was of a stubborn, peevish, spiteful nature, the kind of human being, who flares up at the least little provocation, who carries around with him an eternal anger at everything and everybody, and who cannot get along with people.

But to depend entirely on and to subscribe without question to Zeidel Rovner's verdict, which would put the responsibility for the acrimonious feud largely at the door of Nisi, could conceivably be ill-advised, for he surely could not be absolutely neutral in his evaluation of this controversy and quarrel. It must be remembered that he himself was also embroiled in a running battle with Nisi, which even degenerated often into a veritable war. There was never any love lost between them, so he could not possibly have a very high opinion of his opponent. On the other hand, he thought the world of Yeruchem, who had recommended him as his successor for the cantorial post in the synagogue in the new city section of Berditchev. His gratitude to his mentor and his boundless admiration for Yeruchem's extraordinary talents may have influenced his opinion and inclined him to side with Yeruchem as against Nisi.

It is not as simple and easy to judge the affair. The best explanation of the regrettable feud may be found in the theory, according to which cantors are not unlike prima-donnas. It is well known that if one leading lady thinks that her competition for the public favor received more applause than she or tried to steal the show, of which she is supposed to be the star, there usually breaks out an undeclared war between them. Well, cantorial primadonnas are not any different either. Every one of them blows his own horn, thinks the world of himself and is convinced that there is nobody like him in the world. He is terribly jealous of the success of a colleague. And as if this were not enough, there was the added and even more important factor of the fans, the buffs, the zealous admirers and entourages of the cantors who were the real troublemakers. They used to invent all kinds of spurious, slanderous stories about the idol of the op-

posing camp, in the mistaken belief that by discrediting the other cantor the prestige of their own beloved master would automatically be increased.

Veneration of cantors was as widespread and fervid in the Jewish circles of the old countries as was the unquestioning, absolute slavish devotion of the Chassidim (ultrareligious sect) to their saintly rabbi. Just as the latter would go into a burning fire for their worshipped holy man and trample to death anyone who would dare utter a derogatory word about him, so, too, were the followers of the cantors. These enthusiastic admirers were ready to go to any length to promote the career of the man who caught their fancy. They were not unlike the organized claque, who are hired to come to an opera performance for the sole purpose of furiously applauding a certain singer with the difference that the cantor's claque were idealists, volunteers, who did it only for art's sake and not, God forbid, for money. But their army of volunteers was ready at any time to go into battle for the honor and reputation of the man in whom they believed. Often veritable wars broke out, the opposing parties came to blows in the course of their heated arguments and discussions about the ability and greatness of their respective cantors. One method of persuasion was the use of flying rocks and wooden stands of the synagogue. The sworn followers did not shy away from any means to uphold the exalted position and stature of their cantors, whom they put on the highest pedestal. They kept blowing up the fire of contention by pouring on it the oil of hate and jealousy between their admired cantorial artists.

Both Yeruchem and Nisi were great cantors in their respective fields. Each of them possessed unusual qualities. They were never on friendly terms and sometimes not even on speaking terms. It is hard to assess whose fault it was. But that their followers had a hand in aggravating the feud, there can be no doubt. It was like the case of Brahms versus Wagner. While Wagnerians and Brahmsians were flaying each other the two composers respected each other as musicians. But as the saying goes, a Jewish soul cannot be estimated, meaning that you can never tell what a Jewish soul is capable of. In the presence of death, the great equalizer and conciliator, all the petty human weaknesses take a back seat, all discords and quarrels are forgotten and forgiven, and so it happened that at the funeral of Yeruchem Hakoton, Nisi Belzer turned to Zeidel Rovner and with tears in his eyes uttered the heartfelt, sincere words, "Zeidel, the crown of our heads has fallen. Our great loss is irreplaceable."

With this statement became unanimous the verdict which the jury of the cantorial history brought in about the place which Yeruchem occupies in the Pantheon of the great figures and builders of Chazzonuth. Not only was thereby silenced the only dissonant chord in the symphony of praise that poured in from all over the world for the great deceased, but his former great antagonist had with his words of tribute placed the most beautiful and fitting crown of laurel on the altar of his blessed memory. He passed on to his heavenly reward in 1891 at the age of 93. His voice had not lost its luster. When he officiated on the Days of Awe, being a man who had already passed his eighty-eighth birthday he was still the past mas-

ter able to evoke deep emotion and great admiration in the hearts of the congregants.

Yeruchem was a profound scholar of the scriptures and a great learned Talmudist. He was also knowledgeable in the mystical secrets of "Kabbalah". But even though he was a very pious strictly observant Jew, he was by no means a fanatic.

In his choice of clothing and his whole comportment he was an esthetic, who displayed good taste. He has developed a keen sense of what was fitting and proper and shunned ostentatious, attention-attracting apparel as gimmicks.

He made it a rule to refrain from eating or drinking anywhere outside his own home. This of course applied also to the frequent occasions, when his professional duties required his presence at joyous family celebrations like "Brises" (circumcision rituals) and "Chasenes" (wedding ceremonies) "Bar Mitzvah" festivities and other social banquets.

Among his contemporary colleagues Yeruchem Hakoton played the role of "Menageyn Hador" (the preeminent "Chazzan" of his generation). He was considered in relation to the cantors of that era of a stature similar to the one enjoyed by the Grand Rabbi Reb Aarontze Tchernobiler, as compared to that of his brethren, who also were great rabbinical authorities.

A cantor, who thought he knows it all, once asked Yeruchem Hakoton how can one like me too become a "Yeruchom." The wise master cited the words from a prayer "Umode Veozeyv Yeruchom" (If a sinner confesses and leaves the false road onto which he had strayed, he will be granted compassion by the Lord).

Applying it to a practitioner of the cantorial profession, he said if he confesses and admits that there is yet much which is lacking in his armor and he sheds his haughty demeanor of false pride of the I-know-already-all-there-is-to-know and instead buckles down to learn and improve himself, he too can become a Yeruchom."

As a footnote to history it ought to be recorded that his full name was Chayim Yeruchom ben Avrohom Haleyvi Blindman.

CHAPTER 24

THE MOTHER OF A RUSSIAN GENERAL KISSED THE HAND OF NISI BELZER

The occasion was a musicale in her palace at which the cantor and his ensemble were the featured artists — He was opposed to his sons' embarking on a secular musical career — Military officials ask Nisi not to "disturb" the singing of his own choir.

In the "old country" — as Europe was known among the emigrants to America — where the everyday life of the Jew was closely connected with the synagogue, the advent of the month of Elul, when the sound of the ram's horn began re-echoing from the sacred walls of the house of worship at the close of each and every morning prayer session, caused the hearts of the devout to flutter in deep concern. It served as an urgent reminder that it was time for self-examination, for making an audit of their moral assets and liabilities, for going over the balance sheet of the past year with a fine comb in order to see where and to what extent they had failed in their religious obligations. Perhaps there was yet time and a way to correct matters before the formidable day of reckoning would be upon them.

Needless to say, they became even more agitated as the first night of Slichoth (forgiveness) drew near. In a somber and worrisome mood, with his heart heavy and guilt-laden, the Jew woke up to the grim realization that the situation had become serious indeed. Resolute action could not be put off any longer. It was high time to take himself in hand and confession

being good for the soul murmur "mea culpa" and do penance by proceeding without delay to mend his ways.

They would go to bed much earlier than usual so as to be able to get in a few hours of slumber before the "shames" (sexton) would set out on his rounds in the early hours of the dawn, strutting through the deserted streets, and rapping with his wooden mallet on the closed shutters to wake up the members of the congregation with his singsong call, "Get ye up for 'Slichoth' for the service of the Creator." No sooner did the knock on the window and the sound of the familiar voice reach their ears than all of them would jump out of their warm beds with a jolt, as if shot at by a lethal weapon. Neither dead nor alive, with sleepy half-closed eyes, they would rush out into the still dark of the night and, shivering in the nippy autumn air, hurry to the synagogue.

Well, if the onset of the Elul moon had such a profound impact, such a sobering and even upsetting effect on the layman, how much more so would that have to be true for the cantor. His daily routine went through an even greater change once the autumn leaves began to fall and the approach of the High Holiday season was imminent.

Not for nothing does it say in the cantor's own exclusive prayer, "Heyey im pipiyos" (Be Thou oh Lord with the mouths of the designated emissaries of thy people Israel), "Eyney amcho bom telooyos" (the eyes of thy flock on them are fixed), their sights most certainly were turned on the spokesman, who was selected by the congregation, and on whom they were depending to secure for them with his persuasive prayers and moving chants the grace of heaven so that they would be granted a good year. His constituents became concerned about his health. They used to surround him with special attention, loving kindness and care. They guarded him like the apple of their eye, treating him in the manner of close relatives attending to the needs, welfare and comfort of a woman in the delicate final stages of pregnancy. Ein kleinikeit! (no bagatelle this) our cantor — no evil eye should cast its curse on him. They feared to give Satan any ideas by even mentioning it. It surely would be a very bad omen, a veritable calamity, if God forbid anything untoward should happen to the beloved representative of the community and he should "chas vecholeele" (perish the thought) become hoarse or come down with a cold.

And needless to say, the cantor himself was also fully conscious of the importance of the great task that was assigned to him and the heavy responsibility that rested on his shoulders. With redoubled vigilance and elaborate precautions, he would take care and watch over the precious organ nestled in his throat, doing all he could and employing all the means at his disposal that could be helpful to insure that his voice would be as fit as a fiddle for the ordeal that lay ahead. He would keep swallowing all kinds of pills and medicines, gargling his throat and drinking "gogl mogls" (a mixture of egg yolks and honey). He would also refrain as far as possible from venturing out into the street whenever inclement weather would seem to make exposing his vocal chords to the open air hazardous. In case going outdoors became unavoidable, he would in those crucial

days never fail to turn up the collar of his overcoat before reluctantly venturing out, thus providing his throat with a protective shield in a determined effort to avoid catching a cold. This, however, was merely an extra precaution. For throughout the entire month of Elul, the cantor's neck was like an inaccessible fortress to air, wind or rain, which were looked upon by him as its mortal enemies that were lurking with evil intentions. The whole area between the chin and the shoulders was wrapped around tightly with a thick, large woolen scarf. This was supposed to be the infallable insurance against any chance of his falling victim to a draft thereby affording the Satan an opportune moment for carrying out his devilish project.

Only as a result of the application of these preventive measures and the precautionary steps taken by the careful and circumspect cantor was he able to make sure that when he mounted the pedestal and stationed himself in front of the pulpit to begin the chanting of the "Slichoth" ritual, he was — stone hoarse. Yes, you heard me right the first time — "heyzerik vi di vant" stone hoarse exactly.

I observed it happening time and again. The cantors under whose tutelage I served my apprenticeship somehow invariably were "under the weather" "davke" — (jinx fashion) when the days of awe rolled around. Just when their great moment for which they had made such elaborate preparations, arrived, they were not up to it. The reason for the odd coincidence? Well, the explanation for this, it would seem, could be, that at the moment when the cantor was at long last proceeding to peel off the big shawl, his well-covered, warm neck, which for a long time had not felt the slightest touch of the wind on its surface, suddenly became exposed to the chilly autumn air of the night. Is it then any wonder that he caught a bad cold immediately? If the average cantor was thus likely to become incapacitated, then you can just imagine what was liable to happen to a cantor, who was in the habit of taking a dip in the ritual bath before going forth to the Slichoth services. This then really was very risky and most certainly meant deliberately courting the danger of becoming stricken with a serious illness like bronchitis or even pneumonia, or at the very least a nasty cold, not to speak of getting hoarse as a crow.

These thoughts unwittingly come to mind apropos of the fact, that the cantor about whom we are about to write presently did exactly that. Not only did he himself immerse his body thoroughly in the chilly cleansing waters of the mikvah before he could consider himself worthy and fit to pray for his flock, but he also dragged along with him his entire "kapelye." He made all the members of his chorus comply with the ritualistic chore. And how about the outlandish time, the ungodly hour of the night, which he chose for this preliminary prerequisite to the religious prayer session? Would you ever have guessed that it was two o'clock in the morning when it would be done, since the Slichoth service was scheduled to begin at three o'clock in the morning. And since we have not as yet identified the man we are talking about, we cannot possibly be accused of spreading malicious gossip, when we relate the acid comment

heard about the unnamed individual that he could very well afford the risk of going into the water. "He was not thereby taking any undesirable chances," said these detracting cynics. "He had nothing to lose, since he was anyway hoarse all the time."

Well! you must have already guessed from the few straws in the wind heretofore disclosed, that we can have reference to none other than Nisi Belzer (nee Spivack). In a preceding chapter when dealing with the cantors of Berditchev we started out telling about his life, but in the course of our narrative we somehow got off the subject, were distracted and carried off in a different direction, and thus lost sight of him.

For a cantor this is not an unusual occurrence. It often happens when he ventures out on an uncharted path of freewheeling "ad libitum" improvisation and gives free reign to his soaring phantasy, that his extemporaneous musical thoughts are prone to carry him on the wings of song away from the point of origin into an entirely different key. It takes dexterity and seasoned expertise to extricate himself and by means of skillful modulation get back safely to the basic theme. But since we are here not dealing with intricate dilemmas of singers in the practice of their craft, our problem lends itself to a more facile solution. All that is called for is a sort of reintroductory phrase frequently used in the storybooks after a diversionary excursion into unrelated territory, like "and now let us turn back and look in on the 'Ben Melech' [son of the king], our hero, the prince, at the point where we left him and find out what has happened to him in the interim." With our "Ben Melech" (a prince of liturgy he indeed was), many things happened. N.B. Linder, whose parents were next door neighbors of Nisi's in the house on Chadnova Street in Berditchev, tells about some of them. He used to come often to their home and settling into an armchair and sipping from his cup of tea, chatting about nothing in particular, he would rarely fail to bring up the problem that weighed most heavily on his mind. He would consult Linder's mother about it, soliciting her advice about bringing up his orphaned grandchildren, whom he had taken into his home as his wards after the untimely death of his son Alter.

In his youth Nisi was the lucky possessor of a fine alto voice and experts predicted great things for him. According to the account heard by Linder and related by him, a rich and powerful nobleman heard the young lad sing a solo in the ensemble of Yeruchem Hakoton and was so impressed by his ability and natural talent, that he became very much interested in his future. He planned to steal him away from the famous cantor's chorus, take him to St. Petersburg, have him baptized and make him join the musical ensemble of the Imperial Pravoslavna (Russian Orthodox) Church. However, by a miraculous heavenly intervention, during the night preceding the day on which the planned kidnapping was scheduled to be carried out, the young fellow lost his beautiful voice and received instead a choking, raspy, cough-like growl and the peculiarity of the sound which he emitted when singing gave rise to the suspicion, that his vocal chords had become partially paralyzed. As a consequence, the sinister plot was nipped in the bud.

This traumatic experience of his, together with the generally well known fact that in the Russia of that era a Jewish artist did not have a ghost of a chance of advancement and of getting anywhere in his field of endeavor unless he was ready to desert his faith and become an apostate, may have been responsible for Nisi's resolute opposition to the ideas of his two sons, both of whom were planning to devote themselves to musical careers. The pious, strictly-observant father stoutly vetoed their notions. He was determined to make his children industrious students of the sacred scriptures. During the years when he was residing in Kishinev, he hired for his sons the best "gemora melamdim" (higher grade Talmud Hebraic teachers) that could be found in the city. But the more he objected to their predilection for musical knowledge, the more anxious they became to acquire it. Had they but confined themselves to the study of liturgical music, the father would of course have acquiesced. But his offspring preferred secular music, which was anathema to their father. They loved and were charmed by profane secular worldly opuses, operas, symphonies and oratories and to waste their valuable time on such pursuits was something that Nisi surely could not be expected to condone. Since the stern disciplinarian, Reb Nisi, was not one to be trifled with, for he was even liable to inflict bodily punishment on the culprit, who would dare as much as even mention the contraband commodity, his son Alter used to hide away in the attic, where he felt safe and free to pursue his hobby of avidly reading and absorbing new insight from the music booklets and scores, which he somehow managed to get hold of surreptitiously.

In tandem with him in the conspiratorial enterprise was his most intimate friend, Avrohom Berkowitch, who also was wont to sneak up to the garret, there to bury his nose in the books and sheet-music partituras dealing with the forbidden fruit. It was he who in time became known in the world of liturgy as the celebrated cantor of Kishinev, Avrohom Kalechnick. Alter, jointly with his bosom buddy Avrohom, managed to absorb a considerable measure of musical knowledge and later on succeeded in overcoming the intransigent opposition of his mellowed father, who grudgingly gave his blessing for him to go to St. Petersburg, where he enrolled as a student in the Royal Conservatory from which he graduated cum laude.

In time, Alter grew in stature and advanced in his art to become a great composer and pianoforte virtuoso. He thus did at last achieve his goal. But at what a cost! It was an uphill struggle all the way. Not only did he diligently attend the lectures at the conservatory, but he simultaneously took courses at the gymnasium (high school). Furthermore, in order to earn his upkeep, he was obliged to give private music lessons to backward students, and as if this was not enough of a taxing schedule, he also took on the job of choirleader at the Baron Guinzburg Synagogue. It was too strenuous a life for even a man with the strongest constitution. Completely exhausted, he became mortally ill. The diagnosis of the physicians was that he was suffering from tuberculosis in a far advanced stage which proved to be fatal.

He died in the bloom of his young life, leaving behind a wife and two small children. It was these orphans that were raised in Nisi's home by him and his wife Sheynd'l after their father had so tragically passed away in the prime of his life. Eulogizing his outstanding disciple, Anton Rubinstein, the famous director of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, gave it as his considered opinion, that had not fate intervened so cruelly, Alter Spivack had in him the potential of eventually becoming the Russian Wagner.

The other son of Nisi Belzer, Yudel, who studied music in Vienna, was also a brilliant musician and a prolific composer, and was the author of many a number in the repertoire of his father's chorus. Boris Tomashefsky, a former chorist of Nisi's ensemble, brought him to New York and entrusted him with the assignment of writing music to certain librettos for the Second Avenue Yiddish Theatre, which was under Tomashefsky's direction. But when Yudel arrived in New York, a certain Friedsel, another former pupil of Nisi's said to him, "I have already stolen from your father so many of his melodies and have adapted and made so much of them in my musical arrangements for the Yiddish stage, that there is by now virtually nothing more left for you to do here."

Friedsel's frank confession did not deter Yudel. Undaunted by this disclosure, he tried nonetheless to make his way in show business, but since success eluded him, he eventually became a part-time cantor. He used to officiate in Philadelphia, mostly in concert halls on the High Holidays, with the assistance of a choir of fifty to sixty singers, who were thoroughly indoctrinated and scrupulously trained by him for many months and sang with remarkable artistic precision. He was a master in preparing and leading a singing ensemble, in which respect he closely resembled his father. In later years, he transferred the locale of his activities to Atlantic City, where he also went into the hotel business. According to people who knew him, he became even more successful as a hotel operator than as a cantor and choirmaster.

Nisi, who at first was adversely inclined toward secular music, later on mellowed considerably and had a change of heart and opinion in regard to classical music. It came about most likely as a result of his two sons' involvement with that branch of the art and the influence exerted by them on the originally skeptical father. Both Yudel and Alter used to bring him themes from operas, oratorios and symphonies, and finding them on close scrutiny interesting, he in turn would weave them into the structure of his liturgical compositions. There were frequent instances when they would also submit to Nisi their original opuses for use by the choir. A number of these became integral parts of Nisi's repertoire and were sung often by his ensemble with great success. Outstanding examples of creations from that source were Alter's "Veshomru" (The Children of Israel Shall Observe the Sabbath) and "Mimkomcho" (From Thy Exalted Place, Shine Forth).

Unlike his sons, Nisi never saw the inside of a conservatory. He picked up the whole liturgical "Torah" (codes) piecemeal from Yeruchem, Boruch Karliner and Zalman Umanyer. From these masters, he also got a

smattering of knowledge in theory, harmony and composition. The sheepskin diploma for "Chazzonuth" he received figuratively, of course, from none other than the grand rabbi of Sadigura. He was essentially an autodidact, a self-taught artist, but he had an innate knack and perception, an unusual skill and musical sense, which he developed with tenacious, single-minded consistency and perseverance. He was called the "Jewish Verdi" on the strength of his remarkable record of productivity and creativity. He composed innumerable musical works to the texts of psalms and prayers of almost the whole spectrum of the festivals and holy days of the Jewish calendar. Since there were undeniably some weak spots in his musical armor, there were bound to occur inadvertently some minor mistakes, occasional false chords or cumbersome unwieldy counterpoint passages. Nonetheless, such was his natural genius, that in spite of these imperfections even the greatest esthetic critics became enchanted listening to Nisi singing and directing his sublimely enticing compositions.

The impact of his primitive, energetic force, his dynamic vitality, and his flaring "chassidic" fervor was so overpowering, that the theoretic defects slipped past unnoticed, and even if the finely tuned professional ear heard the flaw, he could not very well find much fault with the author, knowing full well that with such an individualistic master of such a warm passionate personality, the almost scaldingly burning outpouring of the deeply-felt pious supplication must in religious chants take precedence over mere technicalities, such as classical form and scholastic principles.

Nisi was a stern perfectionist, a pedant, a strict, dominating and commanding taskmaster with a fiery temperament, who was demanding and eliciting unquestioning discipline from his singers, who trembled before his presence and like thoroughly trained soldiers stood at all times ready to do his bidding with scrupulous fidelity. He was very tense, preoccupied and nervous at the pulpit. Swinging his long arms hither and yon in seemingly perpetual motion, he was wont to indicate his displeasure and frustration by rapping on the stand in front of him. This gesture was an ominous signal, communicating to the culprits that things were not going well and that they had better be on their guard.

His total involvement in the task at hand became apparent by the profuse perspiration that used to stand out on his forehead, which he was in the habit of wiping every now and then with his red colored handkerchief, a characteristic accessory of "Chassidim" (members of the ultrareligious sect). He used to step down from the podium as thoroughly drenched as a wet rag. Even though he was praying with his "talis" (prayer wrap) over his head, he managed to wind the garment around and behind the cartilages and lobes of his ears so as to leave his keen and sensitive hearing organs free and unobstructed, thus enabling him to detect the faintest dissonant sound. Woe to the blundering singer who, however unintentionally, was guilty of throwing a monkey wrench into the harmony of his meticulously and carefully rehearsed liturgical opus. At the first indication that some member of the ensemble was floundering, the cantor's eyes could take on the aspect of flame throwers. His piercing stare and dark

frown were harbingers of a storm. When he turned his devastating gaze on the culprit, it was enough to make the blood curdle in his veins. If the offender did not instantly get in line and rush back onto the right track, the master's ire was liable to turn into uncontrollable rage and he was capable right there and then, of slapping the face of a father of several children. Nisi was motivated by puritan realism. In his fervent prayers, the anguish, agony and endless suffering of the Jewish people found eloquent expression. These laments were, however, coupled with the ray of hope and prayerful expectation that the "Shofeyt Kol Hoaretz," (the Just Judge of the Universe) could not possibly allow His Chosen People to be so cruelly victimized any longer and would surely not fail to mete out justice.

The format used by him could not be characterized as submissive praying, pure and simple. In his musical treatment of, for instance, "T'ka beshofor godol" (Sound the Great Horn for our Freedom), there can be heard more firmness of claim, bitter complaint and urgent call for protective counteraction than meek and humble resignation. Together with the pleading tone, one can feel an undercurrent of impatient reproach, brewing indignation, and resolute demand, as if he were presenting a brief of an attorney on behalf of his clients, citing chapter and verse, presenting arguments of a just and irrefutable case before the throne of the Lord, with the implication of rebellious sentiment. "Our Father in Heaven, it is high time that something be done about it. We will stand no more for temporizing. Willy nilly you will have to grant us our wishes and no dilly dallying any longer." This kind of approach resembled the method used by the great sage, Reb Leyvi Yitzchock Berditchever, in his famous disputes with the divine Creator which he used to hold in his old "Beys Hamidrosh" which adjoined the synagogue, where Nisi was officiating.

I had in my possession an old manuscript, a voluminous book containing a great number of compositions by Nisi Belzer. Like all of his works, they would be a veritable treasure for the repertoire of the synagogue, provided they were sifted, refined, rearranged, modernized, and what would be even more important and required, shortened by professionals in this field. Nowadays people haven't got the time and the patience to listen to such longwinded chants, no matter how beautiful and ingenious they may be. Nisi's audiences were not as restless as those of our modern age. The worshipers of that era in the Ukraine were in no hurry to leave the house of prayer. For their part he could have kept them in the synagogue until it was time for the evening service. From distant locations, even from as far away as neighboring villages, people used to flock en masse, often trekking on foot tens of miles for the privilege of hearing Nisi and his choir chant the blessing of the new moon. His host of admirers did not mind standing compressed like sardines and almost glued to each other for long hours, and they did not grow tired of listening to the heavenly music of the great master that was pouring forth in an unending stream, giving them a powerful spiritual uplift and making them forget physical discomfort, time and hunger. Many of the Berditchev Jews who were members of the other synagogues of the city, where they used to at-

tend religious services would, after the conclusion of the devotional session in their own house of worship, rush over to the central synagogue in the hope of still being able to catch and enjoy at least the tail end of the Nisi-brand liturgical fare served up for the edification of the enchanted assembly.

When a Jew would on a Sabbath or a festival come home much later than usual and the "Tcholent" (a special Sabbath dish consisting of meat, beans and barley or potatoes) was cold, the disgruntled housewife was likely to berate him with the reproach, "Oha! Of course, you had to go and listen to Nisi!" She did not have to ask him where he was. She knew that there was only one lure that could be counted in her husband's estimation for much more than his festive meal.

He was not very famous during his tenure in Belz and Kishinev. He became well known outside of the confines of his immediate circle and pretty soon famous throughout the land only after he was chosen in 1884 to succeed Yeruchem Hakoton as cantor of the old city central synagogue of Berditchev, which was located in the relatively poorer deteriorated business section of the city in the center of the marketplace. To fill the shoes of such a luminary, who incidentally happened to be the uncle of his wife, was no easy task for Nisi. He brought with him a great deal of ambition, clear vision, and firm determination to succeed in reaching his lofty goal. His first step was to organize a high class chorus. He recruited for his ensemble eighteen to twenty-four of the best singers that he could find, each one of whom was eminently qualified to be a soloist. He trained them with untiring diligence and arduous persistence. He labored day and night to bring out the best in them. It was for him a labor of love and it was rewarded. The fame of Nisi's marvellous choir soon spread far and wide.

Quite understandably, the maintenance of such a quantitatively large and at the same time qualitatively excellent handpicked ensemble did present a difficult problem, which was even more aggravated by the fact that according to his agreement with the congregation, the cantor had the obligation of covering the expenses for the upkeep of the choir out of a budget of two thousand and seven hundred rubles for the whole year. Since for Nisi nothing would do but the very best which, of course, also meant the most expensive, it goes without saying that he was obliged to supplement out of his own salary of 2000 rubles the considerable sums that such a luxury entailed. Even though some assistance was forthcoming from an appreciative and munificent local patron of the arts, the wealthy industrialist and great admirer of the cantor and his choir Israel Yolles, who made generous contributions toward the necessities of the singers, still the deficit became chronic and Nisi was obliged to search constantly for some ways and means to bridge the ever-widening gap between inflow and outgo. He came to the conclusion that there was only one way for him to obtain enough side income with which to balance the incurred burdensome expenses and that was to set out from time to time on extensive concert tours. Nisi used to say that if it were not for the proceeds from these occasional guest appearances, either his chorus would have fallen apart or

he himself would have died of hunger. "From what is left of my salary after providing for the choir," he moaned, "I wouldn't be able to buy a pair of pants for myself."

On these fund-raising, professional excursions into the hinterland Nisi, for apparent economical reasons, did not take along his entire choir. Only the best and the most essential partitura leaders were chosen to accompany the master on his journeys. Needless to say that wherever they made their appearance, the Jewish townsmen gave the visitors a warm reception on arrival. Whether it was a Sabbath service, a weekday evening devotional, or a concert program that was presented by the newcomers, the response of the audiences was invariably enthusiastic and often ecstatic. Of course, the lion's share of the success earned by the touring company was due to the singing of the ensemble and the solos of its members. Nisi's main contribution was as the catalyst, the architect, the organizer and molder, as well as the leader and conductor of the highly successful, skillfully blended vocal combine.

On one occasion, when he gave a concert in a public hall, there were present at the performance a number of high-ranking, military officers and gentile noblemen of the local aristocracy. The program consisted in the main of selections from Nisi's liturgical repertoire that had repeatedly been successful with audiences. As usual, the ensemble was in top form and particularly outstanding in their respective roles were the soloists alternating in turn, the tenor, the basso, or the alto, not to forget also the baritone soloist, even though this latter's individual moments in the spotlight were less frequent. All of them knew their parts thoroughly. Interspersed here and there were also several duets and tercets, which went off equally with the usual precision and finesse. The audience was exhilarated and mesmerized and rewarded the artists with earsplitting applause. Now they came into the homestretch and had arrived at what was supposed to be the high point of the evening. The chorus began to chant one of the master's most famous compositions in which there was a solo for the cantor, the rendition of which Nisi could never bring himself to entrust to a mere chorister but reserved it for himself. This time, too, the author in person squared off to do full justice to his favorite musical creation. He did his level best and, at the conclusion of the masterpiece, the grateful fans of the famous cantor gave him a standing ovation.

Well, let's not go overboard. Actually not all the listeners joined in the applause and if you read carefully between the lines of the sentence we did not claim that they did. There were exceptions, some dissenters, whose reactions were totally different. One of the elite, uniformed gentry got up from his seat and went over to Nisi, not to congratulate him (as the self-deluded cantor thought) but rather to whisper into his ear the surprising disparaging request: "Pozsalusta nye meshaytye" (Please don't mix in, don't interfere. Let the choir sing by themselves and don't be a spoiler). That all the euphoria evaporated from Nisi's heart upon having had administered to his pride such a devastating jolt goes without saying. It cannot be denied that the first impression one got upon hearing Nisi sing was



rather negative. One could very well have had the feeling that it would have been better and wiser for him not to interfere, and instead of singing the solo himself had let the tenor take over the role. But this could rightly be considered an unwarranted case of jumping to a hasty conclusion. Because to judge on the strength of an initial reaction amounts to superficial evaluation.As a matter of fact, after getting used to him, the attentive listener was likely to savor and relish very much his intense, heartfelt style of liturgical interpretation of the prayers and even his high pitched, seemingly shrill voice sounded strangely pleasant and had a unique appeal to staunch Nisi regulars. He was unquestionably a past master and artist in illustrating the deeper meaning of the text in pictorial musical language and vivid colors. When, for instance, in the prayer delivered in front of the open ark on the festivals, he got to the phrase "lechayey huolom haboh" (blissful life in the world to come), one could almost visualize and feel elevated by the cantor's magical wand into the rarefied atmosphere of a faraway spiritual world, where there is eternal life.

On one occasion, when presenting a musicale before the grand rabbi, Reb Davidl Tolner, at whose chasidic court he was a frequent visitor, Nisi, assisted by his choir, chanted his own version of "Odom yesodo meofor vesofo leofor" (man's origin is from earth and he is returned to earth). When he sang of the pitiable fate and sad end that awaits the human being, his musical description was so sentimentally graphic and realistically depicted that the saintly sage was moved to tears and begged the cantor to break off the mournful chant immediately for it was too much for him to take.

Once, Nisi, together with his entourage of juvenile choristers, was on his way to Kovel, to which community he had been invited for a guest appearance. En route he was for some reason delayed, and upon reaching Krivetz, it became evident to him that he would not be able to arrive at his destination prior to the advent of the Sabbath. There was barely sufficient time left for them to travel as far as Loytak, which was the nearest town of any consequence. Having no other alternative, he decided to stay over for the day of rest in Loytak. The hour having already been late he together with his retinue of assistants, betook themselves to the local house of worship. The choristers scattered about the vast sanctuary, and Nisi modestly took up a post in the rear of the synagogue near the entrance where the congregating worshipers usually halt at the especially installed "hantfass" water faucet to wash their hands before proceeding to their seats. The place where Nisi stationed himself was usually occupied by "Meshulochim", traveling, fund-raising collectors, soliciting contributions for philanthropic projects or charitable and religious organizations and institutions. Naturally then, he too, was thought to be such a representative delegate by all the passersby. He also looked like one.

However, he did not remain incognito for very long. Among those who were crowding around the washbasin, there presently appeared a prominent member of the congregation, a businessman Berger, the son of the "gabbay" who used to visit the large Jewish centers, where he had com-

mercial interests. In the course of his business trips, he had had occasion to attend some of Nisi's concerts. He at once recognized the stranger, told his father and soon the entire congregation was apprised of the fact, that they were privileged to have a celebrity in their midst. Upon being informed of the identity of the inconspicuous individual, the gabbay (trustee) in charge of the ritual went over to him and invited him to do them the honor of conducting the evening devotion. At the same time, being a cautious businessman and apprehensive lest the cantor afterwards make too large pecuniary demands on them, he asked him also how much he would charge them for reading the "Kabolas Shabos" (reception for the Queen Sabbath) and "Maariv" (evening) prayers.

But Nisi has made it his practice not to indulge in inconsequential, unnecessary, secular profane talk on the Sabbath, let alone discuss even remotely any business matter on the sacred day of rest. He even refrained from using the weekday language beginning with sunset on Friday. Solely Hebrew was the medium employed by him for communicating with his fellowmen from the moment of the advent of the holy Sabbath until the following evening, the time for escorting out the Sabbath with song. In accordance with this custom of his, he replied to the query of the synagogue official with but two words and this, too, in Hebrew, "B'li mekach" (without a set price) meaning thereby that he was not demanding any definite commitment, leaving it instead to the discretion of the leaders of the congregation to compensate him for his services as they'll see fit.

As it turned out, he did not fare badly at all. The success of his religious services on Friday evening, as well as on Saturday morning, was so great, that he was held over for two additional performances. One concert was held in the "Sod Eldorado Park" and the other affair was a musicale, which Nisi presented in the "Dvoransky Chule" for invited guests, the military brass and the cream of society, and he made a "veritable" killing. The proceeds exceeded his most optimistic expectations, so much so that the happy bard felt impelled to make a generous gesture and donate a considerable portion of the receipts as his contribution to the "Bedek Habayis" (renovation fund) of the synagogue edifice. In a euphoric frame of mind, he and his entourage left for Kovel, late but still very welcome.

In Moscow, there lived a noble dowager, the mother of a gentile general of the Imperial Army, who had once attended a concert, at which Nisi and his ensemble presented unforgettable gems of liturgical vocal art. When the devoted son asked her, what she would like him to get her for her coming birthday, she told him, that the most precious present which he could give her would be to arrange a concert in her palace starring the Jewish cantor, Nisi Belzer, with his singing "Kapelye," whom she had heard on a certain occasion and had come to admire very much. "An odd request," the skeptical general thought. But what would not an adoring son do to please his beloved aging mother? "If that will make you happy," he replied, "it shall be done." So an invitation went forth to Nisi and he indeed put on a great show, regaling the assembled noble guests

with an exceptionally brilliant and varied musical program, which delighted and fascinated the hard-to-please connoisseurs. In her overflowing enthusiasm, the general's mother impulsively rushed over to Nisi, embraced him affectionately and kissed the hand of the embarrassed and blushing virtuoso.

Once when the famous maestro and great composer Pyotr Tchaikowsky was strolling in the streets of Kiev one late afternoon, he became aware of an unusual traffic jam not of vehicles but of Jews decked out in their festive garments. many of them looked as if they were strangers and had streamed into town from the outlying suburbs and they all seemed to be headed in the direction of the Central Synagogue. Intrigued by the sight of the rare influx and not knowing what to make of the sudden outpouring of the apparently Jewish inhabitants, he inquired of one of the bypassers, "What kind of a holiday is this for the Jews?" In reply he was given to understand that this was indeed a great holiday, a red letter day for the Jewish community of the town and those of the hamlets in the vicinity, for the reason that Nisi had come for a visit and was scheduled to grace the pulpit of the Central Synagogue, which meant that a rare treat was in store for them. His curiosity aroused, the ingenious composer, too, joined the crowd to find out for himself what it was about the Jewish cantor that made him such a great drawing card and whether or not the guest celebrity was in fact as great an artist as he was said to be by his adoring fans.

By nature fastidious, squeamish, and at first skeptical, he soon thawed, and as the service progressed, he warmed up more and more to the manner in which the psalms and prayers were chanted and musically interpreted by the reader and his helpers. He liked what he heard and came to the conclusion that here was a craftsman of outstanding ability. Right from the outset, he was struck by the remarkably expressive, almost visual dynamic vitality and vivid method in which was depicted the initial psalm beginning with the passage of "Lecho Neranneno Ladonay" (Oh, Come Let Us Exult Before the Lord. Let Us Shout For Joy). There was no mistaking the meaning of the text and the joyous mood created by the lusty and bouncy quality of the musical phraseology applied by the composer. The mere fact by itself that a man of the caliber of Tchaikowsky sat through the whole religious ritual, the language of which was unknown to him, and remained interested and attentive to the end was significant and indicative of his attitude and opinion. After the conclusion of the prayer session, he went over to Nisi, complimented him on his brilliant performance, expressing his admiration in the following words, "I understood the meaning of every word from the way you interpreted it in the universal vocal language and the closely fitting and eminently suitable musical garb in which you clothed the thoughts expressed in the respective texts. I have seldom had the privilege of hearing such a true and faithful translation of words into songs." Coming from such a great authority this was indeed a tribute to be cherished.

When Nisi heard the news that Zeidel Rovner was coming to Berditchev to take over the cantorial post in the great choral synagogue of the

new section of the city, he became concerned and quite uneasy and not without reason. For Zeidel had become a very popular figure in the Jewish musical world and was reputed to be the new sensation and rising star on the horizon of liturgical art. To have such a potent attraction and a much younger rival intrude into his own bailiwick, where he had been reigning supreme for so many years, was not a palatable prospect for the aging veteran master. He was fearful that the newcomer would undermine his status in the city, which up to that time he had considered his private domain.

Nisi confided his misgivings and worried state of mind to his close and intimate friend, the local Dayan (judge of the rabbinical court of justice) Rabbi Dudye Achtenberg. The venerable sage listened to Nisi's confidences, and while he could well understand the cantor's feelings in the matter, he tried to reassure him and to dispel his anxious concern with the following analogous allegory. "There was once a king," he told the worried bard, "who had a favorite stallion, which was his steady companion. Wherever he went he took the well bred animal along with him. He rode the horse through thick and thin, in war and peace on the battlefields and at festive parades alike. They were inseparable. There arrived, however, the time when the happy long association could endure no longer. The horse had grown old and feeble and could not keep up the arduous pace any longer and was unable to cope with the exhausting activities of his master, the reigning monarch. As much as he regretted it, the king had no other alternative but to put the veteran noble steed out to pasture. To soften the blow of enforced retirement, he placed a crown on the head of his beloved animal as a token, that it was granted the freedom of the ruler's realm and he released it to go wherever it pleased. Given free reign, the uninhibited stallion stomped out into the fields, roaming the open spaces and green country at will, trampling down the wheat and corn, creating havoc, and causing considerable damage. There was great consternation among the frantic farmers and gentry, who suffered great losses and were threatened with utter financial ruin by the unrestrained destruction of their crops by the unbridled spirited horse. They did not dare take drastic measures against the rampaging animal for fear of thereby offending its royal patron. So they had no other choice but to confine their actions to the brandishing of their farming tools and to the setting off of firecrackers to prevent the further destruction of their plowed up acreage, in the hope that these measures would prove effective deterrents. But the smart seasoned warrior stallion just chuckled with contempt at their transparent, naive efforts to frighten it away. "Fools that you are. How stupid can you get?" It kept muttering to itself. "What makes you think that I, who passed my baptism by fire so many years ago, who had since repeatedly been the prime target of innumerable bullets and who had survived all the campaigns of my master without a scratch and without even losing control, would cringe at the sight of your harmless farm tools, or would become scared at the sound of these innocuous explosions and pay any heed to your idle threats?" "This fable is very similar and applicable

to your case," mused the wise rabbi. "I am very much surprised that you, my dear Reb Nisi, who are an old blueblooded warhorse, 'vos hot gepokt un gemoozelt [who had long since had your pocks and measles]' who has gone through so many contests and has always prevailed, should suddenly become plagued with the jitters? You still have your talent, the live ammunition, and there is no reason whatsoever for you to become frightened by mere firecrackers. I am firmly convinced that you will continue to remain top man in your field against any challenger."

Nisi took heart from the encouraging words of his friend and confidante and sure enough the appraisal of his prospects by the farsighted Dayan proved to have been accurate. Eventually, after the initial hullabaloo had died down and the early excitement of the imported novelty had run its course, the old master came into his own again, with the net result that Zeidel did not make much of a dent in Nisi's armor, whose magic still prevailed.

The best proof of the pudding was the fact that no sooner did Zeidel settle down in Berditchev than Nisi got a raise in his salary from his congregation. It was not so much that this act made his financial burdens easier for him to carry. Much more significant was the boost it gave to his morale. He remained sure footed on his pedestal — his crown untarnished.

Zeidel became famous thanks to his compositions, which he produced with remarkable fertility. They were more melodious than those of Nisi Belzer and more easily digested by the unsophisticated, plain folks, the masses, who found it easy to hum and repeat some catchy phrases after hearing them only a few times. He weaved and blended into his musical creations Doyne's Honga's, Mazurkas, volachs, polkas, foot tapping tunes of all sorts, slipping them in in such an imperceptible, ingenious way, that these external ingredients took on a new homogeneous identity in relation to the rest of the music.

That was the secret of Zeidel's ever-growing popularity. Nisi's patriots used to refer to him deprecatingly as the "Klezmer" (dilletante instrumentalist, cymbler).

It is a fact that Nisi's ensemble sang with greater care to detail, with more refined precision and particular polishing and honing of the nuances. His methods catered more to the more discriminating connoisseurs.

Zeidel on the other hand knew what the general public wants to hear and would appreciate and he cut his bouncy melodies and marches to the measurements of his audience. His most well known compositions are the two "Emes V'emunoh's", first "Kedushah" "V'al Yedey Avodecho," "Tisborach," and "B'tzeys Yisroel."

Before he composed his own "B'tzeys Yisroel" he sang another composer's version of the text. Nisi also sang the same composition, but to the text of "Mo Oshiv." He closed out his adaptation of "B'tzeys Yisroel" to "Mo Oshiv" only after his son Yudel brought him thirteen new compositions upon his return from Vienna. His contributions were among others a

new "B'tzeys Yisroel", "Eshkol", "Ato Yotzarto", "Ato Nigleyso", and "Adoshem Zechorono". He too borrowed from alien sources. So is the first part of the latter work taken from an Armenian composition. Nisi's repertoire contained also the masterpieces which he learned in his youth from Tzalel Odessaer.

Characteristic of Nisi Belzer's style is a blend of supplication and pleading with claim and demand of justice. This double-pronged approach is clearly applied by him, to cite one example, in his musical treatment of "T'ka B'shofor Godol."

Convinced that he represents clients, who even though far from being innocent lambs were not deserving of the very poor hand, that had been dealt them in the card game of fate and that they definitely have been shortchanged he does not feel that he must cringe and beg.

More emphasis is laid on the complaint, "We have been wronged and we therefore ask that justice be done (of course in case everything was not on the up and up) tempered with compassion."

Nisi divides the roles. While the tenors and sopranos are praying and pleading the bassos and altos are presenting briefs with irrefutable arguments, complaining bitterly about the continuance of the endless exile and demanding a speedy redemption and the ingathering of the dispersed tribes from all corners of the earth. Like a seasoned lawyer he keeps his options open. He'd rather get his aim without a fuss but if that doesn't work, he's prepared to cite chapter and verse to prove his just case. Either way he is going to fulfill to the best of his ability the assignement entrusted to him by his constituency, his congregation as well as "Klal Yisroeyl."

Nisi was an institution. People would leave their homes and from no matter how far they would betake themselves to Berditchev like Chassidim journeying to their saintly Rebbe solely for the privilege of listening to Nisi and his ensemble.

How highly Nisi was regarded even in gentile authoritative musical circles is sufficiently attested by the fact, that Professor Yohann Wolf of the Vienna Conservatory of Music also called Nisi Belzer "The Jewish Verdi."

When Zeidel was on route, the members of his ensemble usually were quartered with different families, where they also were to receive their meals. It was a device to save the cantor the added expenses of placing and feeding his helpers. It fell to the trustees to distribute them among the members of the congregation as a "Meshorer'l for the Sabbath."

Such was however not the case with Nisi. On hitting a town, the whole troupe was taken straight to the inn, where the cantor made arrangements for providing them with room and board for the duration of the stay at his own expense.

He would not think of having his chorists treated like "Yeshivah Bochurim" eating "tayg" (days, each day in another house) and expose them to the indignities of being obliged to accept alms.

Nisi as well as Zeidel occasionally presented concerts, sometimes with orchestra accompaniment. Mostly it was Zeidel, who employed an or-

chestra in addition to the chorus.

In Berditchev resided Podhootzer, whose orchestra was famous not only in the gubernia of Kiev, but all over Russia — every member of his "Kapelye" was an accomplished artist in his own right. Wherever a rich family married off their daughter, Podhootzer was sure to do the honors at the helm of his band.

Even though professionally he was more often associated with Reb Zeidel, Podhootzer socially and personally was nearer to Nisi Belzer. Every morning it was his custom to make his appearance at the door of Reb Nisi's residence and together they would walk to the "Shtibl" of the "Chevrah Thilim" to take part in the morning religious devotion.

Morris Grodsky, who sang in Nisi's choir recalls that by coincidence Nisi with his chorus, jointly with Podhootzer's orchestra presented a concert at the hall located on Machnovka Street on the very day when Yudel came home from Vienna bringing with him new material and causing a fundamental revamping of Nisi's repertoire.

When the new invention of the gramophone was introduced in Russia, Nisi Belzer was one of the first cantors to be wooed by a gramophone company to make some recordings with his ensemble. However, being a man with old fashioned ideas he, as was to be expected, rejected the proposition out of hand.

His singers however were very much intrigued and when the representative of the company broached the subject to them, suggesting, that the project could be arranged without the participation of the cantor clandestinely on the q.t., they agreed and they sang several numbers into the tube, with Nisi none the wiser.

However it didn't take long for the master to learn of the secret extracurricular action committed by his musical ensemble without his permission. He raised the roof, insisting that his disciples forthwith cancel all plans of allowing the record to be released or they would all be given their walking papers.

He left no stone unturned in a determined resolve to prevent the company from bringing out into the market the sacred chants of the synagogue. Fortunately for him, his intervention came early enough before the processing of the tape had yet been completed and in the face of his strong objection the company relented, agreeing to refrain from releasing the contemplated platter. Fortunately for Nisi, but regrettably for us, who were thus deprived of an invaluable legacy.

Nisi was a chossid of the grand rabbi of Sadigoora. But his second wife "Sheyndel" was a "chossideste" (devotee) of the Makarov'er saintly rabbi.

The wife of Nisi's was childless and as was the custom in the East European countries, women who could not bear children ("Ahkoro's") went to the holy man in whose powers they had confidence with the written out petition ("Kvitel") imploring him that he by his prayers bless them so that they shall become pregnant with child. After the untimely death of Alter, Nisi was very anxious to sire another son.

Since Sheyndel came from a family which used ever so often in a pinch to turn to the Makarover, Nisi, even though he belonged to the "Çhassidim" of another Rabbi, sent her to the court of the Makarover.

However she remained childless all the same. It might very well have been a good idea for Nisi himself to also turn to his revered rabbi with the same problem. The prayers of both might have brought the desired result. But for all we know, he might've already been too old to become a father. Having been denied his fervent hope he and his wife showered the orphaned two children of Alter Spivack with their parental love.

CHAPTER 25

ROZUMNY WAS A DIFFICULT PERSON TO GET ALONG WITH

He was a hard man to please, but he had a heart of gold — To this day his admirers deify him — Why he quit his post in Odessa and transferred his residence to Kishinev — The story of how the young married men kept by their in-laws finally succeeded in bringing Rozumny to their town.

In a previous chapter we stated that as far as cantors were concerned, Kishinev was considered a waiting room in its relation to Odessa which played the role of the main reception room. The cantors used to make their preparations, adjust their tools and appearance in the waiting room before they felt fully qualified to enter the reception hall.

This was routine, the usual sequence of events. From Kishinev, cantors as a rule advanced to posts in Odessa. The almost single exception was Rozumny, who traveled in the opposite direction. He came to Kishinev by way of Odessa. But even in his case this irregularity later on was duly corrected, and conforming to the example set by all other cantors, he too returned to Odessa after only a short sojourn in the Bessarabian capital. Nonetheless, although he stayed in Kishinev for less than two years, he still managed in that short span of time to conquer so completely the hearts of the Jewish inhabitants, and to leave behind such a profound impact on all who came under the spell of his voice, that they could never forget it or shake off its deep effect.

All Jews of Bessarabia to this day pride themselves on the fact, that they were fortunate enough to have had Rozumny reside and function in their midst, even though for but a short period. Needless to say, then, that

Jews who come from the region of Odessa where he spent a lifetime cannot stop talking about and boasting of the unmatched greatness of the famous master of liturgy whom they, with pardonable local patriotism, consider their own.

It is also noteworthy that in the missives which I received from women, who read my published articles, the name of Rozumny was most often mentioned. He evidently was the only one of the great cantors, who also had enormous success with the charming members of the weaker sex.

Recently I had an interesting experience when I visited a woman, who claimed to be related to Rozumny, and who dressed as a boy allegedly managed to mingle with the other chorists without drawing undue attention and used to sing in the Odessa cantor's choir under the direction of the hunchbacked director of the chorus, Graborsky. I was naturally curious to hear any other recollections which she might be able to relate, so I went to see her. She received me with a song on her lips, and in the course of her impromptu concert she rendered for my benefit a great part of the repertoire, which she used to sing, according to her statement, with Rozumny, and she did it with a remarkable youthful exuberance, although, as you may have guessed, she was no spring chicken.

Since I was more interested in essentials, I felt obliged after a while to interrupt her singing and to try to get the conversation around to Rozumny. Much to my surprise, she refused to talk. She wanted me to pay her a suitable sum for the information in her possession. She assured me that I would be able to reap great profits by making use of the information, which only she was in a position to give me. How I could make this fortune, she did, however, not divulge. I did surmise that this too was part of the secret, which she was willing to disclose only after she had pocketed the cash.

Being that I am something of a skeptic, I was in no hurry to part with my meager roll of hard-earned greenbacks and to make an impulsive, blind investment in something, the value of which it was not possible for me to gauge, with the result that the venerable singing bird kept her valuable information and I kept my money.

Taking leave from my reluctant hostess, I gave the old woman the unsolicited free advice, that she better salt away her treasure, her jealously guarded secret information, and put it on ice so, that it would not get sour and stale, for it might be a long time before she would be able to find a willing customer, who would be ready to pay in advance the considerable sum which she demanded for her precious reminiscences.

I relate this curious episode because it is so characteristic of the deep-rooted admiration and the strong nostalgic longing, which the devoted followers of Rozumny still feel for their beloved, great, deceased hero, whom they practically worshipped. To hear this female singing bird and alleged relative of his talk of him as if he had been a superman, her assumption that every little incident and crumb of information about his life would be of immeasurable interest to all the Jews of the world and therefore priceless, would not appear too farfetched, at least to her way of

thinking, and would not seem to be so very unreasonable and unrealistic after all.

But to turn from sentiments to facts, let us find out, why Rozumny decided to leave Odessa and to accept a call from Kishinev. The reason for his turning his back on the Shalashna congregation was, that he had become very angry at the trustees of that religious organization. There was no love lost between them and his departure came as an aftermath of a serious quarrel, which he had with them.

And with Rozumny it was a story similar to that of a certain traveling cantor, whose chanting of the service was so disagreeable that some of the enraged listeners went up to the pulpit with the firm intention of throwing him out. However, when they tried to remove him from the pulpit, they found to their surprise that he had tied himself to it firmly with a rope. When they asked him how he knew that he was going to be dragged away, he answered that this was not the first time that this had happened to him.

In the case of our hero, too, this was not the first time that he had a serious confrontation with the heads of his congregation, with the difference in this case that it was not the members who wanted to remove the cantor from the rostrum but, on the contrary, it happened often that Rozumny in a nervous rage threw his prayer shawl on the pulpit and ran out of the synagogue in the middle of the service.

Like all great artists, who usually are very temperamental, he too was quite sensitive, self-centered and spoiled, and always carried a chip on his shoulder. The least little untoward incident, annoyed him, bruised his ego and aroused his displeasure. Any insignificant episode which remotely could be construed as a slight or an insult to his pride and self-esteem, could trigger an uncontrollable violent outburst on his part, and he was not beyond creating a public scandal even in a house of worship before a large audience.

For a short time he shared the pulpit of the central synagogue of Odessa, located on Yevrevsky (Jewish) Street, alternately with Jacob Bachman. There were moments during their association when he hurled bitter, insulting remarks at this giant whose protege he was and who had been instrumental in getting the position for him.

His unbecoming conduct toward Bachman understandably made an unfavorable impression upon the membership, who showed their resentment. He succeeded in alienating them by his unreasonable acts directed against his senior colleague.

Most certainly his snubbing of Bachman and his habit of picking fights with him antagonized the chief trustee, Yechiel Yechezkel Cooperwasser, who had brought the famous master from Lemberg and who was not inclined to overlook and tolerate any downgrading remark at his expense and any disrespect shown him.

This discord between the two cantors undoubtedly was the contributing factor, which led to the ultimate breakdown of relations between Rozumny and the congregation which was not long in coming. But the main, direct cause, which brought the strained relationship to an explosive

head and resulted in his quitting the post, was a confrontation with the president, Lyoolkemacher, who dared to exchange some words with the sexton, while Rozumny stood at the altar and was in the middle of his recitation of Abrass' composition to the text of "Tikanto Shabos" (Thou didst institute the Sabbath). When the sound of the president's whispered remarks reached his sensitive ears, he halted suddenly in his chant, and throwing down his prayer shawl, he turned around and strode to his room in the basement of the building with the flabbergasted president trailing at his heels.

To the astonished query of the latter, "How can you do an embarrassing thing like this? Don't you know that it is against ritual law to leave the pulpit in the middle of the 'Shmono Esrey' [eighteen blessings]?" he blurted out with biting conceit, "Rozumny — there is only one in existence — whereas presidents are a dime a dozen. Where do you get the 'Chutzpah' [nerve] to talk, when I am standing at the pulpit?" The dialogue was heated, degenerating gradually into a vituperative exchange of recriminations, which finally culminated in Rozumny throwing a "Shtender" (wooden stand used by worshipers on which to place their prayer books) at the head of the president.

This, of course, was too much for the leader of the congregation to take without retaliation. He used his influence with the Governor who was his friend, to get back at the cantor. To try and oust him by a vote of the membership was liable to backfire. He was too strongly entrenched by virtue of his tremendous public appeal and the mesmerizing effect which he had on his listeners. With all his faults, he still possessed the magical power to convert any adversary of his by just opening his mouth in song. He kept them glued to their seats.

The only foolproof way to deprive the impossible, arrogant and offensive cantor of his pulpit was to close the synagogue. This he accomplished with the assistance of the governor. At his suggestion, an order was promulgated by the city authorities calling on the board of directors of the congregation to suspend temporarily the holding of religious services in the holy edifice. The reason given was that an examination of the building revealed certain violations which constituted a danger to the safety of an assembled multitude and which must be corrected before permission may be granted by the building inspector to reopen the synagogue. It was, of course, a contrived device, but it effectively blocked the access to his post to Rozumny.

However, his followers rallied around their beloved cantor and hired a spacious hall, which they converted into a house of worship. Thus Rozumny was again before the public, and there he remained, spreading joy and pleasure without interruption.

By coincidence, at that juncture Yankel Soroker, the cantor of the Shalashna Synagogue became ill and the word from Vienna was that he lost his voice. It was only natural, that the cantorial position in the Shalashna sanctuary should be offered to the most popular cantor of the city, who had been officiating in a rented, temporary temple, and needless

to say, the membership was delighted and overjoyed, when Rozumny accepted it.

But a person's inborn nature, basic character and disposition do not change by his crossing over to the other side of the street or by transferring his activities to a different section of the city. So it was to be expected that in Rozumny's new position too there would be no lack of unpleasant incidents. Time and again he became embroiled in quarrels, and invariably he was the initiator and the center of the troubles, the embarrassing moments and ticklish situations, which did not reflect great credit on him.

On one occasion (it was the second day of the festival of Shevuoth (Pentecost), he took offense for some trivial reason and refused to lead the "mussaf" service and simply went home. He had his quota of spats also with the choir leader Yakovkin. No matter how hard the director tried, he frequently was unable to satisfy the whims of his cantor, and finally left in anger. He was replaced by Poliakoff.

To Rozumny's services used to come gentiles also. His fame penetrated even into the circles of high-ranking public officials, who became interested in the celebrated cantor, who was the talk of the town. City officials, army officers, noblemen, members of the royal family and even priests, could often be seen among the throng that filled the synagogue, and oddly enough, as if in spite, whenever he spotted strangers and especially gentile visitors in the crowd, he was likely to make short shrift of the service.

On one holiday, a group of very important, influential Christians, members of the nobility and high society, came to hear him. As he was apprehensive that Rozumny might this time also, as he had done so often before, run through the devotional prayers as speedily as possible, the gabbay (ritual trustee) Lipa Krementchusky, who was standing at the altar near the cantor, bent over and whispered into his ear a few words, begging him to do his best in honor of the gentile guests, who occupied high positions of power and to show them what a Jewish cantor can do.

Well, that's all he needed. "Who are you," he thundered, "to tell me how to pray? Just for that, I won't pray at all." And he kept his word. He ran down to the basement, and resisting all attempts to pacify him, he refused to return to the pulpit and to finish the service.

A great scandal broke out. The embarrassment was considerably aggravated by the presence of the visiting government officials. The leaders of the congregation could not tolerate the shame to which Rozumny had exposed the Jewish community before the eyes of the gentile representatives. It had come to a showdown, which resulted in Rozumny resigning from his post.

This then was the explanation of the puzzle why he left his congregation in Odessa. There, however, still remains the question of the reason for his having chosen the position which was offered him by the Jewish community of Kishinev in preference to others which he could have had for the asking.

The factor which prompted Rozumny's decision was a wedding to

which he was invited. A wealthy resident of Kishinev, a great admirer of the cantor, who frequently used to travel to Odessa for the sole purpose of listening to his heavenly chanting, had engaged Rozumny to officiate at the wedding ceremony of his daughter, and in addition conduct the services at the synagogue, where he was a prominent member, on the Sabbath, when the calling up to the Torah of the bridegroom was to take place.

When the rabbi of the synagogue heard of these arrangements which the father of the bride had made, he issued the following ultimatum, "It's either he or I. If Rozumny leads the service, I will not set foot in the synagogue." This unexpected development put the "Baal Simcha" (head of the family, where a joyous occasion occurs) in a ticklish situation. To make his position still more complicated, he had already paid Rozumny his fee in advance, to make absolutely sure that he would not disappoint him. Now at the last moment he was confronted with a demand to cancel the high point of his carefully planned arrangements and to deprive his guests of the great surprise and rare treat, which he had in store for them.

He could not possibly disregard the rabbi and ignore his protest, which was motivated by the unsavory reputation which the Odessa cantor enjoyed in rabbinical circles. He decided that there was no other way out for him but to advise Rozumny that, under the circumstances, he had no other alternative but to deny himself the pleasure of having him as the great attraction at his family celebration. As much as he had looked forward to it, he regretfully would have to do without his presence, in view of the determined opposition of the rabbi. He added that he would allow the cantor to keep the money, which he had advanced him.

Deeply hurt and insulted, Rozumny, by return mail, sent him back the money with the proud reply, "I would not think of keeping the fee for a service which I was not permitted to render. But I can assure you that I will one day show your rabbi that not only will I officiate at a religious service in your city, but that there will come a time, when I will even occupy a steady cantorial position in a Kishinev synagogue."

What he vowed on that occasion did in fact come to pass. When the word got around that Rozumny was available, propositions poured in from dozens of congregations, who vied with each other for a favorable answer from the giant of liturgical art that he was receptive to close the deal. But remembering that he still had to square accounts with the rabbi, who blocked his appearance in Kishinev, Rozumny grasped the opportunity to "get the goat" of his adversary by invading his bailiwick. Accordingly, he decided that from among all the proffered positions, the one which was located in the Bessarabian capital suited him best.

He was invited to the dedication of the newly erected great Hekershe Synagogue and to officiate on the High Holidays. At the "Chanukas Habayis" he did not exert himself too much and people who expected lightning and thunder were somewhat disappointed. The proceedings were delayed for some reason and Rozumny waiting in the home of the sexton for the leaders of the congregation to call for him paced the room impa-

tiently like a nervous lion. But he made up manifold at the Days of Awe and the congregation was in seventh heaven, when he agreed to take over the position on a yearly basis.

When Rozumny arrived in Kishinev to take over the cantorial pulpit at the "Heckershe" Synagogue (that of the drivers), he received the reception of a victorious hero returning from the battlefield. There was dancing in the streets, a band of music greeted him, and he was carried in triumph through the Jewish quarter of the city.

The Sabbaths on which he officiated were "Yom Tovim," veritable festivals for the Jewish population. It was impossible on such occasions to cross Ismaylevska Street where the synagogue was located. The streetcars were stalled in their tracks by the onrush of the multitudes. People used to stand in line for hours in order to have a chance to gain admission to the synagogue, which invariably became filled to capacity long before the time for prayer arrived. Many of those who found it impossible to enter through the main door did not let that stop them. With inventive tenacity, they somehow managed to crawl up to the open windows and to jump into the sanctuary, where people were practically hanging from the chandeliers and the rafters. Outside groups of people could be seen standing on the roofs of nearby buildings trying to catch snatches of Rozumny's sweet voice.

One of the main reasons for his decision to transfer to Kishinev was the fact that his former wife got married again to a Kishinev lawyer Blitz and his three children, one son and two daughters lived with their mother. Settling in Kishinev gave him a chance to visit with his children more often.

But in Kishinev too Rozumny ran true to his form. For a while everything was peaches and cream between him and the bigwigs of the Hecker'sher congregation. But for some reason or other a rift developed in time between the parties and Rozumny left in a huff.

Taking quick advantage of the opportunity the "Katzovi'she" (butchers) congregation of Kishinev dangled a very favorable offer before his eyes and succeeded in bagging him in their net.

The Jews, who lived in the provincial cities and villages of Bessarabia, were getting the glowing reports emanating from the capital about the great revival of interest in liturgy triggered by the acquisition of the famous cantor from Odessa and they felt cheated. Oh, how they envied their brethren in Kishinev their singular good fortune from which they themselves were left out. How they longed to be given a chance to also have an opportunity to hear the great master. This was the height of their ambition. Day and night they dreamed about it, seeking ways and means which would enable them to bring Rozumny to their town for a guest appearance. No sacrifice would be too great to achieve this end. They were willing to save on their food bills, to pawn their valuables, and if necessary even their bedding, just so they could live to see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears the celebrated singer of Israel.

There was a steady pilgrimage of delegations from all corners of the

country to the Kishinev residence of Rozumny. All of them came with one purpose in mind, which was to induce the cantor to accept their invitation to visit their village or hamlet for a Sabbath service or for a concert. But in most cases they left greatly disappointed, for the simple reason that they were unable to meet his steep conditions. His minimum fee for a Sabbath was 250 Kerblach (rubles), a sum with which it was possible to marry off a daughter and have still something left over. But there were enough communities, who were willing to pay even that price for the privilege of ensnaring the toast of the Jewish world for a visit to their town.

Durleshty, a small town in the vicinity of Kishinev, included among its Jewish inhabitants a large percentage of devoted lovers of music and particularly were they fond of liturgical chants. The impulsive younger generation, aroused by the glowing stories that went the rounds about Rozumny, got together and made up their minds that whatever it may involve, they must once and for all get him for a guest appearance.

The older, wiser and more responsible members of the community raised the roof, exclaiming, "How can you even think of bringing that about? Where will you get the money to pay for such an extravagance?" And the head of the Talmud Torah (Hebrew School) chimed in, "What are you trying to do? The teachers haven't yet been paid anything on the arrears of their long past due salary for the whole winter and all you can think of is 'Kanariklech' [canaries]. We cannot afford such a luxury."

Since the younger element turned a deaf ear to the arguments of their elders and persisted in pushing their proposition, it was finally decided that Reb Leyb, Soroh Rivke's (a person was identified by the name of his mother), a venerable merchant, who had anyhow been planning to make a trip to Kishinev for the purpose of buying new supplies with which to restock his emptying shelves, should go to see Rozumny, and make the necessary arrangements with him.

What the young fellows did not know was that in entrusting the mission to Reb Leyb, they had sent the cat to fetch the butter. The first part of the instruction which he was given — to go and see Rozumny — he faithfully fulfilled, but the rest of the mission, which was the quintessence — to make definite arrangements with the cantor — he could not in good conscience bring himself to do. In fact, he even managed to inveigle the cantor into assisting him in a plot to frustrate the intentions of the youths of his village who would not heed the wise counsel of their elders.

He told him frankly, that he had been sent by this group of recently married young men, who lived in the luxurious homes of their wealthy in-laws and enjoyed their hospitality "oif kest" (a European custom to give the young couple a year or two of free room and board) with their dowry invested and yielding a good interest rate. Everything was handed to them on a silver platter, so they had nothing in the world to worry about, and all that was missing to make their lives complete was a famous cantor.

"And I want you to know, Panye Rozumny," he continued, "that pretty soon we'll have to conduct a campaign to raise money for the 'Talmud Torah' [Hebrew School], for the 'Chevrah Kadisha' [burial

society in charge of the cemetery], and for 'Hachnosas Kaloh' [Help for dowry of poor brides]. In case you would agree to do their bidding and come to our town, our young 'balebeyslach' [recently married] will no doubt swarm about town and accost everybody in sight for a contribution toward the cantor's compensation, and it will take some doing to collect such a fortune in our small town. After such a thorough job of cleaning out the people's pockets, what will happen to the urgent needs of our communal institutions? You can readily see that we, the officials would be left holding the bag. My plea to you is that you should refuse this invitation, at least for the time being." When it came to matters of this nature, Rozumny was soft-hearted. After listening to the emissary's story and seeing his point, he readily agreed to cooperate wholeheartedly.

When Reb Leyb returned home with the "joyous" news, that he was unable to make any headway with Rozumny, who had categorically declined the invitation because of an overcrowded schedule, the young people thought they smelled a rat. They openly gave expression to their suspicions, that they had been doublecrossed and sold out. They accused Reb Leyb of having played a dirty trick on them. In an effort to get to the bottom of the matter, they dispatched telegrams to Rozumny, asking him to reconsider, as they were ready to meet all his terms. But all their entreaties were of no avail. His answer was unchanged. The disgruntled faction kept up for a while the cry of foul play, but ultimately things quieted down.

In the meantime, the trustees of the united institutions began their drive for the pledges, which used to be solicited every year for the maintenance of the charitable activities of the organizations, and the response was gratifying. They realized their quota which was sufficient to tide them over for another year.

Several months later, the little town woke up one bright day to a new round of excitement. It was rumored in Jewish circles, that passing by on his way home from a concert tour, Rozumny had stopped off for a night's rest in their village. The news spread like wildfire, and a band of youngsters laid siege to the luxurious hotel, where the famous cantor was said to be staying, in the hope of catching a glimpse of him. The group of the young, rich Balebeyslach (sons-in-law), dressed in their Sabbath clothes, proceeded at once to the hotel. When they were allowed in to see Rozumny, they suggested that inasmuch as he was already in town, he should stay over Sabbath and consent to grace the pulpit of their own synagogue with his chants.

The cantor readily acceded to their request. Furthermore, on his own initiative, he offered to reduce his fee to two hundred rubles from the usual two hundred and fifty. However, he volunteered to grant them this exceptional concession only on condition, that they would not sell any tickets of admission, but that twenty young men of their group should put up ten rubles each in payment of his fee. To reimburse themselves, they could later on collect from all those who attended his services, but meanwhile all worshipers, without exception, were to be admitted to the synagogue free of charge.

The young men accepted the great cantor's terms. There was anyhow not sufficient time left for selling tickets. But it was easier said than done. Where and how to lay their hands on such a big bundle of greenbacks in a hurry was indeed a problem. They scrambled about, looking for likely prospects and corralling all their friends in an effort to make them join the list of donors. But to their chagrin, they did not find too many takers for the proffered honor. Even the most enthusiastic music-lovers were reluctant to part with ten rubles.

All they were able to scrape together was a hundred and fifty rubles. Distressed by their failure to collect the required sum, they ran to Reb Leyb and implored him to go to the cantor, as he was on more intimate terms with him, and try to get him to accept as his fee the money which they had been able to collect. Reb Leyb complied with their request, but he came back empty-handed. Rozumny was adamant and sent back word by their emissary, that unless the full amount was handed to him by ten o'clock Friday morning, he would take the train back to Kishinev.

The committee began scouring the town once more. Maybe they had overlooked some people, who could come to the rescue. They approached everybody in sight, but no matter whom they accosted, the response was the same, "Who has ten rubles?" The final result of their efforts was zero. They could not squeeze out one solitary additional ruble from their townspeople.

It began to look as though all their efforts had been in vain and that they would have to let the chance of a lifetime pass them by without the possibility of grasping it. At this critical moment, there appeared a benevolent angel in the person of Reb Leyb himself, who laid before them a proposition designed to pull out the hopelessly stalled wagon of their project from its morass. He graciously offered to advance them the fifty rubles they needed, if they all would sign a promissory note pledging to pay it back within three months. Like one who is drowning and grasping at a straw, they eagerly jumped at the saving device, which he dangled before their eyes and which offered the only ray of hope in their desperate situation.

There was joy and happiness all over town when it became known that the seemingly impossible feat had been accomplished, the full staggering sum had been raised. They now could relax, and look forward to a memorable Sabbath with the great Rozumny officiating. Who needs to eat or to sleep when such a heavenly treat is in store for them?

Well, there is no need and no point in going into the details of the performance which Rozumny gave for the provincial Jews. They had never before heard anything like it and were not likely to experience again a similar exhilaration, if they lived to be a hundred. The whole town, including gentiles, turned out en masse, and they were in seventh heaven, blissfully enchanted by the magic of his incomparable artistry.

It remained an after-glow in their minds and hearts, an unforgettable historic event, unmatched in the annals of the town, whose inhabitants were left with enough material for conversation to last them a lifetime.

They kept on recalling the great moment, and telling their grandchildren wonderful stories about the time when their small village of Durleshty was put on the map by a providential event. The greatest master among all the cantors, Rozumny, came to town, filled their hearts with music, the beauty and charm of which cannot be described in words, and left an indelible impact which lingered on for generations.

In the evening, after the departure of the holy Sabbath, Rozumny called in the trustees of the Talmud Torah, Chevra Kadishah, and Hachnosas Kaloh, and in the presence of the surprised, puzzled members of the arrangement committee, handed each of the three representative groups fifty rubles for their institutions. The remaining fifty rubles were designated by him for "Hachnasos Orchim", taking care of and providing for the needs of hapless wanderers. He thus returned and divided among local charities the whole fee, which he had earned for his Sabbath service.

As for the group of the young impresarios, they were indeed amateurs, and for the record let us add the somber footnote to with that from a business standpoint they definitely did not make the grade. To be specific, they never got back the money, which they had advanced and the additional sum which they had to pay to Reb Leyb in honoring their signatures on his note.

But they had no regrets. It was well worth it. The spiritual rewards which they had reaped were priceless.

This incident, one of many of similar nature, shows the brighter side of the coin of Rozumny's complicated character. Countless legends circulated about his good heart, his generosity, and charitable deeds. This trait of his, his unfailing, immediate, wholehearted response to hard luck stories, was well known, and many unscrupulous people, playing on his good nature, took advantage of his soft heart and used him for their selfish interests. Not only did he indiscriminately, without first making inquiries, hand out to supposedly needy people money of his own, but he even occasionally played tricks on his friends, contriving devious ways and means to extort considerable sums from them and then divide it among his favorite charities. He was in a sense a cantorial Robin Hood.

He could never keep any money. With all the different sources which yielded him considerable income, the top salaries which he was paid and the enormous fees which he was getting for his guest appearances, he nevertheless was always short of funds. Far from worshipping money, he was contemptuous of it, calling it "Geltshmelt" (money smells). No sooner did he get it, than he gave it away to whomever happened to be around.

The same thing was true about clothing and other valuable possessions. His friends and acquaintances, as well as total strangers, knew that Rozumny was an easy mark, a soft touch. If they needed something, they only had to ask him, and he was sure to give it to them. If he did not have it, he could be counted on to make every effort to get it for them. That was Rozumny, a man with a heart of gold, a puzzling but a fascinating personality.

CHAPTER 26

CANTOR ROZUMNY — WHY HE WAS BELOVED BY ALL —

What was the secret of his greatness as "Sheliach Tzibur" (messenger of the community)? — The "Ispravnick" helps in the campaign to lure him back to Odessa.

In the previous chapter, we described the great joy and the festive mood with which the Jews of Kishinev received Rozumny when he came to their city to take over the cantorial position at the large "Hekerisher" (horse-and-buggy drivers) Synagogue. (There was also another smaller Hekerishe synagogue).

But, as usual, the happiness of the winner is the heartache of the loser and so it was in this case. While Kishinev was celebrating, Odessa was bemoaning the loss of such a rare artist. The dismay and resentment of the Jews of Odessa was deep and general. They were inconsolable.

The Shalashna congregation could not become reconciled to the hard blow and did not for one moment allow the unimaginable thought to take hold, that this defection of their adored cantor could possibly be permanent. Even after they had brought a lawsuit in the Rabbinical Court against the Kishinev congregation and lost, they were still not ready to concede defeat and continued to nurture the fond hope, that eventually they would and must succeed in their efforts to bring back Rozumny to Odessa, where he belonged.

As a stopgap measure, to bridge over the supposed interregnum, they engaged, on a temporary basis, Cantor Singerman from Toolan, for whom the cantorate was only a sideline, as he was chiefly a businessman

and a very wealthy merchant. The opportunity to preside at Rozumny's former pulpit counted for so much in honor and prestige, that he would have even been willing to pay the congregation for appointing him to the prominent post. It was, of course, too much to expect that he, or for that matter anyone, could ever fill the shoes of a titan like Rozumny. So after functioning for a short period, he was replaced by Cantor Shulman, who was nicknamed the "Papirosnick" (his father was in the tobacco business). Needless to say, he did not fare much better. Besides he was of a restless nature and had illusions of becoming a great opera star. So one day he left for Italy without saying goodbye.

The pulpit of the Shalashna Synagogue was orphaned once more. All attempts to find a passable substitute for the great master, the canary that had flown the coop, were doomed to failure from the start. The passage of time not only did not diminish the frustrated longing of the members for his heavenly singing, but on the contrary his absence made their hearts grow even fonder.

That some suitable steps had to be taken to re-establish the status quo ante was clearly indicated by the consensus prevailing among the populace. Inevitably, it was decided to face up to the problem and seek a showdown. A committee was dispatched to Kishinev entrusted with the mission of carrying an urgent appeal to Rozumny to reconsider and return home.

In order to reinforce the membership of the delegation with someone who would impress the recalcitrant cantor, they enlisted the help of the "Welko mozsny" pan, grado natchalnik (honorable, mighty, grand official) General Neydgarde, who was known to be a great admirer of Rozumny and who had on one occasion presented him with an expensive, silver-headed walking cane. The general agreed to serve on the committee and to accompany the other members on the crucial mission. The enlistment of Neydgarde in the cause turned out to have been a lucky idea. The arguments and appeal of the general were the decisive factors that influenced Rozumny and caused him to heed the plea that he ought to come back to Odessa and take over once more the post in the Shalashna Synagogue, which had been waiting for him ever since he had abandoned it.

With lightning speed, the news spread through the length and breadth of Odessa, that the rift between Rozumny and the Shalashna congregation had been healed. The father was going to remarry the divorced mother. All the Jews of the city felt like very close "Mechutonim" (relatives) at this joyous reunion of the long estranged couple. Odessa was beside itself with joy, and with good reason. What a momentous event! Their beloved prodigal son had returned from his self-imposed exile. Once more the sun was shining brightly in the sky and had driven away the dreary clouds that for so long had hovered over the horizon and had depressed their souls. Rozumny was back and this time the newly retied knot was so strong that it never again became unraveled. For the rest of his life, he remained with the congregation which could not live without him and equally couldn't he without them.

In Russia there was an expression widely used to say that one is well-off and enjoys the highest living standard: "He lives like God in Odessa." How did Odessa become the symbol of affluence to the extent that it was figuratively speaking, considered the favorite place of the Lord Himself? I would guess that the people's reasoning went something like that: In the prayer book God is said to be partial to the chants of the psalms ("Habocheyr b'shirey Zimroh"), and since the Jews are said to be his chosen people, it is fair to assume that He particularly loves Jewish chants, in other words "Chazzonuth." Well, then, it follows that the Lord must have preferred Odessa to any other city. For where on earth was there as much singing as in the port city that lies on the shores of the Black Sea? Why, even the pebbles in the rivers sing there, not to speak of temples, synagogues, cantors and choirs. No place on earth could boast of so much liturgical chanting, so many beautiful sanctuaries, so many excellent choirmasters and so many great cantors. It was as a matter of fact called "the city of cantors" and in addition to all that they had Rozumny. Is it then any wonder that God felt at home in Odessa and that He lived there in gracious style and pleasurable enjoyment? When we just mentioned so many great cantors, and above all Rozumny too, we meant in this way to indicate that the world venerated and elevated Rozumny above all others. By any yardstick, the public considered him outstanding among all the other cantors and they placed him on a special pedestal, in a class by himself.

When a person who was lucky enough to have heard Rozumny in person writes or talks about him, he usually concludes by adding, "We will never hear someone like him again." No cantor in history ever had so many and such fervent devotees, who would swear by him and defend his superiority fiercely.

We have had occasion to attempt a feeble appraisal of his unusual virtuosity when we were concerned with the cantors of Odessa. Now we are in the process of covering the cantorial story of Kishinev, and since that city too has a legitimate claim on him, because for a while he brightened the Bessarabian scene with his presence and also played a leading role in the liturgical fraternity of its capital city, this circumstance affords us another chance to fill in some of the gaps in our profile of this outstanding figure.

Luckily we have managed to obtain some new material that gives us a fresh slant on his personality, as evidenced in certain episodes of his colorful life, that give some revealing glimpses of the man behind the reputation.

Cantor Icht of Manchester, England, relates that his Mussaf (concluding part of the morning devotion of Rosh Hashonoh and Yom Kippur) lasted not less than five hours. As sweet, artistic and impressive as a Sabbath service of Rozumny's was, it could not be compared with the sacredness, almost Godliness and elevating quality of his High Holiday prayers. On Rosh Hashonoh and Yom Kippur, he was an entirely changed "chazzon". Observing him while reciting the prayers, it seemed as if a se-

cond Reb Leyvy Yitzchok Berditchever was standing at the pulpit. He looked like an angel, like a spirit, and his heartrending insistent manner seemed as though he were saying to the Lord of the Universe, "One of the two. Either you will write into the book of life a good year for all Israel or I don't leave my post and remain standing here at the pulpit until I pass out." Deep in his heart he was a great believer, even though in his private life he had his full share of human weaknesses that made people wonder about the sincerity of his religious convictions.

Prior to ascending the rostrum, he always became very excited, irritable and nervous. When he was once asked, "Why are you trembling? How can you of all people have stage fright? You should have conquered long ago the fear of an audience being that you are constantly appearing before the public?" His reply was, "It is not fear of the congregants that besets me but fear of the Lord in Heaven and that is something I can never overcome."

A rabbinical council once considered the issuance of a decree that Rozumny should be stripped of the eligibility to conduct religious services, because of his conduct unbecoming a man of the cloth. Learning about the charges against him which the rabbinical court was taking under advisement, he went before the religious judges and pleaded, "Before you make a final judgment, I have one request and that is that you attend the services this coming Sabbath in my synagogue. Even a criminal who is convicted and about to be executed, is granted one last wish."

It happened to be a Sabbath that fell on "Rosh Chodesh," the first day of the month (the new moon), when "Ato Yotzarto" (Thou Hast Created) is recited. Rozumny chanted this prayer superbly, as only he was able to. When he came to the passage "Ulefi Shechotohnu Lefonecho" (And Because We Have Sinned), he said these words with such a sincere, heartrending feeling of penitence, as if he were publicly baring his heart, confessing his sins and taking a solemn vow never again to stray from the golden path, that all worshipers, including the rabbis were moved to tears.

After the service, the chief of the rabbinical court turned to Rozumny and chided him, "God gave you such a heavenly gift. You pray so beautifully, so why are you so fickle?" To which the great master replied, "Rabbi, when I am standing before my Maker, I forget everything else. At that moment, I am a wholehearted penitent and I make my listeners also mend their ways and turn over a new leaf." Of course after that the rabbis had a change of heart and dropped the matter of censure.

B. Astrow of Newark relates that one day as he was walking on the main thoroughfare of his native Odessa, he noticed a taller than average slim man, who had a pockmarked face and a long thin neck from which protruded a sizeable Adam's apple, wearing a silk top hat and a cape on his shoulders, carrying a walking cane with a silver handle and promenading leisurely. From the constant movement of his lips, the grimaces of his facial muscles and his absentminded bearing, it was evident that he was deep in thought and most likely humming some tune, which he had just composed.

Jews who were passing by and seemed to be in a great hurry recognized him and suddenly halted. Unable to take their eyes off him, they forgot where they were rushing to and instead fell in line and followed him. Soon, a procession formed that kept increasing. As they reached an intersection, they bumped into a traffic policeman who stared at the man at the head of the advancing solid column, as he strolled and glided along, singing softly to himself and accompanying his tunes with the movements of his cane like a conductor directing an orchestra with his baton.

The strange sight intrigued the policeman and he inquired sarcastically, "What kind of a procession is this and where is the permit for such an assembly in the public square? Disperse at once." And with that, he would charge with his club into the crowd, driving them in all directions. Only the harsh command of the raucous keeper of public order brought Rozumny down to earth. He looked around him and only then realized that he was being trailed like the proverbial Pied Piper and that a sizable crowd had been following him for quite a while. Ashamed of the row he had caused and at the thought of having made a spectacle of himself, he blushed with embarrassment. Turning on his heels, he quickly disappeared into a side street.

M. Young of the Bronx recalls that when Rozumny was walking in the street of Bolshoya Avnaootzkaya one day, he happened to pass by the wine cellar of a trustee of his synagogue, whose name was Rabinowich. When the latter sighted his cantor, he invited him in to have a drink with him. They spent a while in friendly conversation, sipping intermittently from the glasses wishing each other "Lechayim" (to good health). The intoxicating and invigorating effect of the grape liquid lifted the spirits of the cantor. Lulled into a happy, carefree, expansive mood, he felt like singing. The sweet sounds emanating from the wine cellar made the passersby curious. They were intrigued and paused to investigate. There was no mistaking that voice. Only one person could sing like that. Soon a large crowd had gathered around the store to enjoy the unexpected vocal treat that filled the air.

It was the custom that when a prominent, respected member of a synagogue died, the hearse that carried the earthly remains of the deceased to his eternal resting place would stop in front of the synagogue which he had frequented. Then, the cantor would stand near the coffin and recite the "Moley" (lament), the prayer for the dead. Each time when the Shalashna Synagogue was the scene of such a final tribute and Rozumny was scheduled to chant the "Moley," the Yekaterinska Ulitza instantly became impassable, as people used to come there in droves to listen to the chanting of the somber prayer by their beloved cantor, and in many instances police had to be dispatched to the scene to keep order. Also whenever it was learned that Rozumny was going to officiate at the burial ritual, huge masses used to go to the cemetery, pushing and stepping on each other's toes, just to hear him sing. Wherever and whenever he made an appearance, a mob was sure to assemble. People of all strata of society were attracted to him as though he were a magnet and they followed him

around like a shadow.

According to the authoritative account, as recorded by S. Alman, the well-known composer, choirmaster and musicologist of London, who knew Rozumny well, having been one of his disciples, there was never such a thing as an unoccupied seat in the large synagogue when he stood at the altar. It was invariably standing room only, and more often than not Cossacks on horseback had to be stationed at the entrance of the Shalashna Synagogue to hold back the onrushing, unruly mob and to prevent rioting by the late arrivals, who were already unable to gain admission to the prayer session.

It was an assignment, which all policemen coveted. There was a restaurant across the street from the Synagogue and the lucky policeman who was delegated to keep order could sit there sipping his drink and listen to the sweet sounds of the celebrated cantor coming out from the holy edifice.

Rozumny was of frail build and delicate looking. How such a slim, rather thin, body could contain such a great all-embracing soul was hard to imagine. His voice also was not very strong and loud. Not only was his tone production nasal but also somewhat throaty, what in cantorial parlance is called "fargamt."

According to Topfstein, who for a time served as choir leader with Rozumny, he was no great shakes as a musician either. Once they were rehearsing a composition by Novakowsky in which there is a pretty difficult solo for the cantor.

When in the course of the singing they came to the point where the cantor was supposed to take over, he recoiled from plunging into the reading of his solo.

Claiming hoarseness, he asked Topfstein to substitute for him. At a subsequent rehearsal he again under some other phony excuse, made the director sing the solo. But he had a very perceptive musical ear and after having heard it sung by the choirmaster several times he mastered it perfectly and rendered it flawlessly to the enthusiastic acclaim of the congregants.

But in spite of these flaws, he just had to open his mouth and all music critics and expounders of theory fell silent. Not only that, but forgetting all their reservations they were so astonished and became so enchanted and electrified by what came out of that precious throat, that they would have gladly remained standing for days and nights at a stretch and not gotten tired of listening to those magical sounds.

In the opinion of Alman, Rozumny was without exaggeration the nightingale of the cantorial world. Even though his voice was unquestionably a typical lyric voice, he was able to dramatize the appropriate passages that lent themselves to such an interpretation with such power, intensity and shattering impact, that his listeners got goosepimples. He somehow grew taller in those moments of dynamic elation and majestic grandeur.

His graphic depictions, in his individualistic musical language, of the

sufferings of his people never failed to draw hot tears from the eyes of the praying congregations. Even to hear him sigh was an engrossing experience. His hymns of praise and tribute to the Almighty were regal odes of angelic glorification and sanctification and his urgent insistent appeals to the Father in Heaven for grace, clemency and merciful forgiveness toward human failings were so persuasive and irresistible, that it seemed impossible that they could remain unanswered.

Joseph Rumshinsky, composer and musical director in the Yiddish theatre, wrote that Rozumny's pianissimo and "mezzovoce" had no equal in the world. He had absolute, complete control over his voice which with its rich color, its indescribably sweet, silken quality and with his extraordinary long breath, hypnotized his audience.

Rumshinsky was a youngster who belonged to the ensemble of the Wilna "Choir synagogue," when Rozumny came to town in response to an invitation to officiate at a Sabbath service. When he heard the young boy sing a solo, he engaged him for his choir in Odessa. Since Rozumny was scheduled for a guest appearance on the following Sabbath in Bialystok, he took his newly engaged soloist with him. The choir director of the Bialystok Synagogue fell ill and the baritone of the choir, Zeidman, took over the reins and led the choir at the rehearsal. Rozumny was dissatisfied with the way Zeidman was directing, so he turned to Rumshinsky, gave him the baton and said, "Pokazi tchto ti umiyeyesh" (show what you can do). The little Joseph was capable to do just that even at that tender age, and not only did he lead the choir at the synagogue services, but he continued leading even when he himself sang the solo, thus giving himself the tempo. It was so funny, that it made all the choristers laugh.

Since Rozumny had more scheduled stops to make before he would be returning to Odessa, he assigned the task of taking Rumshinsky to Odessa to the baritone, Zeidman. He gave him a sizeable sum of money with which to buy a new outfit for the boy and cover their traveling expenses to Odessa. But Zeidman wanted to get back at Rozumny for not having let him direct the choir. He also had different plans. He was going to Grodno, and he persuaded Rumshinsky to forget about Odessa and to come along with him to Yoshe Slonimer. Rumshinsky balked protesting: "But I promised Rozumny to come to him." However when Zeidman told the boy that in Grodno there was also a Yiddish theatre, this proved to be a decisive inducement for Rumshinsky and he went with Zeidman and joined the choir of Yoshe Slonimer.

The cantor of Grodno was a very pious Jew and in conversation with the two newcomers when the name of Rozumny was mentioned, he disdainfully remarked, "Rozumny has 'ah Yiddish moyl un ah goyishe neshome' " (a Jewish mouth and a gentile soul).

Cantor J. Kelmansky, who in his youth sang in Rozumny's chorus and later was the cantor of an Odessa congregation, reported that the climax of Rozumny's High Holiday services was his "Neelah" (closing) service at twilight of the Day of Atonement. "There are no words," according to this disciple of the great master, "in our vocabulary that could

adequately describe the magnificence that characterized his interpretation of the concluding prayers of the holiest of holy days of the Jewish faith. The way he chanted 'Yisroel nowsha Baadoshem' (Israel trusts in the eternal help of the Lord), pouring out his heart in the absolute unshakable conviction that in spite of every evidence to the contrary, the Jews do not stand alone as the helpless scapegoats and ready targets of all the inhuman cruelties visited on them by their merciless enemies surrounding them, but that the protective hand of the Lord watches over his chosen people and it would ultimately prevail, was an experience never to be forgotten. He broke the hearts and lifted up the spirits as no one else ever could.

"Listening to his exposition one could not help but take on new hope and confidence in a brighter future. His voice brought to the worshipers the consolation and solace, the healing balm to their wounded hearts, that was so sorely needed in those dark days. It was a holy mission nobly executed by a superbly endowed great virtuoso."

Shaken to the depths of his soul, Kelmansky, returning home after that heavenly religious service, said to his wife, "How can I even think of becoming a cantor, when there is in the world such a titan as Rozumny?"

Rozumny was very particular in choosing the tenors for his choir. He would only take young men eighteen or nineteen years old. There was no steady assistant cantor in the Shalashna Synagogue. On the Sabbaths when Rozumny was off, the choir leader would direct one of his tenors to read the ritual. These young apprentices were given strict instructions not to attempt any improvisations. Their job was to conduct the service in a simple manner, without any ostentatious phraseology. After the congregation had finished reciting a prayer, they were to repeat only the last sentence in accordance with the directions given in the prayer book. If one dared to try showing off and to begin somewhere in the middle and act like a professional, he was sure to be severely reprimanded by Rozumny.

Kelmansky used to be appointed frequently by the leader of the chorus to mount the rostrum on some of these in-between Sabbaths. (Rozumny officiated only once a month). On one such occasion, when he was reading the Friday evening devotions, he felt like singing "Vetaheyr libeynu leovdecho b'emess" (Cleanse our hearts so that we may serve thee in truth) "a la Rozumny." He let his voice float in an attempt to copy the way the chief cantor of the synagogue used to chant that particular passage. Rozumny gave him a piece of his mind for having dared to disobey orders, adding the coup de grace, that henceforth Kelmansky could forget about ever again being allowed to ascend the pulpit.

When Pinye Minkowsky was asked why all cantors love Rozumny and do not have such affection for him, he gave the following reply, "When a young fellow comes to Odessa to study 'Chazzonuth,' he is sure to pay his first visit either to me or to Rozumny. If he happens to come to me, I begin by giving him first of all a lecture of what 'Chazzonuth' is all about. I explain to him that to become a cantor means a lot of study, hard work, long hours, sweat and dedication. This frightens him away. He usually leaves my house feeling disappointed and goes over to Rozumny to

hear what he has to say on the subject."

In parentheses, he could have also added that he had two fierce dogs on the premises watching and suspiciously scrutinizing all comers. If they did not like the appearance of the person who approached the hallowed ground and wished to see the master of the house, they howled and frightened the visitor away before he even had a chance to present himself to Minkowsky and get a hearing, let alone get his advice.

And now to return to Minkowsky's explanation of the reason why Rozumny was so popular and beloved in cantorial circles, especially by the fledgling for the cantorial profession. He continued, "When this young man, who was not particularly impressed by my cool expostulation of the hard road that one was obliged to tread before he can ever hope to become a competent, professionally well equipped cantor, goes to see Rozumny, he gets an entirely different reception. At the very beginning, Rozumny was most likely to tell him a joke. Without ceremony, he immediately becomes "panye brat" [thick friends] with him, invites him to a cafe, treats him to a fine meal, takes him to his home, plays some card game — a "sixty-six" or dominoes — with him. Not a word is mentioned about the study of music, voice culture, religious training, the necessity of working very hard, poring over partituras, or of the importance of bearing, conduct and dignity in the holy calling.

"It's all so chummy, easy and simple, requiring no effort. The young man goes away from Rozumny in a happy mood with a light heart. So why should he not be grateful and just love the man who made it all seem so easy and gave him the illusion, that the so much coveted goal was within his reach without the need of too much study, time and sacrifices?"

Paraphrasing the witticism of a certain Englishman at the expense of the Italians, "Everybody loves the Italians but who respects them?" To which the Italian retorted, "Everybody respects the English, but who loves them?" Minkowsky concluded by saying, "Everybody loves Rozumny but who respects him?" When this derogatory remark reached the ears of Rozumny, he retorted, "Everybody respects Minkowsky, but who loves him?"

Well, in one respect Pinye was right. Rozumny loved a joke, a funny story. He was a happy-go-lucky witty person.

Rozumny was on very friendly terms with "Mendele Mocheyr Sforim," the "Zeyde" of the Yiddish literature. On one occasion, in the course of the conversation, Rozumny posed the question to the writer: "How come you took the 'Nom de plume' 'Mocheyr Sforim' [seller of books]? Why don't you call yourself: 'Mendele Koseyv Sforim' [The writer of books]? Surely that would be more accurately descriptive of your true profession." "Well," replied the "Zeyde" in characteristic Jewish fashion with a question of his own: "What is in a name? It seldom fits the man who wears it. Take your own case. Your name is Rozumny and yet you are a cantor."

But, the picture was not exactly the way Minkowsky painted it. There was more to it than he was willing and ready to concede to his much better

liked colleague. On a Sabbath or a holiday afternoon, it was his habit to take a stroll in the park — promenade through the passage of the Diribotzowska Alley. The young cantors used to gather there, forming a circle around Rozumny, eager to hear what the great master had to tell them. He was holding court and putting them through an examination in the manner of a teacher probing the knowledge of his pupils. "Now, you smart alec, let me hear how you would say, 'Misod Chachomim' [Secret of the Wise], and you, big shot, how about giving us a sample of how you would interpret 'Kevakoras' [Like a Shepherd] and that wise guy there he thinks that he now already knows all there is to know. I'll bet your 'Habeyn Yaker Li' [The Son is Dear to me] is not so hot. Go on, let's hear it." In such bantering fashion, he used to make them relax and they used to show off before him without a trace of stage fright, and when he corrected them, they took it with good grace and gratitude. And after he listened to their versions he would point out their mistakes and demonstrate the correct way, hum some recitatives and give them useful pointers.

His relationship to them was akin to that of a big brother. His home was always open to them. Instead of holding forth with highbrow theoretical lectures, he gave them practical advice and easy-to-understand-and-to-follow directions. He did not keep his young colleagues at arm's length as Minkowsky was wont to do. He had not become swelled-headed by success. He was a warm hearted, accessible friend and good natured comrade, who was always ready to assist any friend who called on him. For a colleague in need, he would give away his last shirt. It was no wonder, then, that he was idolized and beloved by all.

Rozumny himself was not a composer, a creative musician. As a matter of fact he was not a very accomplished musician. His greatness lay in his interpretative power of the works of others.

He had however a good nose for smelling a good recitative and when he got hold of one, he made a masterpiece out of it by his inimitable delivery. Most of the recitatives with which he conquered the world were written for him by Moshe Ber Kuritiansky, the ingenious cantor of the choir synagogue of Yekaterinoslav. Another great composer, whose creations became immortal classics thanks to Rozumny's masterful interpretation was Peyse Chotiner.

Rozumny's grandfather, a rabbi by vocation was an expert penman, who was very good at composing and writing "proshenye's" petitions, applications, appeals and other official documents to the authorities on behalf of people who were unable to write them themselves. He knew several languages and his hand writing was like that of a caliograph. He also was a very learned talmudic scholar.

Thanks to his many-faceted talents he gained employment as a useful man for all seasons at the court of a certain "Tchinovnick" (high official bureaucrat), who had ready access to the Tzar Nicolay the 1st.

In a conversation with the "Batyushka" this nobleman happened to mention the virtues of his man Friday, who even though a Jew, is of great value to him.

His curiosity aroused, the Tzar summoned him to his presence. He asked him several questions and after listening to his answers he remarked to members of his entourage "Da Rozumny Tchliovek" (He is a smart guy). The adjutant of the Tzar made a note of the Emperor's opinion and that royal tag stuck to him for good and was inherited also by his progeny. The Tzar also appointed the Zeyde of Rozumny as Chaplain of Jewish Sailors.

Rabbi Mazeh of Moskwa gave his consent to have Rozumny conduct religious services in his synagogue. When he was asked why he allowed Rozumny access to the Omud when many other rabbis would not give their consent, he replied: "I am convinced that when he stands at the Omud he prays with sincerity and pious conviction and evokes deep religious feelings in the hearts of the worshipers."

That his soulful outpour of prayer was not a put-on but expressed his sincere feelings is borne out by the fact that in the last years of his life he would often complain: "I can't 'daven' anymore. I feel like crying, so deeply moved do I get by my own chants and carried away by my feelings."

To be just to the memory of Rozumny, it must be noted, as a postscript, that there is some basis to the opinion held in some circles that the devil was not as black as he was painted. Rozumny was pictured as a great lady's man, a Casanova, who was wont to disregard public opinion by his conduct which was allegedly not in accordance with Jewish religion and moral guidelines. According to Zeidel Rovner and others who were in a position to know, various derogatory stories told about Rozumny, which circulated among the Jews of the European countries, were largely nothing but the figment of the public's imagination. Zeidel, who was a good judge of people, knew Rozumny personally, and his evaluation of the great cantor would seem to be pretty authentic and as such should carry weight. There is no question according to this famous colleague and contemporary that Rozumny lived up to his name which in Russian means "smart one." He was very shrewd in the ways of getting publicity and creating around his person an aura, an air of mystery. He was interested in publicity and anxious to have the talk and discussions in Jewish circles center around him at all times. He went to great lengths to achieve this goal. He was even capable of spreading false rumors about himself and occasionally some that not only reflected no credit to him, but were of a downright derogatory nature.

It was generally held that Rozumny was no "tzadik" (saint or even a pious man), a great admirer of feminine beauty and easily charmed by members of the feminine sex. But there was also talk going around that he had the nerve to come to the synagogue on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, the Day of Atonement, riding in a hansom and accompanied by two ladies. The story was, of course, fictitious and had been planted by himself with the object of furnishing people with piquant material, so that they would have something to talk about. It was designed to prove that he was such a great and superb artist, that nothing could hurt his career. If, in

spite of having committed such an outrageous act of sacrilege, his congregation still stuck by him and would not dare even consider dismissing him from his post, he must indeed be irreplaceable and a drawing card of unmatched potency.

Rozumny almost never appeared in public with any other head gear but his high silk hat (stovepipe) and a pelerina (cape) over his shoulders. He never would walk in casually into the synagogue. He made it a point to always make a grand, impressive, almost theatrical entrance so as to instantly become the center of attention.

Zeidel also related that while sojourning in Odessa he was most anxious to listen to a religious service of Rozumny's, but he did not have the opportunity, because every Sabbath on which Rozumny was officiating, he himself was also conducting the religious service in some other synagogue.

But there came an occasion when the "dozer," the head of the congregation with which Rozumny was connected, passed away and a great mob, from all corners of the city, gathered in front of the Shalashna Synagogue. They were coming to the funeral in the expectation of being able to listen to the masterful way in which Rozumny would perform the mournful ceremony. Rozumny arrived elegantly clad, with a shiny silk hat on his head and a cape on his shoulders. He ascended the stairs until he reached the gates of the entrance into the synagogue. There he stationed himself, standing motionless as erect as a pole, while the assistant cantor recited psalms appropriate for the occasion, with the accompaniment of the choir. The same assistant then proceeded to chant the memorial dirge of "Keyl Moley Rachamim" (Lord Full of Compassion). During all that time Rozumny remained silent.

Needless to say that the crowds in the street were disappointed. They wanted to hear something from the chief cantor of the congregation. But there was more of disillusionment in store for the listeners, who gradually became more and more impatient and even annoyed by the apparent unwillingness of Rozumny to even as much as open his mouth. He continued to remain as silent as a stone, even after the funeral procession began its march through the streets. It was the second cantor's show, assisted, of course, by the chorus, all the way to the cemetery.

Undaunted, the obdurate crowd did not disperse. They were determined to follow the cortege to the hallowed ground of the cemetery, where the burial was to take place, confident that at some point of the ritual Rozumny was bound to deliver a lament. Zeidel, too, held out until the end and they were indeed rewarded for their patience and perseverance. When the coffin was placed near the open grave ready to be lowered, Rozumny suddenly stepped forward and right at that moment there went through the lines of the assembled mourners the whispered exciting message, "At last Rozumny is after all going to say something."

Rozumny approached the coffin and began a declamation of the text, "Hasheym nosan veHasheym lokach yehi sheym Adoshem mevorach" (The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away. May the name of the

Lord be blessed). Just eight Hebrew words and it was not exactly singing. Rather was it in the form of a dramatic recitation or oration. He repeated the text three times, making it successively more emphatic and more impressive. As he later recalled the experience, Zeidel remembered that it was not much of a chant, but from Rozumny's mouth it seemed like a brilliantly illuminated poem, a flash of light, or like the pronouncement of an oracle. The audience was charmed and delighted, and as they left the cemetery grounds many were seen shaking their heads as if in a trance and were heard remarking one to another, "How do you like that? What a marvellous artist. Wasn't that something? Are you a 'Meyvin'? [One who understands and can appreciate liturgical music]. Pulling off such a feat!" Zeidel had to agree. He now had some idea of the secret of Rozumny's magic. If he was capable of enchanting the Jews with eight words of declamation, he was indeed a great artist, a "Molodyetz."

Rozumny was able to command what in those years seemed like astronomical figures as fees for guest-appearances. Few Jewish communities could afford to meet his outrageous demands.

But to what length wouldn't Jews go in order to have the "zechiyeh" (privilege) to hear the legendary cantor?

People were even ready to, as they say in Yiddish, "farmashkenen di bettgewandt" (pawn their bedding) just so they could buy a ticket of admission to the rare musical treat.

Rozumny got a kick out of the eagerness, with which people parted with their hardearned money and in a self-satisfying mood he was fond of remarking in a spoofing jocular vein and reference to his name: "Durak davay i Rozumny bere" (the fool gives and the smart one takes). But it was easy come easy go.

Rozumny was, as most artists are, a bohemian, who lived a full, eventful, turbulent, careless, but soul-satisfying life, and also as most artists he died broke, lonely and deserted, in a Christian hospital from an incurable disease which he had contracted. He earned fortunes but he died in "fremde tachrichim," penniless, in borrowed shrouds. Not only did he give until it hurt but he gave away all he had and often even to not deserving friends. He was an easy touch, and many hangers on of his coterie, who swarmed around him like flies, took advantage of his good nature and soft heart.

The funeral services for Rozumny were conducted with solemnity never before seen in Odessa or anywhere else. A long parade of all the choirs of the city followed the coffin and they chanted various laments and appropriate psalms. The streets through which the funeral procession passed were full of people that had come to say the last goodbye to their idolized bard. They were mourning the death of the town's most beloved individual. Scores of people stood on the rooftops; all the stores on the route had closed down their shutters in honor of the great deceased. Police on horseback rode in front of the hearse to open a path through the solid front of human bodies.

When the procession halted in from the synagogue where his immor-

tal voice was heard for most of his short life and where the lights in the lanterns were already burning, the pushing and shoving in the street became so fierce and uncontrollable, that even the police detachment was unable to cope with the situation and several people sustained injuries in the melee.

At the Beys Olom (cemetery), the coffin was taken into the black hall, all of the walls of which were pitchblack, relieved only by several white stars on its ceiling. Rarely was the somber hall used. It was a singular tribute and honor bestowed on the deceased to have the burial rites performed there. It was reserved for outstanding personalities and revered public figures.

Pincus Minkowsky walked to the rostrum and together with the choir intoned "Ki malochov yetzaveh loch" (He will command his angels to take charge over thee) for the repose of the soul of his colleague.

Yechiel Alter Karniol, the cantor of the Yevreysky Synagogue chanted the "Moley" (dirge) with his mighty voice, which echoed in the adjoining streets, as if cannons were booming and giving the last salute to the fallen hero. This was followed by all the cantors of Odessa and all the singers of the choirs of all the synagogues joining in the rendition of "Shivisi" (I have set the Lord always before me).

A representative of his congregation, Vladimir Kaufman, the treasurer, who was one of Rozumny's greatest admirers, gave a very moving eulogy, which he concluded with the following words, "What a pity! My dear great 'Chazzon,' with your wonderful heartrending prayers you could have steered all of Odessa back onto the road of virtue, but woe to us! Satan in the form of the 'yeytzer horah' [evil instinct] did everything in his power to foil the noble intent of your heart and to make sure that this would not come to pass. May the earth be light on your grave and may the Lord who forgiveth sins grant your cleansed soul eternal peace in Paradise." Hot tears glistened in his eyes, when he took his final leave from the friend, whom he adored, and there was not a dry eye in the whole assembly.

As a tombstone, there was erected on his grave a replica of the Omud (pulpit) of the Shalashna Synagogue. It was carved of marble, and on the top of the stand lies an opened marble prayerbook on which was engraved in golden letters — "Av Horachamim shocheyn meromim" (merciful Father who dwellest on high). This was the prayer that was most closely identified with him and with which he conquered the world. Never before him and never since has anybody been able to chant it like he did. This "trade mark" of his marks the grave of the incomparable giant of the "Omud."

The mound where Rozumny sleeps for eternity is separated from other graves by an iron gate and the inscription on the side of the tombstone reads, "Here lies the great artist, Sheliach Tzibur [emissary of the community] Ephrayim Zalman Rozumny. The Jewish people will never forget him. Honor to his memory." He was a rare phenomenon, legendary, almost mythical figure who had an unparalleled hold on the public.

If ever there was a man who exuded "charisma" that was capable of practically hypnotizing his listeners, it was Rozumny.

He departed earth much too soon, leaving the hosts of his admirers poorer and sadder. He prided himself on being "Rozumny" but he did not live wisely and was outsmarted by the angel of death.

What a pity that no recording of his voice was left to posterity. He probably avoided getting mixed up with the gramophone, not wanting to draw upon himself also the vicious attacks of Minkowsky, who uncompromisingly was crusading against Sirota and Kwartin for their recording of prayers.

His son Michael Rozumny settled in America and went to Hollywood where he had a creditable career as an actor in movie pictures.

CHAPTER 27

JACOB BACHMAN, ONE OF THE GREATEST CANTORS OF HIS GENERATION

Anton Rubenstein was one of his teachers — What Moussorgsky said about him — He ran away from Odessa and landed in Budapest.

If one, in writing about the famous cantors, is employing the method of grouping them according to the cantorial centers where they functioned, as I attempted to do until now in my series of chapters, it frequently becomes necessary to spend more time in the same city than one had originally planned to. We have for example already spent several weeks in Kishinev, which almost makes us feel as if we were permanent residents of that city.

Not that we have any reason for complaining, God forbid, we only wish that a greater misfortune shall never befall us. All our dear ones should never have to sojourn in a worse city than Kishinev. You can surely never die there from hunger and life there is lively and merry. And especially if one has the good fortune to arrive there at the season of the High Holidays. In that case one can not only enjoy the physical pleasures and strengthen his heart with tasty delicacies and with the finest beverages, but also saturate his soul with the sweet sounds of the wonderful synagogue chants, with which Kishinev is so richly and abundantly blessed.

It is only regrettable that it is impossible to be simultaneously in all the synagogues and it is pretty difficult to make a choice from among so many great and famous cantors. Where to go and who to listen to first?

That is still the question after we have, as noted before, already spent here so much time. We still have not been able to visit a goodly number of the great artists of the pulpit and how can we bypass such an opportunity? To have been in Rome and not to have seen the Pope?

So let us look around and see what we can accomplish. Let us go out and find the cantor who is next on our list. We meet him and greet him like an old acquaintance, for we had already met him once before in Odessa. But here in Kishinev, he is still a youngster. In this city he was born and raised, and all who dwell here may justly be proud of their kinsman, who became one of the most famous of his time. The world echoed with his name which was Jacob Bachman.

As was the custom in those years, his parents made him go to work in a textile store as an apprentice helper, messenger and errand boy so that he could learn the secrets of the trade and in time perhaps also be able to branch out in the same on his own. He was a well-built, muscular young fellow to whom the handling of merchandise weighing dozens of pounds was like playing with a pin. Among other manual duties, it was also his job to dust and sweep. He was a meloman of music, a lover of songs and fond of cantors and choirs, and whenever he had a chance, he ran to listen to their chants, which he later tried to repeat. It was his habit to sing while working, especially when he was sweeping the floor and nobody was around. Then he would sing with the full power of his voice and wield the broom like the choir leader in the synagogue giving the beat with his raised hands. He was in general a merry, happy-go-lucky youngster, always singing, jumping, laughing, and having fun.

One day, there happened to come into the store a wealthy businessman from Odessa just when the young employee was in one of his jovial moods. While climbing up the ladder to bring down from the shelves the heavy bolts of cloth which the customer wanted to see, he felt like singing some new melody, which he had heard the local cantor sing recently. Although he was only singing softly, the visitor who happened to be musically inclined and had some knowledge and understanding of voices, became aware of the carefree boy, who was enjoying himself and incidentally also entertaining the customers.

The customer was surprised by the rich quality of the youngster's voice. He knew at once that he had stumbled on a raw diamond, that here was a precious stone, which, if ground and polished, would make of its possessor a phenomenal singer. He became interested in the lad, and advised him to think about cultivating his voice and studying music. He offered to help him not only morally but also financially. He got in touch with the boy's father and made arrangements with him to take his Yanke'le along with him to Odessa, where he introduced him to the great master and recognized authority of the cantorial world of that era, Betzalel Odessa'er, who asked him to sing something. When he heard the rare timbre and quality of the young man's voice, he confirmed the opinion of the businessman that the boy had a great future before him in the musical field. Tzalel undertook to personally oversee the musical education of the

young Bachman, who was eager and anxious to learn. His diligence and industrious perseverance was rewarded. With his youthful enthusiasm and his thirst for knowledge, he imbibed the genuine, traditional style of liturgical chant, which Reb Tzalel imparted to him, and he became one of his best pupils.

Simultaneously with the boy from Kishinev, there sang in Tzalel Odessa'er's choir also a native of Odessa, Yankel Gottlieb. He was somewhat older than Bachman and the main soloist of the choir. He was the mainstay of the Kapelye (group), an excellent singer, whose artistically phrased solos used to evoke general admiration. After having served in Tzalel's choir, this alto-soloist had the notion that he knew all there was to know and that he could already stand on his own feet. So he decided to quit the choir, go out on his own and become a cantor. But in what synagogue whould they allow a young boy who was not even Bar Mitzvah as yet to conduct the services? He managed to pull it off by bribing the sextons of the different congregations of Odessa, with the spleens, lungs, livers, and sweetbreads, which his father, who was a "shochet," used to bring home from the slaughterhouse. In return, they permitted him to go to their pulpit and officiate on a Friday evening or sometimes at a Sabbath service.

That is how he got the necessary experience. When he saw that things were going pretty well, that he was successful and people were well pleased with his performances, his ambition grew by leaps and bounds and he began organizing his own choir. He was anxious to secure the services of his colleague and friend, his namesake, the other Yankel. By means of generous promises, he succeeded in persuading Bachman to join his newly-organized choir. And so it happened that Bachman became a meshorer (singer) of "Yankel the heyzeriger" (the hoarse Yankel) so-called because of a peculiar type of hoarseness that characterized his otherwise fine and pleasant voice.

When he had succeeded in gathering together a group of singers, "Yankel der heyzeriger" set out on the road and traveled with his choir all over Lithuania, Poland and Bessarabia. Touring in this manner the cities and villages and performing synagogue-services on the Sabbath and sometimes on weekdays as well, they once made a stop in a small town, where had also arrived Moshe Pasternak, who had a reputation as one of the great luminaries on the cantorial horizon. He also was scheduled to officiate on the following Sabbath in one of the synagogues of the village. Bachman was dying to hear this giant of cantorial art, so he stole away during the reading of the Torah and ran breathlessly to the "Beth Hamedrash" where Pasternak was conducting the service. The great master's prayers made an unforgettable impression on him. He was drawn to this great artist as if by a magnet, and from then on he followed him around like a shadow.

The cantors of his time used to call Moshe Pasternak "The King of Tefila" (prayer). Listening to him, one could not help but be moved to tears. He won the general characterization of "Bechyon" or "Bal Bechy"

(crier), for he had a tear in his voice. In spite of his enormous talent, he was not able to obtain a position, for the reason that his personal life was not up to the standard required from a clergyman. His religious and moral conduct left much to be desired and congregations were reluctant to engage him, consequently he was usually on the road, officiating here and there and traveling constantly.

The Opter Rabbi once heard him conduct a service and afterwards remarked to him, "Hear my words, Moshe. In purgatory where you are sure to land eventually, you will with your prayers bewitch the 'Malachey Chabooloth' [punishing angels] so as to turn them into 'Malachey Hashoros' [benevolent angels]".

The Rabbi of Savran, who was a disciple of Reb Boruch of Mezbits, refused to let him into his house. So Moshe Pasternak took his stand under the Rabbi's window and began chanting the passage from the Zohar (cabbalistic book) "Posach Elijahoo" (Elijah began praying). Immediately under the impact of his moving recital in the street, there broke out among the assembled crowd a loud wail, which induced the uncompromising Rabbi to reconsider his ban. He finally relented and gave the order to let him enter. He admitted that it was Tfiloh L'Moshe, the prayer of Moshe, a sublime fervent effusion of a broken heart, that won him over, and turning to Pasternak he addressed him with these words of chastisement, "Moshe, Moshe, I'm trying to elevate you and you are throwing yourself down. When will you at last get hold of yourself and become a respectable man?"

The cantor replied, "What can I do when the peasant women carry me [Pasternak means carrots] in their 'podales' [aprons]?" In his declining years, though, he turned over a new leaf and became a "Baal Tshoovo" (repentant man).

Bachman kept listening intently to Pasternak, observing his style and imitating his idol. His unique way of interpreting the prayers appealed to him very strongly and he was greatly influenced by his emotional style of improvising.

During the entire time which Bachman spent singing in choirs and wandering all over the globe with the traveling cantors, his mentor, the businessman of Odessa, who discovered him and who kept in touch with him, kept urging him to go St. Petersburg and enroll in the conservatory of that city. He was willing and ready to cover the expenses which this would entail. Bachman finally took his advice. He was then 18 years old, and his voice, which in the course of the passing years had undergone great changes, had by this time developed into a well-modulated, powerful instrument and had ripened immensely. It now possessed a more brilliant lustre and power than before.

When Anton Rubinstein, the director of the conservatory, heard him sing he was beside himself with excitement and surprise and resolved immediately to make a great opera singer out of him. He would not turn this task over to any of the other professors but made him his own responsibility. He himself personally took charge of his curriculum, teaching him all

the courses of musical knowledge and voice culture.

* * *

In the course of our writing about famous cantors, we had and expect to have some more occasions to make mention of Anton Rubinstein time and again. It is perhaps about time for us to get better acquainted with the famous pianist and composer. He was born in Vechvatinnecz Gubernia of Podolia, near the border with Bessarabia where his father Grigori held a farm in Arenda (rent). He also was the concessionaire of a kretchma. There on the 28th of November, 1829 Anton Grigoriewich Rubinstein was born. On the site where stood the tavern was years later erected a public school that was named after the celebrated native of the village. Soon afterward the family moved to Berditchev, where his grandfather, Reuben Rubinstein, a respected pious citizen, held in lease the lands and estates in the vicinity which he rented from Count Radzivil. He was on friendly, intimate terms with some of the influential magnates and noblemen, who belonged to the circle which had ready access to the court of Tsar Nicholas, the First. Thanks to the high connections and the favored status which he enjoyed with the powerful politicians, he was able to land a lucrative contract for supplying a considerable amount of certain required provisions like food and clothing for the army, which was at that time embroiled in a war with Turkey. Due to unforseeable circumstances and unavoidable difficulties, the wagons of a large transport of meat preserves, canned goods and all kinds of beverages that were urgently needed, were held up at some railroad junction. The harassed soldiers in the fields meanwhile were left without food for days, and as a direct consequence the army suffered a serious defeat in combat.

Rubinstein was called to account. He was accused of criminal negligence. As a dirty "Zsidak" (Jew) he was suspected of having deliberately withheld the delivery of the supplies in order to hurt the war effort and lower the morale of the troops. Charges were brought against him. He was courtmartialed and sentenced to be shot. Luckily for him, his patron, Count Radzivil, intervened on his behalf with the authorities and with his great influence was able to get a special pardon for him which was granted on condition that he, as well as all the members of his family, renounce his faith and go through the ceremony of getting sprinkled with the holy water, which would make good Christians of them. Not having any other alternative, Reuben Rubinstein became a renegade, adopted the Orthodox Russian Pravoslavno religion and took along with him into the fold of the Russian church also all the members of his family, his son Herschel, his wife Keyle (Katya) Levenstein and their six children, 4 daughters and 2 sons, among whom was also his two-year-old grandson, Anton.

There are, to be sure, other versions of the story and according to one of them Reuben Rubinstein became a turncoat because he was angered by the acts of discrimination directed against him by the leaders of the Jewish community. As he was one of the wealthiest Jews of the city, his co-religionists of Berditchev naturally expected him to make generous con-

tributions to the various charitable and religious institutions of his hometown and to respond with an open hand to the needs of the community, but tightwad that he was he ignored the gentle and subtle hints of the necessity of a more appropriate attitude and consideration on his part.

To punish the recalcitrant, obstinate miser, it was decided to shun his company and to deny him the honors usually accorded a member of similar prominence. When even this method did not work and there remained no chance that he might voluntarily contribute, action was taken by the trustees of the congregation to slap a heavy tax on Reb Reuven. He refused to be bound by the decision and to pay the bill levied on him. In his wrath and to get even, he conceived the idea of taking revenge on his tormentors by deserting and denying his past and assuming a new image. He not only embraced the Pravoslavno faith but even changed his first name to Ramon.

Up to this point, he was considered by his fellowmen to have been a pious, observant Jew. But he hardly could have ever been very religious, if a caprice and an insignificant matter of pecuniary considerations could have impelled him to take such a serious step and to drag into the morass also all his dear ones. Whatever the cause of Reuben Rubinstein's action was, his grandson grew up as a member of the Christian church and fraternity.

Anton's father, Herschl Grigory was a great "apikoros" (heretic). While yet living in Berditchev he would on Passover to the "Seyder" have on the table all the prescribed herbs, matzos, wine, etc. Only in addition he would place in the center a large plate with two decorated heads of pigs.

When asked why he needed two heads he would explain that one was for "Nusach Ashkenaz" (German version of the Seyder ritual) and the other for "Nusach Sfard" (Spanish rite). Anton's mother was a well-educated woman with an inclination and love for music which she tried to instill into her children. 1834 finds them in Moscow, where Grigory tried to keep the wolf away from his door by opening up a small factory of lead pencils.

The mother in her spare time would teach her children to play the piano. A frequent visitor to the Rubinstein home was the wife of Dr. Greenberg, whose ten year old daughter Aliyah, a very talented child, took piano lessons from the French professor A. Villuan, who on occasions would also out of curiosity visit the Rubinstein's when he heard from Mrs. Greenberg what a remarkably gifted boy Anton seems to be. It didn't take long for the music teacher to become convinced of the lad's enormous potentialities. He took him under his wing and the rest is history.

Anton made such rapid progress that as a ten year old prodigy he was already giving public recitals with great success in St. Petersburg, Paris and Berlin. In Paris the 12 year old Anton was acclaimed by Chopin as a genius. He was granted a scholarship in the Royal Conservatory of Music of Moscow from which he graduated as the valedictorian, summa cum laude. In 1849 he was back in St. Petersburg, the houseguest and protege of the grand duchess Helena Pavlovna, under whose patronage he undertook in 1854 a concert tour which took four years, in the course of which

he covered all the important musical centres. His triumphant tour was only interrupted for a return to Petersburg in order to take part in the coronation of Tzar Alexander the Second.

When Franz Liszt heard him play the piano in 1841, when he was only twelve years old, he exclaimed, "Here is a genius of God's grace, who will in time become my only truly worthy successor as a master of the piano." He was appointed to head the great insitution of musical knowledge of the Russian capital by the Princess Helena Pavlovna, at whose initiative and under whose aegis the Royal Conservatory of St. Petersburg was founded in 1862. Rubinstein was chosen as the most competent and suitable personality from among a number of names suggested.

In what high esteem Anton Rubinstein was held even in the circles of the royal court can be gleaned from the fact, that when in 1879 he reached his fiftieth birthday it was decided in the highest echelons to celebrate this jubileum of the eminent musical personality with pomp and grandiose splendor.

A committee consisting of members of the elite nobility was in charge of the arrangements. Among the notables who personally attended the singularly festive event were the heir to the throne, crown prince Nicholas, the grand duchess Alexandra, wife of the ailing grand duke Constantin, the grand duke Constantin Constantinowich and many other high ranking members of the aristocracy.

Tzar Alexander III sent warm congratulations and best wishes to the celebrant and awarded him a medal of valor and the honorary title of "your excellency".

However Rubinstein had to contend with the jealousy and envy of a lot of influential gentry who looked with jaundiced eyes at the elevation of a descendant of Jewish ancestry to such a high position and in a mood of bitter sobriety he wrote to his mother: "I have a presentiment, a hunch, that I shall need the 'Excellency' bestowed upon me some day against the very powers that gave it to me. For all your and my baptism at Berditchev we are Jews all the same, you, as well as I and sister Sophie."

Rubinstein's heart was constantly torn by his ambivalent identity. "Jews consider me a gentile and in the eyes of gentiles I am still a Jew, as a result of which I am neither fish nor fowl," he complained.

Rubinstein used to come every Passover to the house of Baron Guinzberg as his guest to the "Seder." The Seder ceremony was conducted in a most festive manner at the house of the baron. About fifty guests were sitting at the table, personalities like Professor Garkov, Yehuda Leyb Gordon and other notables. Rubinstein enjoyed that Seder very much. His most intimate friends were Jews.

He often said that he regretted not being able to go to the synagogue to "Kol Nidrey" for the reason, that everybody knows him and his appearance in the synagogue would focus attention on him and cause all kinds of comments.

When he was told that Nisi Blumenthal had taken a melody from his opera "Demon" and had applied it to the hymn of "Yismecho Bemaal-

choscho" of the Sabbath morning service, he was so delighted that he wrote Nisi a letter of appreciation.

But even though he was a convert (passively), and he lived among Christians, in his soul lay dormant Jewish feelings. Once when he was sitting at the piano, his fingers, as if of their own volition and by instinctive inspiration, began automatically to play the strains of "Kol Nidrey." Suddenly he realized that it happened to be the eve of the Day of Atonement. He took this to be a sign from heaven and he vowed that henceforth he would devote himself exclusively to Jewish themes. He subsequently composed the operas "Moses" and "The Maccabees." His longing Jewish soul evidently sought contact with the past of his people and found solace and comfort in delving into the glorious episodes of their history of which he sang.

He passed away on November 20th, 1894 and the funeral and burial rites were conducted with Royal honors in Peter's Court.

Nisi Belzer's son Alter was one of his favorite pupils. The steady influx of Jewish students at the conservatory was a thorn in the side of the anti-Semitic circles and they tried their best to arrest it. They almost succeeded in barring members of the race which they so vehemently hated and despised. But when one day an ordinance was issued saying that all Jewish students should be expelled from the conservatory, which naturally also would've included Alter Spivack, Rubinstein issued an ultimatum, "If Spivack leaves, so will I." As a consequence of his threat to quit and his proud courageous stand the whole plan had to be withdrawn.

Anton Rubinstein entertained great expectations for Bachman and helped along his progress in every way that lay in his power. He watched over him like a father and saw to it that he be not distracted by prosaic everyday worries from concentrating on his studies and under the master's watchful eye and expert direction, he indeed made great strides toward the desired goal.

The exceptional power of his voice drew the attention of the intellectual and musical circles of St. Petersburg and he became very popular among the members of the higher strata of society. He was the pride of the conservatory. Rubinstein took him along on his concert tours and made him appear with him on the stage. Bachman presented arias and folk songs which drew long rounds of applause. Wherever and whenever he sang, he was a colossal success.

But the more he thought of it the more the idea of devoting himself entirely to concerts, opera and stage became to him unthinkable. The "Pintele Yid" (Jewish) feeling in his heart made itself felt in no uncertain terms. It could not make peace with such an alien plan and gave him no rest. It gnawed at his conscience and held him back from committing himself to follow such a course. Instead, it pushed him toward the pulpit.

Bachman decided to give it a try. Just then there was a search on for a suitable cantor for the great temple that had recently been erected on Tlomatzka Street in Warsaw. Bachman too sent in his application. he came, sang on trial at a Sabbath service, and with his tremendous voice

and his highly artistic rendition, he won over the listeners. The consensus was that this candidate would positively be engaged for the post. When nothing happened and the trials continued, the worshipers were puzzled. A group of the members sought out the chairman of the synagogue's ritual committee, the well-known banker Henrick Nathan Nathanson and urged him to see to it that the outstanding young cantor who found such favor with the public should forthwith be elected.

But the coldblooded officer rejected their request, remarking, "Our congregation needs a cantor not an acrobatic circus rider." The irate and disappointed members of the delegation replied, "You may be an expert on banknotes but you surely do not understand anything about cantor's notes." But in conformity with the age-old rule, "vehr es hot di meyeh, hot di deyeh" — whoever has the dough, has the say — the banker had his way and not public opinion.

But the fact that his style did not find favor with and was frowned upon by the ignorant banker of Warsaw, did not in the least hamper or hurt Bachman's career. He occupied cantorial positions in such large cities as Rostov on the Don, Berditchev, Constantinople and Lemberg. His name became more famous day by day and was heralded as a new bright light that was rising in the east in the sky of Chazzanuth.

While he was residing in Lemberg, one Saturday morning after the service a man came over to him and introduced himself as Yechiel Cooperwasser, the trustee of the great Yevrevsky Synagogue in Odessa, where Pitze Abrass was the cantor. He told him that his congregation had decided that inasmuch as Abrass officiated only twice a month, it was imperative to engage another cantor who would alternate with Pitze and conduct the services on the two Sabbaths when their present cantor was at liberty. He also revealed to him that he came specially for the purpose of offering him the position.

Bachman, who had a weakness for Odessa, the city where he made his first hesitant steps as a choirboy in Tzalel Odessa'er's choir, was glad of the opportunity to be able to return to that city as the cantor of the famous synagogue, so he accepted the proffered post without hesitation.

But when he arrived in Odessa to occupy his post, he found out that although the gabbay, strictly speaking, did tell him the truth, he did not tell him the whole truth. He found out that there was a running feud going on between this officer of the congregation and Pitze Abrass and the whole idea of having two cantors was conceived by him to spite Pitze and hopefully drive him to quit his position.

He now realized that Cooperwasser induced him to come there so that he could use him as a stick with which to harass Abrass and inflict punishment on him. He was the innocent pawn thrust into the middle of a fight between two opponents. If he had known the true situation, the background and the existing circumstances, he surely would not have allowed the wily trustee to use him and trick him into falling in with his plan. But now the harm was done and it was too late to back out.

Soon things began to happen. Sure enough, what he was afraid of

soon came to pass. He too was dragged into the conflict that raged between the two sides. Open scandals and disturbances broke out in the synagogue and the whole city was in a turmoil with regrettable incidents which hardly contributed to the dignity of the services. The congregation was split into two opposing camps, who fought each other tooth and nail. When Bachman sang the Kedusha (Sanctification), the Pitzists turned up their noses and raised up their shoulders in dismay and vociferously complained that the cantor sang with sour tones that belonged in a bar. On the other hand, when Pitze used to conclude the "Yehi Rotzon" (May It Be Thy Will), the Bachmanists went over to him and sarcastically asked him, "Could you tell us when the new moon begins? You mumbled something and nobody could understand a word you were saying." Pitze's faction made Bachman's life miserable with their harassing tactics. Even the singers of the choir became embroiled in the feud. Divided in their sympathies they took sides. The tenors were in Pitze's corner, while the Bassos were rooting for Bachman. After Pitze's death, Bachman suspecting Yakovkin of disloyalty dismissed him from his post of choirmaster.

But notwithstanding the constant rude vicious antics perpetrated by his confirmed antagonists to which he had all along been exposed, Bachman with remarkable self-control parried and withstood their attacks and holding his ground remained at his post.

His determination to stay pat not giving an inch and try to weather the storm stemmed from the fond hope and expectation entertained by him that given time, patience and endurance he may yet succeed in winning over the hostile camp. Sooner or later he figured things may very well quiet down when the ruffians will be brought around to the realization, that there was no valid reason and no shred of justification for their hounding campaigns directed against him.

However to his great disappointment things did not turn out the way he had calculated. Not only did the enmity of the opposing group not diminish but on the contrary it became even more ferocious. The launching of an even sharper greatly intensified attack against the target of their poisonous arrows was triggered by the occurrence of a sad calamity. Osias (Pitze) Abrass suddenly passed away in 1864 at the comparatively early age of 64.

His demise was a shattering blow, a traumatic shock to his stalwart devotees and gave added impetus and a shot in the arm to their burning hatred of the rival of their departed idolized hero. Grieving and giving vent to the inconsolable grief over the great loss in their embittered hearts in their passionate anger they flatly came out with the open condemnation of Bachman, whom they accused of having been the direct cause of their beloved cantor's untimely death.

This was the last straw that broke the camel's back. The die was cast. They had come to the parting of the ways. This dastardly charge made it inevitable for Bachman to come to the conclusion that the heat had become unbearable to endure any longer. Not wanting to give his opponents the satisfaction of quitting under fire he decided to withstand yet

for a while the abuse heaped upon him as if nothing untoward had happened, he continued in his post alternating at the pulpit with Rozumny, the newly appointed assistant cantor who also gave him a hard time. The fresh conduct of Rozumny was an added reason for his determination to get out. His decision was irreversible. He had gotten sick and tired of the malicious intrigues. It was only a matter of timing and a question of transferring to the right suitable pulpit. He began scanning the horizon, sifting through the several propositions that from time to time were submitted to him and when he received an invitation from the Budapest congregation offering him the cantorial post in the Rombach Temple, he immediately accepted, saying the blessing of "Boruch Shepotrani" (good riddance) and thanking God for having gotten out of the gehenna-fire with his bones intact.

Pinye Minkowsky was elected to fill the vacancy and share the pulpit with Rozumny. However he didn't last long and when he received a call from a New York congregation he was only glad to vacate the hot seat and sail for America.

After Bachman left Odessa his tormentors had second thoughts about the great cantor whom they had treated so shabbily. They saw the folly of their ways and tried to make amends.

Delegations were dispatched to him who were authorized to grant his every wish if he only would reconsider and agree to return to them. But Bachman turned a deaf ear to their pleadings and would not even for one minute take their propositions under consideration.

The honor bestowed upon him and the love, appreciation and gratitude shown him by the Jews of Budapest were in such sharp contrast to what he had had to endure in Odessa, that to take another chance with them on the theory that they had learned their lesson, was unthinkable. But the main reason for his reluctance to make a change again was the fact that in Budapest he had gotten married for the second time. The marriage proved to be a very happy one and his beloved wife, a native of Hungary, would not even think of leaving her homeland and emigrating to the uncivilized Russia.

Pinye Minkowsky in writing about Bachman states that he possessed three voices in one. It was, according to his estimation, a happy combination of a basso, a baritone, and a tenor. If this was not enough, he was, in addition, blessed with a falsetto which was unique. It was one of the most marvelous voices in the world, from which issued sounds of pure gold. As for his prayers — hot lava, burning, blazing fire, sparks were flying.

The great Moussorgsky wrote in one of his letters, which was addressed to his friend Stassov, that while on tour with the singer Lavarawskaya as her accompanist at her concerts, he was in Odessa and visited the synagogue on Yevreysky (Jewish) Street corner Pushkinsky where he heard Cantor Bachman, who possessed a phenomenal voice, the like of which he had never heard anywhere before.

Bachman was also a very talented composer. On the occasion of the crowning of the Russian Tzar, he composed a special cantata, which he

dedicated to the new ruler, and in appreciation the Tzar rewarded him with a personally written letter of thanks.

He was a very learned, educated, intelligent man, with scholarly inclinations. He read, spoke, and sang in several languages including Hebrew, Russian and German. He became connected with the conservatory of Budapest and received the title of professor of music. A collection of some of his best compositions was published in 1884 under the title, "Shiroth (the songs of) Jacob." Another work contains his musical setting for the prayers of "Yom Kippur Kuton" (little Day of Atonement).

What an extraordinary phenomenon Bachman was can be gleaned from the following episode.

At the opera house of Odessa there was a recently acquired tenor by the name of Aramburo. He sang the tenor roles in *Troubadour* and *Huguenots* where the high "C" occurs twice and other operas. He boasted about his ability to take and hold these high notes. There was in the same company another tenor, a wonderful artistic singer by the name of Mishugyue, an accomplished actor but he did not possess the high "C". In *Faust* he sang "A" instead of "C". This minor change did however in no way diminish the effectiveness of his performances which were nothing less than marvellous.

Jealous of his success, Aramburo went about preaching, that any tenor who was unable to belt out a high "C", has no business being in opera. He kept up his taunting not only against his main rival but also all the other members of the opera house.

When walking up to his dressing room, he would ostentatiously with each of the thirty steps raise his voice one half note, until he reached the high "C", challenging all and sundry to match his feat.

Finally his colleagues decided to make him eat crow by teaching him a lesson. They went to Bachman and told him that they are all planning to come to his Sabbath Evening religious service and would he do them the favor of giving out with some of his high notes so as to silence that pompous rooster Aramburo.

This accomplished they taunted the egotistical boaster saying: "Listen here you big shot. You are prancing with your high 'C'? Come, we'll show you a little Jewish cantor who has it all over you in high notes."

"Well, that I'll have to see", was the haughty reply of Aramburo. They all betook themselves to the Yevrevsky synagogue on the following Friday evening.

True to his promise Bachman hit a "C" sharp in "Ma Tovu" and when he turned around to face the congregants at "Boyiy Vesholom" he finished "Boyiy Chaloh" hitting a "C" and topping it off with an "E" flat gliding down to A flat minor. It was a bravura performance that left the opera singers gasping and Aramburo humiliated. Never again did he denigrate his fellow singers by prancing with his high "C".

Ever after that the opera singers used to come en masse to listen to the great Jewish cantor, the titan Jacob Bachman.

The 30th day of April, 1905 dawned bright and mild with no inkling

that anything of particular significance would occur in the course of its reign — but that date was destined to become memorable.

For before the sun disappeared from the horizon, plunging the planet earth into darkness, dark sadness descended on the hearts and souls of all the inhabitants of the Hungarian capital, Jews and gentiles alike.

Returning home from a social visit to the home of the Rabbi of his congregation, Jacob Bachman was stricken with a malaise which proved fatal. He passed away in the prime of life in his 59th year. Jews all over the globe mourned the irreparable loss.

His memory will forever remain alive in the hearts of Jews everywhere, for he was indeed one of the greatest cantorial figures, which the people of the Bible ever possessed.

CHAPTER 28

ABRAHAM KALECHNICK, A GREAT CANTOR, WHO DIED IN LONELINESS, MISERY AND POVERTY.

Practically during his whole lifetime, he functioned in Kishinev — Because of Zeidel Rovner he was obliged to leave the city for a short interval — How his followers succeeded in bringing him back.

In the many congregations of Kishinev, from time to time, some of the greatest cantors officiated. But none of these masters ever succeeded in acquiring permanently the identifying surname of "Kishenever," as was the custom at that time. One reason for this may have been that a four-syllable designation is too long and too cumbersome to have a chance of being generally accepted and applied by the public which prefers to attach short names like "Belzer," "Rovner," "Lomzer," or "Minsker" to their favorite cantors.

Secondly, the cantors in question did not remain long enough in Kishinev to be considered sons of the city. Was it because their congregations were unwilling to keep them for any protracted period of time? Such was hardly the case and the reason for their quick exit. Rather is it more probable, that the cantors came there with no intention of remaining permanently. It is more likely that they accepted the positions only on a provisional basis, intending to use them as temporary stations, where they would be able to catch their breath and find shelter, before they were able to find something better and then take off again with renewed strength for the journey ahead.

Even before they had tarried long enough to have had a chance to get adjusted to their new pulpit, they already began to look around, alert to any inkling of a good prominent position having become open in one of the great Jewish centers in cities like Odessa, Berditchev, Wilna, Warsaw, Lemberg or Budapest. They lived in constant hope that sooner or later somewhere a worthwhile vacancy would occur and they would get a chance at it.

But the question still remains to be answered. What did the above-mentioned big cities have, that Kishinev did not possess and that made them more attractive to the cantors? What was the reason, which induced them to give preference to the other cities over Kishinev? As far as can be ascertained, it seems to have been a question of eating "before," or "for" praying in the sense in which the Yiddish proverb teases and taunts the cantors with accusation, that all of them eat before they do their praying. (It is a word play "essen far'n davenen," the word "far'n" means both "for" and "before." It is naturally true that cantors eat for praying. That's how they earn their livelihood. But to eat before praying is not permissible.)

You may say what you wish about the Jews of Kishinev, except one thing and that is that they were not competent appraisers of cantors, for they most certainly were, and for that reason it was a hard, difficult and lengthy task for them to select a cantor. To get a passing mark from these strict examiners, was an achievement about which not too many in the holy profession were able to boast. In the great synagogue of the city sometimes dozens of cantors performed on trial, and the experts (and who is not an expert, when it comes to cantors?) found fault with each and everyone of them: "Eh, it is not Nisi. It's not Zeidel! How does he compare to Avrahom (Kalechnick)?" Thus they used to criticize the aspirants and give their verdict. Each of the congregants compared the candidate to his idol, who in his opinion was the epitome of perfection. Naturally, the applicant could not measure up and nearly always was found wanting. They were very particular. Only the best would do.

One would've thought that if they were looking for perfection in a cantor the remuneration was very generous. But far from it. When it came to the discussion of the compensation, these "big shots" did an about face using a double standard. They did not with equal stubbornness insist that the cantor, too, shall be given the best and finest. Now that the shoe was on the other foot, they became cheapskates. He could have honor and recognition in very generous measure. No haggling about that. But money? To be able to make do with the salary, which he received, the cantor had to be a magician, preferably one who swallows flames or a sword, but not bread and surely not meat. Having little need for them, he might as well place his choppers on the shelf.

Appropriately enough, one enraged and outspoken cantor once gave the following suggestion and unsolicited advice to the trustees of the synagogue gratis: "Instead of trying out the applying cantors at the pulpit, you ought to first lock them all up for several days in an empty room,

where they would have no possible access to either food or drink and the one among them who can stand the hunger and thirst for the longest time, would be the right man for you, for he will be able to get along on a starvation diet, the only kind your salary allows for."

That having been the situation, it is no wonder that the cantors were not especially desirous of lingering for too long a stretch in a position which paid such inadequate wages and that was probably the real reason for the great turnover and the frequency of changes in the cantorial fraternity of the city of Kishinev.

But if most cantors were always prepared, eager and ready to start out instantly to faraway places, there nevertheless was one great cantor, who was the exception to the rule and could justifiably be considered a staunch, permanent resident and a legitimate citizen of Kishinev. He lived out his years in that city and there he died too and in her soil do repose his earthly remains. Mockers and jesters claim that this was one cantor who truly was most suitable and eminently fitting for Kishinev, if for no other reason than that he was properly conditioned for the post by his habit of fasting every Monday and Thursday and that he died from hunger. But who can take seriously such silly allegations?

Avrohom (Abraham) Kalechnick's real name was Berkowitch. He was generally called "Kalechnick" because his father was a merchant of calx, whiting and calcimine (Kalech), and fast on Mondays and Thursdays he did, because he was a particularly pious, religious Jew who observed and fulfilled not only the generally accepted regular requirements of his faith, but going them one better, he even followed the non-obligatory customs of the ultrapious Chassidim. Accordingly, he would study on Thursdays on an empty stomach in addition to the weekly portion of the Bible (Chumash) the commentary of Rashi and a chapter of "Orach Chayim" (way of life).

He was a staunch and devoted "Chosid" (follower) of the Ba hoosh'er Rabbi, a grandson of the famed Rizin'er wonder rabbi. At the morning's prayers, he used to put on two pairs of phylacteries and wear his prayer garment over his head so that his face was hardly visible. He also had a sash tied around his loins. He never failed to take the ritual bath before the religious service. He used to study the folios of the Talmud day and night, with great diligence. He had gone through all of its volumes several times, so naturally he became a great scholar, and very knowledgeable in the Talmud and all the commentaries thereof. When he happened to be in the company of Rabbis, he could with great competence discuss and debate with them matters of Torah and questions of religion, and they listened to him with deep respect and high regard. He was even very careful not to pass between two women. His general conduct was not unlike that of a grand Rabbi, and his dignified saintlike way of life evoked in his congregants boundless admiration toward their cantor. They honored him and placed him on a high pedestal, both for his cantorial excellence and his inspiring, exemplary, God-fearing morality.

Kalechnick imitated almost exactly the ways of Nisi Belzer, whom he

took as his model. In his youth he was a frequent visitor in his house and was considered a member of the family. He and Nisi's son, Alter, studied with the same Talmud teacher, who was considered the very best in town. The two boys became very attached to each other and inseparable. As we had already related on a previous occasion, the two youngsters used to steal away and hide in a corner of the attic of Nisi's house in order to look through the profane, worldly music books. They had to keep it a secret from the old man, for they knew that should he find out, or even suspect what they were doing, there would be hell to pay.

Nisi came to love the young Avrohom very much and he even used to kiss and embrace him at times, especially after the untimely tragic death of his beloved Alter. he sought and found some consolation for his great loss in the boy, who was closest to the departed. He treated him like a son and used to call him "my Avreymele." He held him in the highest esteem, and was always loyal to him.

When Avrohom grew up and ventured out on his own on a cantorial career, he could always count on his patron and teacher for help and advice. On the occasions when he came to Berditchev for guest appearances, Nisi gave him all the assistance in his power. Kalechnick was the only visiting cantor, to whom Nisi would never deny the services of his choir to accompany him at a Sabbath service in one of the synagogues of the city. On one of his visits to Berditchev, he was prevailed upon by his admirers to officiate there on ten consecutive Saturday services and on all of these Nisi's choir was on hand to assist him, at the specific order of their master.

He resembled his mentor in so many ways, that after Nisi passed away, he was the one who came to mind before anyone else as the most suitable candidate to fill the shoes of the great deceased. But when he was invited for an audition service, he made the big mistake of singing his own compositions in a synagogue, where there existed no other acceptable repertoire save the one of the sainted Nisi.

Kalechnick belonged to the same category of cantors as did Nisi Belzer and Zeidel Rovner, whose forte was not their voices, but who excelled in treading out new paths, popularizing novel styles, which bore the distinguishing stamp of originality and musical genius. Not with thunderous sounds storming the heavens, not with topping their presentations with the highest cadenzas, but with their feelingful and moving prayers did they succeed in lifting up the worshipers to the highest religious ecstasy. They were creators of new modes in liturgical music, and they were mainly masters of ensemble singing of the synagogue choirs, which they themselves used to teach and conduct as well.

Kalechnick possessed a lyric baritone voice, or what is usually called a second tenor, of a somewhat greater range than Zeidel Rovner. He also had a wonderful fluid coloratura and a fine "mezzo voce" (half voice). But his main power lay in his great versatility, his mastery in artistic improvisation and in the extraordinary "Mesikos" (sweetness) with which he was able to penetrate into the hearts of his listeners and to squeeze tears from their eyes. Remarkable was his rich phantasy and his expert way of

fitting the musical interpretation to the meaning of the text.

His recitative was so colorful, flexible and varied, and his transition from one key into another was so unobservably skilled and suddenly executed without warning, that it was often difficult for the choir to follow his manipulations and to come in in time with the right accord. There was always a chance to hear something new and unexpected from Kalechnick, and cantors used to follow him around in the hope of being able to snatch some new word or tune from the great master.

He was also recognized as an eminent teacher of cantorial art. He gave the young apprentices, who flocked to his studio, lessons in all branches of liturgical knowledge, and wrote recitatives for each one in a different vein, according to their individual voice and ability. He evolved a new school of cantorial interpretation, a style known as the Kalechnick Steyger (mode) which exerted a powerful influence on a whole generation of cantors.

But he, himself, fell also under the influence of his environment. Just as the Jewish community of Bessarabia in general became in the course of time acclimatized, adopting gradually a great many of the customs of their neighbors, they also took over and sang with relish the songs of their Christian friends. On Passover, at the "Seder" they used to hum the melody of "Froodze Verde" (Green Leaves) to the text of the "Haggadah." They were also in the habit of repeating on Rosh Hashonoh before the ritual of blowing the Shofar, well known Roumanian folk songs and when in high spirits at their parties, especially on their joyous family occasions, they used to entertain themselves to the strains of a lively "Tshaban" or "Valachel" (Moldavian chant). Why even the melody of our "Hatikvah" (The Hope) which was elevated to the status of the national hymn of the State of Israel is taken from a Roumanian symphonic poem by Smetana by the name of "On the River Moldaw".

It was under the circumstances inevitable that some lively Moldavian motifs, as well as themes of operas of that nation, would find their way into Kalechnick's compositions. But these influences played only a minor role in his compositions and could not in any substantial measure obscure the basic traditional Jewish nature and flavor of his works.

The other great musical authority, beside Nisi Belzer, who had a great part in forming Kalechnick's musical education was Novakowsky. When at the beginning of his career, he held the cantorial post at the "Malbish Aroomim" (Clothing the Nude) Congregation of Odessa, Avremele studied with the famed conductor. He was a diligent pupil, absorbing eagerly the teachings of Novakowsky, whose compositions serve as textbooks for cantors and choir leaders to this day. The result was that he also became a well-versed musician.

As to the published compositions which he left behind, they are more modern than those of Nisi Belzer and could without any scruples be presented even in a conservative temple. His best known numbers, "Racheym Oleynu" (Have mercy on us) and "Hallelooya" (Praise Ye God) were frequently sung even in Odessa. His "Eshkol," "Ki Hiney

Kachomer" and the second "Kedoosha" are quite often presented in synagogues everywhere with great success. Besides the published volume, he also left a large number of manuscripts, which are still waiting for a generous philanthropist who will redeem them from obscurity and help them to see finally the light of day.

As is well known, there was constant rivalry and at times even bloody wars were fought for the possession of Bessarabia and Moldavia between the two powers which have common boundaries with the territories in question. In the course of their stormy history they belonged for a long stretch of time to Russia, and at other periods to Roumania, and vice versa. A similar rivalry and a miniature war went on for the possession of Kishinev, the capital of Bessarabia, between the followers of Abraham Kalechnick and the admirers of Zeidel Rovner. Originally Kalechnick reigned supreme in the city. Following the invasion of Zeidel into his kingdom, Kalechnick's rule was challenged by the stalwarts of the insurgent cantorial personality. They attacked him in their zeal to further and promote the cause of their new idol. They spread around town the slogan which proclaimed to all and sundry that "a little Polish Jew [Yidel] came to town and with one blow, managed to extinguish the 'Kalech' [calx Whiting]."

The campaign against him gradually grew in intensity. The officers of his congregation, under the influence of the propaganda of the opposing clique gave Kalechnick such a bad time, that he felt that matters were getting too hot for comfort, and he decided that it would be the better part of wisdom to quit the city voluntarily. He left his post in Kishinev and went to Mohilev-Podlosk, where he had devoted friends and admirers, who had hoped for a long time to be able to persuade him to come to their city and accept the cantorial post at their synagogue.

In taking this step, Kalechnick most certainly did not make a bad, unfavorable change. On the contrary, after every service people fell over him, trying to kiss him. They carried him in the palms of their hands. They stretched their budget to the bursting point and allocated for him a yearly salary of two thousand rubles which was well above their ability, but to the Jews of Mohilev there was nothing too difficult or impossible when it was for the sake of their beloved cantor. They anticipated, guessed and fulfilled his wishes before he even uttered them.

In Kishinev meanwhile, Kalechnick having quit the field of battle, the way was clear for Zeidel to take over the vacated throne. With his wonderful "Kapelye" (choir), he enthralled the music lovers. In contrast to Kalechnick, who even in ensemble singing, played the main role, even though he, too, had a very fine choir, which he had trained, Zeidel's role as soloist was not outstanding or even of any great significance. The main attraction was the singing of the choir and the ingenious way in which Zeidel was able to bring out the best from the singers by the intensive indoctrination, which he gave them and by his energetic and disciplined conducting.

For the moment at least the troops of Zeidel were in charge, dominat-

ing the city. His patriots were prancing around Kishinev as if they owned it lock, stock and barrel. The members of Avrohom's party were unable to raise their heads, their voices were drowned out by the clamor which acclaimed Zeidel's greatness. They were obliged to lay low. But they did not give up. They sharpened their teeth, did quiet spade work and waited patiently for the auspicious moment, which they knew was bound to come eventually, when they would be in a favorable position to begin anew, with a reasonable chance of success, their campaign to bring back their favorite cantor from exile.

We have on other occasions had the opportunity to tell about the arguments, fights and battles that used to take place and occur between two opposite camps of cantorial devotees. In Kishinev, the matter was still more complicated by the fact that here a new element entered into the fray. A brand new factor, which we have not encountered in the other cities, intervened or rather was thrown into the match by the participants, who squared off ready to slug it out. In Kishinev it was not solely a question of who was partial to which cantor, but also to which Rabbi does the cantor make his pilgrimage.

Zeidel was a confirmed chossid of the Makarover Rabbi, while Avrohom was a staunch follower of the wonder Rabbi of Bahoosh. Consequently, all the Chassidim and followers of the Makarover Rabbi swore by Zeidel and quite as naturally all of the devotees of the Bahoosher court could be found in the camp of Kalechnick. Each of the two groups was ready to go into battle for its convictions or rather for the cantor who shared their convictions. Those residents of the city who did not belong to either chassidic group sided in the question of cantors with the party to which they were more sympathetically inclined.

Inasmuch as the camp of the Bahoosh'er was numerically the largest in the city (with the Tolna'er chassidim and not the Makarover occupying second place), and, therefore in a position to exert considerable pressure, the chances of Kalechnick being called back to Kishinev were not slim by any means, and he was furnished ammunition from an entirely unexpected and unlikely source. Zeidel himself did inadvertently also contribute to the bolstering of the chances for the return of his opponent. Time and again, he made tactless acid remarks to many influential members and irritated them with his sharp wit, biting jokes, and his stinging and pricking proverbs. He also managed to acquire in time a goodly number of enemies by his habit of interjecting himself and interfering in communal politics, in taking sides and giving unsolicited opinions and advice in matters that did not directly concern him. The friends of Kalechnick sensed that their hour had arrived, so they redoubled their efforts. They did their best to help blow up the fire, pouring more oil on the increasingly developing heated atmosphere. They paid back Zeidel in kind for all the trouble that his camp had caused to their idol. The end result was that Zeidel was obliged to leave Kishinev for good.

He was meandering around in Lutzk and Dubno. He wandered from town to village making one night stands here and there, giving concerts

with his choir and officiating in synagogues on Sabbath services and also on week days. He finally made his way to Berditchev with eight helpers and conducted a service in the synagogue of the "Baalegooles" (drivers, and sometimes also owners of a horse and buggy) at the Piske's (a poor section). It was just at the time, when Yeruchem Hakoton fell ill. In addition to the poor condition of his health, he was also at an age when the thought of retiring from active service had frequently occurred to him as being worthy of serious consideration.

When it became known throughout the city that a very capable talented cantor was causing great interest and drawing the lively attention of the musical circles, he was, with the consent of Yeruchem, invited to officiate on trial at the "Neushtedtischer" (new city) synagogue. At his recommendation, Zeidel was elected to fill the post, which Yeruchem had held for so many years with unparalleled distinction.

But to return to Kishinev, the longer Zeidel tarried in that city, the more did the Jews begin to long for the absent Avrohom. His unique brand of praying was so deeply imbedded in their hearts, that no singing of a choir, no matter how beautiful, could compensate for his sweet inspiring melodies which they missed so much and which they longed for. They were definitely lonesome for the adopted son of their city, their beloved Avrohom.

After Zeidel's departure, the road was open for the return of Avrohom. Kalechnick was brought back in triumph and he took over once more his old place at the pulpit of the great synagogue, which was also called the Turkish synagogue. This was a majestic structure. According to a legend, this House of God was excavated from under the surface where it was lying for centuries buried under several layers of old ruins. The holy building had an unusually large main auditorium, whose resonance too was unusual. The softest, faintest pianissimo which reverberated in its vacuum could be clearly heard in its farthest corners, but there were no installations in the synagogue for heating it.

In the winter days the freezing chorists used to thump with their feet and keep rubbing their hands together in an effort to counteract somewhat the bitter cold weather and try to keep up the circulation in their numb extremities. The cantor used to stand at the pulpit bundled up in a "tilip" (heavy fur coat). While chanting the services, his exhalations could be distinctly observed as they were blown into the cold air, making it appear as if chains of clouds were coming out from his mouth. You could almost touch them with your hand.

The prevalent cold atmosphere was perhaps the reason for the temperament and intensity, the burning soulful manner, which was such an important characteristic of Kalechnick's way with the Hebrew prayers. Only by pouring his heart and soul into his chants was he able to warm up as well as to help thaw the worshipers.

Avrohom Berkowitch was an intelligent, bright, pedantic, well-groomed, immaculately clean man of medium height. His handsome face was adorned by a good-sized, well-kept beard. He was usually clad in a

Prince Albert, the kind worn by clergymen, with square pointed ends. In winter he was garbed in an expensive coat with a fur collar and a fur lining. He always carried a Rabbinical cane with a silver head. His general bearing was that of a proud individual and a dignified personality. As he strutted along with his youthful, rhythmic, energetic stride, with his head in the air, his back erect and straight as a pole, looking neither to the left nor to the right, he gave the impression of being the very prototype of an aristocrat and he inspired in all the people great respect and reverence for his person.

I am trying to draw and reconstruct as well as I can a clear image and a faithful portrait of his impressive personality, for all my efforts to get somewhere a picture of Avrohom Kalechnick ended in failure. I have a suspicion that there might not even be any photograph of him in existence. As he was a very pious chassidic Jew, it is possible that he was loath to having his picture taken by any photographer. As we know, the chassidic Grand Rabbis would not allow a camera to come near them and Avrohom imitated them in every other way, so it is conceivable that in this respect, too, he followed their example.

What strengthened and served to heighten my suspicion was the curious fact that even on the first pages of his liturgical work "Tzeloysoo d'Avrohom," (the prayer of Abraham) there is not to be found any sign of the author's likeness and who, I ask you, would fail to insert his photo in his own book? Such an "Onov" (humble person) he most certainly was not. On the contrary.

From all we know about him, one thing we can state without fear of contradiction. Excessive humility was not one of his vices. Rather was he very conceited. He thought the world of the genius and ability of Avrohom Kalechnick. He relished praise and recognition. He loved flattery. He enjoyed hearing it even if he knew it to be less than sincere.

In his old age, he was no longer on the elevated pedestal, where he was accustomed to be placed. He was pretty much neglected and ignored. Nobody paid any attention to him. This lack of consideration on the part of the very people who not so long ago looked at him with adoration and who were very happy if he only looked in their direction, was puzzling to him. Things have certainly changed radically.

He was miserable, disillusioned and embittered by the turn of events. It was the same old story, as we have seen it happen time and again to great artists in their declining years. None of them are able to take it gracefully and to make peace with the great changes that occur in their fortunes with the passing of time.

Kalechnick lost his position in the great synagogue and went over to the synagogue of the tailors. After that he officiated in the house of Prayer "Yavneh," and later nowhere. Who needs an old cantor? He was distraught, perplexed and bewildered. The sudden fall from the high rung on the ladder of success was too much for him. He was desperate. He had to earn a living. All doors seemed closed to him.

He used to go out on the road, making trips to the towns and villages

in the vicinity and grab the opportunity to officiate at a service in Yedinetz, in Lipkan, and other neighboring communities, a Pentecost service in the Boyaner Beth Hamedrosh in Tchernowitz, a Sabbath here and a holiday there.

He also had some additional income from the young cantorial students who came to him for advice and instruction. But what could he expect from them, when they themselves had nothing, and were still learning the craft?

He was in an unenviable position, in great need and misery. The pangs of hunger were his steady companions, but he pinched his cheeks to keep his color and nobody knew what was going on in his empty house and in his empty pockets. He kept up appearances to the last, too proud to complain or to ask favors from anybody. A lonely figure he walked around like a shadow, burying in his heart his troubles and woes, but never confiding them to his fellowmen, who apparently did not care much. He passed away at quite an old age, nearly eighty, on the fifth day of the week of the Parsha (portion of the Bible) Pinchas in the year 1927 in Kishinev where he had great triumphs and bitter disappointments.

Characteristic of the veneration and high standing he enjoyed in the estimation of his peers is a remark made by the famous cantor Zanvil Kwartin, when on a visit to Kishinev he, in the company of a group of local colleagues of his, availed himself of the opportunity to go and listen to a religious service that was conducted by the old master.

After the conclusion of the prayer session Kwartin, who was of a rather reserved nature and not easily impressed, rushed over to Kalechnick warmly embracing him and bubbling over with enthusiastic feeling exclaimed: "Words fail me. All I can say is that we cantors ought to build a special synagogue, engage you as our cantor, have you officiate and we your disciples should sit at your feet listening to your artistic brand of interpretation of the prayers and learn how to properly chant the liturgy and most effectively fulfill our mission as 'Shelichey Tzibur.' "

No greater compliment could be paid to anybody by a more competent practitioner of Chazzanuth.

CHAPTER 29

CANTOR JEHUDAH LEYB KILEMNIK WAS A MAN OF A LOT OF PROFESSIONS, BUT FEW BLESSINGS.

He was an excellent cantor and a splendid improvisator — But he could not get along with his fellow men — That was the reason for his inability to hold on to any post for any length of time — His tragic death in London.

In our last chapter we were dealing with the life-story of Kalechnick, now we intend to acquaint you with another famous cantor: Jehudah Leyb Kilemnik.

Kalechnick and Kilemnik, how similar their names are! How well they rhyme. Don't they sound like Twiddledee & Twiddledum? as if they were Siamese Twins or members of a vaudeville team or perhaps two partners of a business establishment. They seem to go together like bagel and lox or sour cream and borscht (I was almost tempted to say "like ham and eggs," woe to me!)

As a matter of fact however, these two had very little in common except for the pure coincidence that both served long tenures in cantorial positions principally in Kishinev.

Even their (on the face) similar names were of a different character. Whereas Kalechnick was merely a nickname (his real name was Berkowitch) Kilemnik was the original legitimate name of its wearer and had no particular connotation, meaning or significance, unless it means "Kill 'em! Nick!" But his name was not Nick, so there goes my hypothesis.

Kilemnik was a quite interesting personality. His most pronounced

characteristic and the one that became clearly evident to the observing eye was his remarkable versatility, his being gifted with manifold talents. He possessed innate abilities in diverse fields of endeavor. He was the proverbial "Jack of all trades" but he was also master of some, especially did he excel in singing.

In a sense this was a blessing. But on the other hand he was also handicapped and encumbered by a restless nature. Changing courses every once in a while he was prone to throw himself hither and yonder abruptly on a sudden impulse from one occupation to another without a carefully mapped out plan.

What different things didn't this unstable man attempt to do at one time or another! Now he was a secular artist, then he became a Yeshivah "bochur" (talmudic student). For a time he served as a choir leader, and at others of course in the capacity of a cantor.

He even tried his hand at pharmacy, working as a "provizor" and for a time he functioned as a "Kazion" (official government-recognized) Rabbi. But notwithstanding all these feverish activities that kept him busy on several fronts at one and the same time, in his case too, as in so many others the old adage: "ah sach m'looches un veynig brooches" (a lot of different jobs and little luck) proved indeed to be quite applicable.

In his youth he was a very poor pupil in "cheyder". He evinced no great "Cheyshek" (interest) in learning. His mind was not on his studies but rather on boyish, usually michievous pranks. He was the type of kid, who liked to show off before the gang and would climb up fences or trees just for the fun of it and to make the other lads laugh and admire his courage.

His insatiable thirst for all kind of knowledge in his adult years may very well have been a natural hyperreaction, that spurred him on to great efforts in a determined resolve to make up and compensate for the lack of attainment in his formative years.

Very early in life he became an orphan. His mother passed away and the father, obliged to go to work in order to make a living and therefore unable to take proper care of the youngster, had no other choice but to send him away to relatives, who resided in Odessa.

There he grew up in the home of an uncle, a tailor, who entrusted the task of delivering the finished new, as well as the cleaned and presesd garments to the customers, to his ward, the adolescent nephew. He even tried to teach him the craft.

But the young fellow had little use for nor any inclination to learn the secrets of the needle-trade and only grudgingly did he take on the assignments, almost never fulfilling them satisfactorily.

Perhaps in order to demonstrate his utter dislike of the uncle's line, he deliberately would mix up the clothing articles and deliver for instance the box containing a man's suit to a lady customer, who was impatiently waiting for her dress and vice versa the dignified gentleman, who was supposed to receive his brand new cutaway was understandably nonplussed, when on opening the just delivered box he discovered in it to his amaze-

ment and consternation an evening dress, apparently intended for a strange female.

The distraught uncle finally concluding that his nephew was most certainly not cut out to be a tailor, tried to find for him some other occupation, to which he would take with more liking.

It didn't take long before his problem-child seemed to have found the place, where he rightly belonged. "Shmulikel Chazzon", the cantor of the "Bagiyavka" Synagogue happened to be a frequent visitor to the Tailor's workshop and accidently discovering in the little troublemaker a fine voice, he took him into his choir.

After a year of apprenticeship under his own guidance Reb Shmulikel, realizing that Jehudah Leyb deserved better than to linger much longer in the synagogue of the small congregation, recommended him to Dunayevsky, who recognizing that the lad possessed qualities of great promise, accepted him as a member of his chorus, which assisted the chief cantor of the great central synagogue of Odessa: Karniol.

The youngster had found his right vocation. Not only was he on his way, but he had arrived. He now was a fullfledged "Meshorer" of the city's largest and finest choir under the leadership of the great master Dunayevsky.

His uncle was delighted and entertained great hopes for his ward . . . It was only reasonable to expect that with growing maturity and his entry into such a respectable ensemble would also go and result a more sensible, sedate and responsible behavior.

Such however was not the case. His changed status exercised no detectable restraining effect on the urchin's vexing and pestering impulses and did not keep him from giving free reign to his natural inclinations of playing prankish tricks, practical jokes and cause trouble for others as well as for himself.

Far from comporting himself in an adult-like dignified manner Leybele reverted to type, letting loose his michievous instinct, repeatedly inventing some new gimmicks by means of which to harass and annoy his pals, who were likely to frequently find dirt or water in the pockets of their jackets, when they put them on after rehearsals. The director put him down in his book as a bad boy, but a valuable singer whom he was ready to forgive a lot of "shticks:"

On one occasion, it was a Saturday evening, as the holy Sabbath was just about to expire, while the evening service was in progress and the reader, as a child was holding a lighted candle, was reciting the blessing of the post-Sabbath ritual "Blessed art Thou King of the universe who hast created the light of fire" that the roguish chorist slipped out clandestinely with the aim of applying lighted matches to the caps of the other singers.

This was the last straw. His chickens had come home to roost. Dunayevsky could bear no longer the not very funny extracurricular surprises and the chicanery of the obnoxious lad. So, giving him his walking papers, he unceremoniously threw him out.

Next we find him in the "Kapelye" of the hunchbacked choir leader

and part-time impresario, Grobarsky, who used to recruit and gather together around him a bunch of young boys with good voices and rent them to the opera company, where they were commissioned to perform in certain opus'es, in the presentation of which kids are required to play specific minor roles, as for instance in "Carmen," where youngsters are needed for marching in a mob-scene and "Tosca" in which opera a shepherd boy has a singing part.

Leybele was in good company. He joined this gang of juvenile delinquents that was hanging around the hunchback, who was constantly on the lookout for young talent and supplying them, as the need for them arose, to the management of the opera house.

But running true to form, he pretty soon tired of that too. Worldly secular music was allright with him as far as it went. He had however already become particularly fond of the haunting melodies of Jewish liturgy and he felt a strong longing and desire to become associated with it once more.

And so it came to pass that when a friend and talent scout of the famous Cantor Meyer Pisack of Yelisovetgrad happened to visit Odessa and hearing him giving out in song, saw in the young fellow a hot prospect, suggested that he should journey together with him to that city. Kilemnick was only too glad to oblige. He was delighted at the chance offered him to sing in the choir of the renown cantor and so was the cantor, when he heard the import from Odessa sing for him, with the result, that he at once was elevated to the rank of chief soloist in Pisack's eminent chorus.

It was in Yelisovetgrad that a strange transformation occurred with him, a metamorphosis the like of which seldom happens to a singer. Usually a boy retains the possessions of his alto or soprano voice until circa (approximately) the day he gets up in public in a house of worship and in the presence of all his assembled relatives and friends of the family and the worshipers present proudly announces: "Today I am a man" (or a pen and pencil set).

If one has indeed turned the corner and had become a man, it would of course be incompatible with his new status for him to still keep on talking and singing in the voice of a child.

It consequently is quite understandable that under normal circumstances he does, about that time, sooner or later, but not far away from that important milestone of his life, lose the voice of his childhood and the period of "motieren" (mutation) the advent of puberty begins for him.

During that transition stage, which lasts longer in some cases and shorter in others, the voice is neither here nor there, in any event in pretty bad shape. Actually it is in reality no voice at all, but rather a squeak or a growl or something in between, and any singer who values his vocal chords and does not want to expose himself to the peril and risk of possibly never again getting his voice back, ought to keep his mouth shut and forswear singing for the time being.

When the term of incubation ends and luckily a brand new voice em-

erges from under the hatch, it is usually "tenor" in case of a former "alto" and a boy who sang soprano in his childhood as a rule becomes a baritone or a basso.

Jehudah Leyb (no more "Leybele") at that juncture was already an adolescent of almost sixteen years of age, who was still singing alto, without any sign of deterioration in his voice or any indication that he was about to lose it.

On the first day of "Rosh Hashana" (New Year) he was still in excellent fettle, singing lustily with the ensemble and delivering his solo passages with gusto to the delight of all within the walls of the house of worship.

During the night however, while he was asleep, there went on in his throat a process something akin to the one, that happened to the ancient Rabbi Eliezer ben Azaryoh who even though a great scholar was too young for the post of "Noseeh" (president) of the rabbinical college, to which he had been appointed. People were grumbling, holding his youthful appearance against him.

So miraculously overnight a snow white beard grew up on his chin in order to make him look old and venerable, and thus inspire and evoke greater respect and confidence toward him and his teachings on the part of the lesser lights.

Our hero too had a similar experience. When he went to bed he was an alto, but when he got up in the morning and began clearing his throat, he discovered to his amazement, that the voice he had gotten so used to, was gone and that in its place in his windpipe had been installed a wonderful instrument, a ready made glorious tenor. He had every reason to be happy and contented with the exchange transaction. It was to his advantage, a great gift and bonus for the oncoming New Year.

To having been spared the agony of going through the interval of a long drawnout evolution of transition was a lucky windfall to be exploited. It gave him an inner self-confidence, that he had hitherto lacked. The acquisition of a brand new voice awakened in him new and bigger ambitions and aspirations.

Why not strike out for myself? he wondered, and no sooner said than done. The thought was followed by deeds. He went back to Odessa, where he looked up Yossel Adelman, who was the director of a kind of a homegrown conservatory.

Joseph Adelman, having sung in the choirs of such masters as Yeruchem Hakoton, Zeidel Rovner, Pitze Abrass and Jacob Bachman, became the cantor of the Kirzsner'sher (furriers) Synagogue, which was located at the new market section of Odessa. His primary activity however was teaching young men, who aspired to become cantors.

Among his disciples were Leybele Kilemnik, Dovid Moshe Steinberg, Dovid Katzman, Svet and Icht. His speciality was writing recitatives for cantors, specially suited for and fitted to their respective potentialities. His standard price was two rubels for such a cut-to-order and measure opus. This included already also the coaching of the pupil by Adelman, until the

former had fully digested the recitative.

Reb Yossel took him in hand, working with him in an intensive effort to prepare him for the new goal, which he had set for himself: To become a competent cantor. But once again his lack of "zitzfleisch" (inability to sit pat) stood in the way and prevented him from successfully completing the needed courses. Before he even started in earnest he already wanted to be done with it. To buckle down and persevere was contrary to his make-up. It seems that our smart-aleck Jehudah Leyb expected of Reb Yossel something similar to what that ancient prospective proselyte asked of Rabbi Hillel (who was famous for his patience): "Teach me the whole Judaic code of law, while I'm standing and balancing myself on one foot."

The wise, imperturbable sage fulfilled the preposterous demand of the gentile by quoting him the basic principle: "Love thy neighbor as thyself". But Adelman was no Hillel and could perform no miracles. He told his disciple that there were no shortcuts to Chazzonuth. One must work hard and diligently, if he wants to make something of himself.

But Kilemnick was a young man in a great hurry, eager to cash in on his voice and whatever knowledge he had managed already to acquire. Hardly had Adelman gotten with him as far as acquainting him with the elementary guidelines and rudimentary rules and modes of the Sabbath ritual, when he was already off and running.

In vain did his teacher argue, that he was not as yet ready to show off his wares, the hot headed apprentice betook himself to the "Peresip" on the "Moldovanka" (a poor section on the outskirts of Odessa) where he succeeded in getting access to the pulpit of the "driver's synagogue" where, so he thought, anything goes.

It happened to be a Sabbath, on which the blessing of the new moon was to be recited. In the course of these prayers the cantor makes the pronouncement "Rosh Chodesh (the beginning of the month) will be on this or that day. It varies according to the calendar. Rosh Chodesh sometimes is one day, in others two days. Kilemnick went the calendar one better. In his generosity, wishing it would seem, to give his listeners a bonus, he presented them for good measure with a third day Rosh Chodesh.

Seeing whom they are dealing with, even the unsophisticated "horse and buggy" men made no bones of their disenchantment with the would-be cantor, who doesn't even know that there was no such animal as a three day "Rosh Chodesh." What an amhooretz! (ignoramus).

After the backfiring of his debut, Kilemnick made a soul-searching reassessment of his situation. He came to the inevitable conclusion, that he must turn over a new leaf and start from scratch striking out in a new direction if he is to get anywhere. He decided to begin at the beginning and to keep his nose to the grindstone until he'll master the subjects thoroughly. There and then he made up his mind, that he would not settle for less than he was capable of becoming.

Gone was his haughty, superior I-know-better attitude. He became a serious industrious student of music, voice culture and liturgical art and as our sages so succinctly put it, "Yogaati umotzosi taamin," If one says "I

took pains, I exerted myself and reached my goal" you may believe it. You have to work hard to earn worthwhile possessions. In time Kilemnick's diligence and persistence bore fruit, he became a seasoned musician and an erudite wonderful cantor. He fulfilled a heretofore unglimpsed potential.

He was the fortunate possessor of a very pleasant, caressing and resonant lyric tenor voice, which, while not overly voluminous or powerful, was however of very considerable encompass. Its register extended even in a larger measure than that of cantor Meisels, which is saying plenty. The quality of his voice was also reminiscent of "Shaye Gorgel"s'. It was pure, crystal clear, soft, mellow and flexible. He could sing for hours with remarkable ease without any exertion whatsoever, as if the voice would come out from under his sleeve, and he was capable of swinging up, as if on a flying trapeze to the ethereal heights of the upper "MI-FA (E-F), which is a rare feat indeed. He was also gifted with a fluent coloratura that was spiraling forth effortlessly and a fine glittering falsetto.

He was both a well-trained musician, a singer with an artistic delivery as well as a sweet voiced reciter of the liturgical chants, an excellent interpreter of the prayers and a skillful "zoger" (spontaneous improvisator) but the old "skorbove" melancholic traditional cantorial style in his version was tinged in modern colors and cast in fashionable formats.

He was very scrupulous with his chorists. He was a perfectionist and was not satisfied until he had made sure, that his ensemble would come up to the high standard set by him for the divine services.

His choir leader had his work cut out for him in trying to follow the strict instructions laid out for him by the cantor regarding the conduct of the rehearsals, which were interminable. Even so Kilemnick did not depend entirely on the latter, but frequently would take a direct hand himself in coaching of the "meshorerim" (synagogue singers) with the help of an organ, on which instrument he was able to play pretty well.

He began his cantorial career as a free lance traveling bard. He would tour the countryside in the company of an associate, who was also something of a singer himself and who at the same time played the role of impresario for Kilemnick. He was the advance agent, in a sense his man Friday, whose job it was to make the business arrangements for the guest appearances, which varied in character and in time. He would schedule a Sabbath service here, a weekday evening prayer there and a concert somewhere else. He would also assist the cantor at the pulpit, harmonizing with him.

As a result of these one night stands in cities and villages his name became known to young and old all over the land as a young talented cantor with a bright future.

Eventually his fame reached as far as Kishinev and the trustees of the "Chore school" (the choir synagogue) which was located at Pushkinskaya Street having heard about him, invited him for an audition, which turned out to be such an unqualified success, that they engaged him on the spot as the steady cantor of their congregation.

The choice proved to be a popular one. Kilemnik was an instant hit in town. People came in droves to hear the new cantor and enjoyed listening to his beautiful voice and his pleasurable artistic chanting of the psalms and prayers.

A great asset was also his imposing stature, his pleasant physical features and nice appearance. In public he was at all times well groomed, elegantly and neatly dressed, with a bohemian "pelerina" (cape) over his broad shoulders and broad-rimmed headgear or (in winter) a fur jacket and fur cap. On the Sabbath and festivals he used to don a silk "stove pipe".

A friendly, outgoing person (extrovert) he was by no means, rather was he an introvert, a loner, who would eschew mingling freely with people. Even his devoted fans he kept at arm's length. He considered himself to be somebody special and below his dignity to fraternize with plain folks.

His holding himself aloof may very well have been due not so much to haughtiness on his part, but rather to his desire of creating and maintaining an aura of glamour around his person.

His actions were designed to make the impression and give the illusion of a mysterious phenomenon. His mode of living was not unlike that of a recluse. He was never seen taking a stroll in a promenade.

Even when he had to go on the Sabbath or the festivals to the synagogue from his home, which was several blocks away, he would walk through side streets in a round-about zig-zag manner and would move quickly, as if he had to dodge people and was afraid to be seen and found out. He was prone to crawl into his shell, especially at any hint of disapproval.

Kilemnik was blessed with many positive traits, great abilities and considerable virtues, but on the debit column of the ledger he was weighted down on the scale by a lot of faults, negative qualities and habits.

If on the one hand he was able to attract, entice, delight and charm people with the brilliance and magnetism of his art in Chazzanuth, he did however on the other hand alienate them and chill their enthusiasm by his unreasonable, capricious disposition and with his free-wheeling, acid tongue. Too often he was acting like a codger and misanthrope who albeit inadvertently was prone to upset the applecart.

With him it was a case not unlike that of a Holstein cow, which gave a lot of milk, but when after the milking, the farmer put down the filled up bucket, she would kick it with her hoof, turning it over and spilling the whole content. He was a very nervous, irritable eccentric with fixed ideas, an uncontrollable quick tempered hot-head, who would let nobody step on his sensitive calluses. He gave no quarter to any offender, returning instead in kind a double measure of abuse, that had been heaped at him.

When he was still in the early stages of his budding career as traveling dispenser of his vocal wares, he hit the Bessarabian town of Lipkan, together with his sidekick. This adjutant and manager of his proceeded with his task, attempting to make suitable arrangements for the holy Sab-

bath which was around the corner.

The cantor of the town was the well-known Itzikl Shkolnick (this was an assumed name, his true original name was "Sapozsnick" (Shoemaker) which it seems was not to his liking. He considered it a misnomer. When people say "ah Chazzon ah Shuster" they mean he is a "Kalike" (cripple), a botcher. When the amateur impressario requested of the local dignitary that he yield his pulpit to the visiting young cantor, Shkolnick not only readily agreed, but received his colleague with warm hospitality and in every way tried to smoothe his path for his guest-appearance.

The whole town turned out to hear him and Kilemnik in excellent fettle showed them what he can do. The congregants were enchanted and mesmerized, and in a town where Shkolnick was the cantor this was no mean achievement. But all of a sudden he had a bright idea. After he had concluded the "Shacharis" (morning) part of the Sabbath ritual and retired to the cantor's dressing room, he called in the trustee and confronted them with the demand that they should guarantee him a minimum of two thousand leys as a condition"sine qua non" for his continuing the chanting of the "Mussaf" (supplementary) prayers.

The trustees, caught off guard by this surprising and confounding ultimatum, tried to reason with the visitor: "Why discuss business now on the holy Sabbath in the middle of the service. This is neither the time nor the place for bargaining. You made a big hit with the audience. Tomorrow you will present a concert and you may rest assured that you will net even more than you are requesting."

But Kilemnik remained adamant, sticking by his guns. He refused to go on. A big scandal broke out and several enraged young butchers made ready to teach the stubborn cantor a lesson in decent behavior. He had to flee for his life.

His relationship with the leaders of the choir synagogue of Kishinev too became strained as time went on. It began with insignificant misunderstandings and minor squabbles, that gradually led to larger conflicts and angry quarrels, that made cooperation between them all but impossible, and Kilemnik was not one to take things he considered "avles" (wrongs) lying down. He was riding on his high horse and gave the big shots of his congregation a piece of his mind in the highest octaves that his voice could muster, with the result, that they had come to the parting of the ways. Exit Kilemnik.

It happened at the time when Zeidel Rovner left his post at the "Neustatische School" (new-city synagogue) of Berditchev. In his place was installed Leyb Shapiro, formerly cantor of Vinitze. In his time he enjoyed an enviable reputation in liturgical circles but at that juncture he was already well up in years and his voice had gone back on him. He was engaged for the Days of Awe with an option.

He led the congregation in the High Holiday religious services, doing his best. But after Zeidel that was not good enough. "It is not Zeidel" was the general comment and as could have been predicted the option to retain him on a steady basis was not picked up and the search was renewed for a

suitable candidate for the post.

It was at this point that Nisi Belzer entered the picture. The departure of his arch competitor from town was a fortunate break for him. But the fact that the people kept sighing and longing for Zeidel was irksome for him. So upon being consulted by its ritual committee he gave it as his considered expert opinion that the congregation of the newer section of the city could do no better than to hire Kilemnik to fill the vacuum.

It was his fond hope that the cantor, whom he recommended, would with his wonderful voice and brilliant artistry make the Jews of Berditchev forget all about Zeidel, and sure enough this calculation of his proved to have been accurate.

Kilemnik's voice and cantorial style was reminiscent of the new synagogue's most famous former occupant, whose era preceded that of Zeidel. The resemblance between them was so pronounced, that people began calling the new cantor "Yeruchem" the second.

Everything would've been fine and dandy. There was only one fly in the ointment. The newcomer's modern "daatchmerish" (German fashion) attire caused some eye-brow lifting, wrinkling of noses and disapproving comments on the part of the ultra conservative inhabitants of Berditchev, who were accustomed to see their congregational dignitaries clad in the old-fashioned long, black satin cloak (Kapote) or a Prince Albert and a silk headgear. When his attention was called to the fact that his modish garb did not quite fit in with the environment and was coupled with a gentle hint that he would do well to get himself a new wardrobe more in keeping with traditional usage, he just shrugged his shoulders and paid no heed to the well meant suggestion.

His superiors began looking askance at the way their cantor was comporting himself. On one occasion when his trustees paid him an unexpected visit with the object of taking up an important matter with him, they found their cantor in his yard chasing geese. He had on nothing more than a shirt and the lower half of his pajamas and his head was bare, without the cover of a yarmulka.

When the officers chided him, remarking that it was not proper for a cantor to show himself in such a getup, barefooted with uncovered head and almost naked, he referred them in reply to the second sentence of "Shir Hashirim" (Song of Songs) which begins with the word "Yishookeyni" you can kiss me . . . He was a past master at telling antagonists where to go. Deeply insulted the trustees left in a hurry.

After such a "Boruch Habo" (reception) Kilemnik's connection with the congregation naturally was bound to be severed. He was summarily sacked. It was just as well. Berditchev was anyhow not his cup of tea. He was much happier in and much more suited for Kishinev and that's where we find him next, once more.

But this time it was to the great community synagogue, located at Asiatzkaya Ulitza that he was called. In this post he succeeded the renowned cantor Avrohom Kalechnick, who had just resigned.

A great many of the Jews of the Bessarabian capital had a soft spot in

their hearts for him and missed him ever since he left for Berditchev and were looking forward to the day when he would be back in town.

The "Gabbay" of the great synagogue Mishi Segal, himself a great fan of Kilemnik, sensing the public sentiment of the Kishinev Jewish community brought him back from exile and installed him with great fanfare in his new post.

With the prodigal son's return the old house of worship got a new lease on life. The centre of the Jewish population had by that time already shifted to a new section of the city, away from the neighborhood of the great synagogue. It was now too great a distance from the new inhabited location for the worshipers to cover by foot on the Sabbath.

As a result new synagogues sprang up in the vicinity of the new habitats of the Jewish population and the great community synagogue had lost a large part of its former patronage.

With the advent of Kilemnik however, the old edifice once more had acquired a powerful drawing card. Ignoring the difficulties and discomfort, people were tracking in droves from the furthest points of the city to the old House of God in their eagerness to listen to the exalted liturgical chants of the gifted cantor.

Kilemnik had not changed his ways. But people had made peace with his caprices. They overlooked everything under the absorbing influence of his great talent and inspiring artistic chants.

In the stormy years of upheavals that followed upon the heels of the first world war, when just as in the other neighboring lands, in Bessarabia too periodically broke out violent disturbances and life became more difficult and unsafe by the day and hour, Kilemnik thought it best to get out before things became utterly unbearable.

He fled in 1918 to London, England, where he hoped to find peace and serenity, establish himself and begin a new life. He won the cantorial position at the prestigious Rothschild synagogue. He was also appointed as professor at the Conservatory of Music. He seemed to be on the way to a new and even more promising chapter of his career. However fate had decreed otherwise. A heart attack struck him down, putting an end to his life at the relatively young age for such a sad finish of fifty five.

He was a very intelligent, very generously endowed practitioner of the cantorial art. He had a lot of irons in the fire, but his first and foremost love was Chazzanuth in which he excelled to a very high degree. Everything else was passing fancy in his turbulent life . His place is among the most prominent ones in the Pantheon of the liturgical art.

CHAPTER 30

CANTOR FROYKE (EPHRAYIM) SHLIEPACK

Cantor Froyke (Ephrayim) Shliepack — the "violin" of the cantorial world — He could imitate musical instruments — His teachers — He officiated for years in Kishinev and in Berditchev — He concluded his colorful career in Canada.

Lakol zman v'ays lechol cheyfetz (For everything there is a season and a proper time for every pursuit). There is a proper and suitable time for everything according to the wisest of all men, King Solomon. There is a time to come for a visit and there is a time for leaving, a time for meeting and greeting each other and there comes a time, when you have to say goodbye.

The time has come for us to bid farewell to Kishinev. We are getting ready to leave and in order to make the conclusion of our very pleasant visit to this city as festive as possible, let us do it in the same manner as is customary on the festival of "Simchas Torah" (Joy of the Law). All the congregants have already been given an "aliyah" (Torah honor) and now they have called up to the pulpit all the youngsters (Kol Haneohrim) covered their heads with a big "Talis," and concluded reading to them the last portion of the Bible. Then begins the ceremonious and elaborate feature of the service, the calling up to the Torah of the "Chassanim" (bridegrooms) in whose honor the reader sings the long introductory "Birshuss" (by permission from) finishing up on his highest tones with the threefold "Amods" (get up).

Following the same example, let us give the honor of "Chasan

Torah" (Bridegroom of the Law) to Cantor Ephrayim Shliepack. It suits him perfectly, for he was a great Hebrew scholar and a Jew of the strictest religious beliefs.

"Froyke," as he was generally called, a native of Loytzk, Wholinia, was the son of the Reb Zeyde Kipenyer, who filled two positions in his community. He was the cantor and also the main "Gemoro Melamed" (teacher of Talmud) of the little town in the Gubernia (state) of Podolia.

The very pious father was interested in making sure that his children become scholars, well-versed in the sacred literature. Therefore, he made his son study Torah subjects day and night. Since Froyke had a great desire to learn and in addition, possessed also a sharp Talmudic mind, the father's efforts were not wasted. On the contrary, no parents could wish for better children. Froyke was brilliant and absorbed everything that his learned father taught him, like a sponge absorbs water. He had a remarkable photographic memory.

But in addition to the knowledge of the law, the Kipenyer Cantor also taught his son "Nusach Hatfilo" the traditional melodies of the prayers. As was customary in those years, he also let him stand near him at the pulpit so that he could assist him, together with the other schoolboys whom the cantor had chosen among his pupils, by occasionally providing the background in the form of "holding a tone" (an accord, harmonizing).

He also occasionally gave him a solo and when the child delivered it in the synagogue at the service, the worshipers used to shake their heads and nod approvingly. The proud father's heart skipped a beat and expanded from "naches" (parental joy). And no wonder! The boy showed very early definite signs of a remarkable talent and of a sweet soprano voice, which enchanted the listeners. People flocked to the synagogue not so much to pray, but mainly to observe the antics of the cantor's son and to listen to his appealing voice. It was indeed something to behold how the little fellow handled his assignment. He acted in a matter-of-fact fashion and with the natural ease of a grown-up professional cantor, exhibiting the bravura and flourish of a seasoned performer, without an inkling of nervousness, bashfulness or stage fever.

Some of the wandering cantors, who stopped in Kipeny for a guest appearance, were enthralled, when they heard Froyke's voice and his mature familiarity with cantorial music and they used to implore Reb Zeyde to give them the talented boy as a choir singer. The father finally concluded that there was no future for his son in the small town as a helper in his own choir, so he sent him away to serve under the tutelage of some of the great masters, where he would have the opportunity to gather additional knowledge and experience in the sacred craft.

His first experience as choir boy in a professional ensemble was under Cantor Nechemyo of Satanov. But two other great cantors were the main influence in the development of Froyke Shliepack. The first one, who had the great fortune to acquire for his choir the soprano, who was the marvel admired by all the cantors and with whose exploits the whole musical

world was agog, the canary called "Froyke Soloway" and "Dos Fidele" (the violin), was the famous cantor, Itzik'l Shkolnick, who held positions first in Ramon, than in Podvolotchisk, in Kamenetz Podolsk and finally in Stanislav. He was one of the best known cantors of his time, a great musician, and a wonderful interpreter of the prayers. He was also a talented composer, who had to his credit a great number of ingenious musical works. Nisi Belzer said of him, that he was already a cantor in his mother's womb and born "mit a golden lefele" (with a golden spoon) in his mouth.

It was asserted by competent experts, that the presentations of the liturgical chants by Shkolnick and his choir were like the singing of the Levites in the holy Temple of Jerusalem in ancient times. Gentile noblemen, city and state officials used to come to his services, and were so fascinated and bewitched by his superb artistry, that they often kissed him in their enthusiastic excitement.

Itinerant cantors used to avoid visiting the city where Shkolnick resided, for no matter how great an artist the cantor on tour would be, he was bound to be unsuccessful in the community, where they were used to hearing Shkolnick, the ultimate in liturgical perfection. It was impossible for anyone to match his ingenious way with a prayer. His admirers used to boast that none of them were fit to even shine the shoes of their inimitable Itzik'l.

He was also blessed with other virtues and talents. He was a very educated Hebrew scholar, who used to spend his spare time in the diligent study of the Talmud and its commentaries. In addition Shkolnick was also reputed to be a talented writer and artist.

He died in Vienna to which city he was taken for an emergency operation. His body was brought back to Stanislav for burial. He was mourned by the host of his devoted followers, to whom the passing of the pious servant of God was a painful blow and an irreplaceable loss. In the hearts of all the Jews of Galicia, his memory is kept alive with great reverence to this day.

* * *

Another great cantor under whom Froyke served his apprenticeship was Moshe Achler. His real name was Kiyevsky. The name Achler (eater) became permanently attached to him for the reason, that he had a pretty good appetite. He was capable of putting away the "Shor Habor" (ox of the pit), finishing off all the "Leviathan" (giant fish), and washing it all down with the "Yayin Hameshoomor" (secreted seasoned wine). All these delicacies are supposed to be served exclusively to the righteous in the world to come, in "Gan Eyden" (paradise). But to be realistic, is it any wonder, that he was opposed to any form of dieting? It was a matter of principle with him. After all he was a native of Debretzen, Hungary, and it is common knowledge, that there people cook well and eat well. Hungary has a reputation in the world as the classic land of "achila" (food consuming), and although Achler left the country of his birth, this virtuous characteristic of his kinsfolk he never lost or abandoned. On the contrary,

he faithfully observed and practiced the Hungarian customs whenever and wherever possible in an undiminished if not in an enlarged measure in his new adopted country.

Why had he left Hungary? Well, for the very valid reason, that if he had not run away fast enough, he probably would not have been around much longer and would have most likely lost for good any chance of continuing to indulge in his favorite pastime of making good use of his teeth.

Not having been a weakling, by any means, ever (thanks to the abovementioned good habits of ample intake), he was readily accepted as a recruit in the army of "Froyem Yossel" (Franz Joseph, the first). As he was in the habit of doing daily, he continued to recite his morning prayers in the barracks and whenever he had the chance, put also on his Tefillin (phylacteries) and his Talis (prayer shawl). He did it of course secretly.

One time, the sergeant caught him redhanded in the act. He entered just when the private was praying, clad in his ritual wrap and paraphernalia. He upbraided him for his audacity to engage in such extracurricular activities at the time when he was supposed to perform some manual assignment. He showered him with anti-Semitic, vile, abusive language, and tearing off his phylacteries, he threw them on the floor.

Such descration of the holy accessories by the brutal subaltern enraged the proud and temperamental Moshe and he gave the foul-mouthed sergeant such a fiery, forceful slap in the face, that he staggered, stumbled, fell down and accidentally hit his head on a sharp stone. His injuries were fatal.

The moment Moshe realized what had happened and what its consequences are likely to be, he fled. Without having any definite destination, he miraculously succeeded in crossing the border into another country. He did not know where he was, except that he had found a haven. He hid there for a while and as a precaution he changed his name to Kiyevsky. This became his second name. Subsequently, he was known as Achler, his third monicker. His original and first name is unknown.

For a long time he moved around, traveling over the length and breadth of Bessarabia and Galicia with several helpers, officiating in synagogues at the services and giving concerts and guest appearances in cities and villages. Later when he had overcome his fear of the consequence of having caused the sergeant's accidental death and felt more secure, he accepted permanent positions and took up residence first in Bertchon and later in Zsalkov. He was the possessor of a powerful second tenor voice and a master of improvisation. He also had a thorough knowledge of musical principles and was a very capable instructor, director and conductor of a choir.

Froyke was a member of Itzik'l Shkolnick's choir, when that vocal genius was the cantor of the Jewish community of Kamenetz. He spent several years under Moshe Achler's tutelage, when that cantor occupied the position with the congregation of Zsalkov. He learned a great deal from these masters. He adopted their style and absorbed their methods, as far as cantorial virtuosity was concerned. Being a good observer and an

excellent listener and imitator, he learned with unusual ease, whatever they were able to impart to him. He profited enormously from his association with them.

But by nature he was not one ever to be satisfied with the superficial knowledge of any subject and especially a subject that was so near to his heart and so vital to his future, as he considered music to be. Since it was always his habit to try to probe deeply into the heart of the matter in question, he never ceased to sieze any opportunity that was open to him to broaden his knowledge and to study thoroughly and systematically all aspects of music. The result was that in time he became one of the best educated cantors of his era.

* * *

He was well versed in liturgical as well as secular literature. He knew by heart almost all the important works of such great cantors and choirmasters as Weintraub, Kashtan, Zultzer, Lewandowski, Naumberg and Novakowsky. He was also familiar with most operas. He could sit with colleagues for hours and sing for them from memory entire passages from operas, oratorios and symphonies and not only did he know scraps of melodies of the popular arias but all the parts.

His versatility was admirable. At the same time he did not neglect his old love, the study of the sacred books. For a long time, he was a pupil of the famous Yeshiva of Volozsin from which any student was bound to emerge a many-sided scholar, and Froyke was one of the best. He was entirely at home in the company of rabbis if the discussion turned to questions of Talmud and commentaries, or any of the other religious books. Having acquired a thorough knowledge of the "Yoreh Deyo" (compendium of religious rules) and of the commentary (Meginay Oretz), he was competent to decide questions of law (Shaalos). In a word, he was a uniquely endowed person, blessed with talents in several fields, but as his lifework he chose Chazzanuth for which he had prepared himself with especially faithful devotion.

When he was ready to set out on his own as a fledgling cantor, he began his career working his way on the road. He was no longer a soprano. He had lost or rather shed it. In exchange he gained a baritone voice of not exactly brilliant but middling quality. Its range, however, was quite extensive, enabling him to reach higher and to go down lower than is usually the potential of a baritone. Neither was his voice as limited in its movements and stiff as most baritones are. On the contrary, it was remarkably pliant and possessed a mercurial mobility and flexibility, making it a most suitable tool and a most useful, obliging, fully cooperative handmaiden in the service of his wonderfully fluent, sharp and cutting coloratura. He was also able to sing falsetto, a la Galli Curci.

But his greatness lay mainly in his colorful ingenius recitative. He was a master of improvisation and artful, breathtaking modulations. He never remained for very long in the key in which he began. He was more likely to run through a half a dozen different keys so fast and with such nimble

ease, that it was difficult to follow him even for an experienced, seasoned craftsman. But Froyke's intricate musical movements and acrobatic maneuvers were never accidental shots in the dark. They were planned with well thought out, well worked out deliberate strategy, and were carried out according to the blueprints, with meticulous care.

There was no chance of his getting lost in a labyrinth. He always knew where he was and could pinpoint the exact latitude and longitude of his current position. He could also tell in what direction he was headed, and with the same ease and facility he was able to descend, extricate himself and return to the jumping off spot, whence he had originally started out. It was a tour de force, an exhibition of superb skill of navigation between the musical narrow straits of Scylla and Charybdis, which astounded even the experts.

With this, the list of Shliepack's assortment of capabilities was however not exhausted. He had many other tools in his arsenal. He possessed also the rare peculiar talent of imitating the characteristic sounds of birds, animals and different musical instruments. We have already mentioned that he was called "Froyke the Solovey" because he was able to reproduce the singing voice of a canary. But he was an artisan, who had many irons in the fire. What would you like to hear? A cello, a viola, or perhaps you would prefer to listen to a trumpet or a flute or a cymbal, or are you maybe partial to a trombone or a cornet? Just leave it to Froyke.

By employing different tricky combinations of movements and of resonances with the aid of his lips, teeth, nose and tongue, he was able to produce a great variety of sounds, which closely resembled those of the different instruments. His favorite instrument, which he loved best to imitate and which he so frequently did that it became his trademark, was the violin. Hence the tag which his admirers used to identify him with — Froyke Dos Fidele (the violin).

In the course of his extensive travels, he once arrived in Krementiz. He deliberately had set out for this city where there happened to be a vacancy in the cantorial post of the "Kozatzke Beth Hamedrosh" (house of prayers of the Cossacks). He officiated at the Sabbath service on trial for the cantorial position and made an excellent impression on the congregants. But there was one handicap. He was still a single man, and according to the prevailing customs in those countries at that time, which held it almost obligatory for a young man to get married at the ripe age of eighteen, he was already considered to be an old bachelor.

When as a consequence for the very favorable impression which he made on his listeners, they demanded of the gabbay (trustee) that the young man be engaged immediately for the vacant cantorial post, he demurred, replying that for a reputable synagogue to employ a cantor a "chalastiok" who was not married would be unthinkable.

Reb Moshe Chayim, the gabbay, had it all figured out. He had a daughter, an old maid, and here was a God-sent opportunity to kill two birds with one stone; to get a husband for his daughter and a cantor of his

congregation. At the same time, he would be relieved of the necessity to give a dowry to the bridegroom, who would be glad to consider the cantorial position as an even more valuable gift than a dowry from his father-in-law. He took Froyke to his home and gave him a sumptuous meal, but it was all wasted on the reluctant suitor. After seeing the blushing maiden, he decided against tying himself for life to a female, whose charms did not appeal to him.

Just then he heard that there was an opening for a cantor in the city of Great Beltz, Bessarabia. Losing no time, he proceeded at once to apply for the position. He conducted the Sabbath services with great success and the enthusiastic audience said, "He's the man for the job. We don't want to hear any more cantors on trial."

But once again the question of his single status complicated matters. It was a problem of law whether or not it was permissible to let an old bachelor pray as the "Shliyach Tziboor" (emissary of the community) for his congregation. The matter was brought before the rabbinical council for a decision. The rabbis called the candidate before their court. They spoke to him, probing his knowledge and his background. They soon satisified themselves that the young man was a Talmudic scholar of note who was also a chassidic devotee, garbed in the manner and fashion of the pious sect and whose background and religious conduct was in accord with the highest principles of Jewish law. So they gave their unanimous opinion, that such a strictly observant and learned young man was qualified and permitted to hold down the cantorial post, even though he was not as yet married. This ruling was, however, meant to apply only temporarily and provisionally, with the condition that the cantor would give his solemn promise to get married immediately after the High Holy Days.

Now that he at last had acquired a steady job, he could concentrate on looking over the available supply of maidens from among whom to choose a suitable bride. His discerning eye came to rest on Sasha, the daughter of the local "Schochet", with whom he went under the wedding canopy right after the conclusion of the "Simchas Torah" festival and with whom he lived happily ever after.

His name soon became well-known in the whole vicinity and when he received a call from a prominent congregation in Kishinev, he eagerly accepted. It was a great leap forward and there he remained for the next several years, gradually working himself up until he became one of the most popular cantors in the whole of Bessarabia.

In the year 1909, we find him in Berditchev where he was elected to the post of cantor of the choir synagogue. In that city he spent the following eleven years. He filled the position with honor and dignity. He was beloved and revered by all, not only for the high quality of his cantorial virtues, talents and unusual abilities, but equally for his charming and sympathetic personality, and because he conducted himself not in the more modern manner of a cantor of a choir synagogue, but rather in the more traditional fashion of an ultra-strict, pious chossid (follower of a

wonder-rabbi). Even at the pulpit, he prayed with the heavy long woolen tallis drawn way over his head and his midriff tightly laced in by a "gartel", silken black sash. Before ascending the pulpit to conduct a service, he would never fail to first take a plunge in the "mikva" (ritual bath).

He was usually dressed in the customary garb of the chassidim — long coat, round velvet or plush rabbinical "kapelyoosh" and boots, with the variation on the Sabbath and festivals of a silken overgarment or a Prince Albert coat and a headgear consisting of fur tails, called "Shtreimel".

His serene mode of life was interrupted by World War I. But conditions became even worse and almost untenable after the conclusion of the Armistice, when the White Russian bands swarmed over the Ukraine and the other territories of the land, engaging in bloody battles with the hordes of the Bolshevik Army. Whole sections were laid to waste. Hunger and misery stalked the countryside. Masses of the inhabitants were uprooted and made homeless. But the hooligans were going first of all after the Duchovny Zvany, the Jewish religious dignitaries, the "Kley Kodesh".

Shliepack was also one of the victims of the outbreak of hostilities in the Russian civil war. But he would not desert his post until he was almost trapped and only miraculously escaped at the last moment. Stripped and shorn of everything he possessed, he fled to Vienna. With his guest appearance in the Austrian capital, he drew the attention of all the Jewish musical circles in the city. He created a sensation. His greatest boosters and promoters were the cantors and professional musicians, who knew best how to evaluate and appraise and appreciate his unique, individualistic approach, his marvellous vocal acrobatics, his revolutionary, ingenious ideas and methods, and the facility with which he was able to execute complicated, musical feats.

It was shortly before the High Holiday season and he accepted an invitation to officiate on Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur in the Boosh circus. The over three thousand seats of the giant hall were sold out and snapped up by the public immediately and even standing room was at a premium. The attendance was so enormous, that when the prominent cantors of Vienna, the very cream of the fraternity of the sacred craft, rushed to the circus, which was converted into a house of prayer for the occasion, after they were through with their own services, in the hope that they would be able to still catch the tail-end of "Froyke's Mussaf" service, they were unable to gain entrance into the auditorium and were obligated to sit on the steps and listen to the strains of his chants from there.

Men like Leybush Miller, Frankel, and the famous former chief cantor of Lemberg, Yitzchok Tzvee Halpern, who at that time was living in Vienna and conducting a private school, where he taught prospective cantors, became great admirers and devoted followers of Shliepack and they had the highest praise for his remarkable eighteen karat artistry of style and magical virtuosity of rare perfection. Vienna took to Froyke like a duck to water. He was held over by public demand for five months. That any cantor should draw capacity crowds for so long was unprecedented in

a metropolis that had already heard all the celebrities of liturgical art.

People were wiping their eyes when he was chanting the long Av Horachamim (Father of Mercy) at his first Sabbath service in the Austrian capital and among those who were moved to tears was also Halpern and a number of other cantors.

He was so deeply impressed by Shliepack's artistic and passionate interpretation of the prayers that he said to his disciples: "As long as this cantor is in town you need not come to my lectures. Go and listen to his rendition of the liturgical chants and steal from him all you can. He is a Maloch [angel]."

It was rumored that he allegedly received a proposition from one of the conservative temples of the city, famed house of "Gemutlichkeit" (coziness, good nature). They were, it seems, willing to engage him as their cantor on condition, that he get rid of his long broad beard. To which he is supposed to have replied, "It is true that according to religious law one is permitted to remove his beard if it grows in a manner as to get in the way of eating and the intake of food. But in my case, I am confident that my hirsute adornment is a handicap to my eating only in your eyes. I'm sure that I'll find a congregation which will be glad to take me as I am, beard and all."

In justice to the venerable great Jewish center of Central Europe, let me, however, at once add that from what I know about conditions and customs as they were in the era in question in Vienna and judging also from all information which I was able to gather, the rumored story appears to be of spurious origin and improbable, for we know for a fact, that quite a number of cantors of the Austrian capital wore beards proudly. Not only was their dignified, professor-like appearance not looked upon as a handicap, but on the contrary it was considered an ornament and an asset for an official of a congregation.

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Froyke was not very enthusiastic about going to America. He would have preferred to remain and to continue leading his accustomed mode of life in the congenial surroundings of the European Jewish communities. But economic conditions in the Old World continued to deteriorate and he finally yielded to the entreaties and urgings of an American manager, who offered to bring him out and painted rosy prospects for him, if he would let him be in charge of his professional activities and manage his affairs.

He arrived in New York in 1926. His debut was announced with considerable fanfare by his impresario Morris Wolf. It was held at the "Poaley Tzedek Anshey Illiyah" synagogue of Forsyth Street corner Delancey in downtown New York. He conducted the Friday evening and Saturday morning Sabbath services on the 9th and 10th of July accompanied by the Trachtenberg Chorus.

Sunday, July 11th happened to be "Erev Rosh Chodesh", the day preceding the advent of the new moon, on which occasion the special "Yom Kippur Koton" service (small Day of Atonement) is recited. He

was also to conduct the regular Mincha (evening) service prior to the Yom Kippur Koton.

An overflowing crowd came from all over town to hear the famous guest from abroad. Among the notables who were present and lent great dignity and significant importance to the occasion were such conspicuous figures of the cantorial fraternity of New York as Joseph Rosenblatt, Mordechay Hershman, David Roitman and David Moshe Steinberg, who came to greet their famous colleague and welcome him on his arrival in America.

Shliepack's Mincha service was a lesson in cantorial art. It took so long that there was not much time left for Yom Kippur Koton, although he only emphasized three prayers of the "Amida" (18 prayers), Reey No Veonyeinoo (Look upon our Affliction), Veliyrooshoolayim Ircho (To Jerusalem Thy City Return in Mercy) and Retzey (Accept Thy People, Israel). Having just come from the valley of misery he poured into these prayers all the pain and suffering of his people. When he finished, the audience gave Froyke a standing ovation and the great cantors lavished on their colleague their most enthusiastic congratulations and good wishes.

Having scored such a hit, it was only natural that the officers of the Illyer congregation would not fail to take advantage of the opportunity to procure the services of the great cantor for the oncoming high holidays and in view of the lateness of the season, Shliepack accepted the offer. After the conclusion of the Days of Awe he made a number of guest appearances but his real preference having been after his Odyssea's, a steady position, in 1928 he accepted a post in Newark, New Jersey as the cantor of the Brisker Congregation Tifereth Israel of Prince Street, where he was officiating with the assistance of a yearly choir under the direction of Max Nadler. But his connection with the Newark religious organization was of but a short duration. The commercialization of Divine services in America was repulsive to him. So he resigned and moved to Montreal, Canada, where he served the Roumanian Congregation, "Beth David," for nearly twenty years until his death. He passed away in 1948, mourned by all the Jewish inhabitants of the city who loved and revered him.

He was a tall and heavy set man. In private life, he was a very pleasant, friendly, charming, sensitive and sentimental man with a good heart and he always radiated good humor with a bashful half-smile on his face. He was also that very rare swallow among cantors, a modest, unpretentious, humble man and his humility was not feigned. He never was one to seek the limelight and push himself to the front. He was always content to stay in the background and let people discover him, if they were so inclined. Such an attitude is, of course, especially in America, not of much help in furthering the progress of the career of a man in the public eye.

I was drawn to him and never failed to visit him whenever I happened to be in Montreal. He was a great host, who loved company and made a visitor feel at home. It was indeed a pleasure to spend some time with him. He was always good for a sizeable quote of words of wisdom. He was an excellent conversationalist with a brilliant mind and a wonderful entertaining storyteller. He could keep you interested for hours with his nostalgic

reminisences and literally in stitches with his funny stories. Curious episodes and witty jokes flowed from his lips in an endless stream, seasoned and spiced occasionally with suitable quotations from the wise sayings of the Talmud or other sacred scriptures. And if the talk turned to the theme of liturgical or secular music, nobody could match Shliepack. A visit to his home was stimulating and enjoyable, an experience long to be treasured.

But matters of the spirit were not the only ones that interested Froyke. Being that he was an observant Jew, who meticulously fulfilled the commandments of the Jewish law, he also was a strictly adherent believer in the commandment, "Veochalto vesovoto" (you should eat your fill). In this respect, he followed the shining example set for him by his teacher, Moshe Achler. He used to make fun of his pretty good appetite by saying, that he could do with only a small roll as long as there was a whole loaf of bread lying on the table. The spare tire (or was it tires?) around his midriff testified to the fact, that pious as Froyke was, he did not fast very often.

In the year 1944, I was engaged to officiate in Montreal on the Passover festival in a synagogue which was not far from his. I conducted the services only on the first evening and was free on the second evening. So I went to hear Shliepack. He recited the prayer of "Sefira" (counting the Omer) and then proceeded to chant the concluding prayer, "Ribono Shel Olom" (Lord of the Universe). Although his voice was by now somewhat hoarse, hollow and without lustre, I was nevertheless astonished and enthralled by the masterful fashion in which he imitated violins, flutes, trumpets and cellos.

He took a theme, a phrase, and elaborated on it and developed from it several variations, singing all four parts of the Partitura one after the other. His modulations, his coloratura passages, his winding maneuvers from key to key, back and forth, made me dizzy. He built musical castles in the air, which towered one on top of the other and before you looked around, they toppled down, crashing on your head with the impact of an atomic bomb. It was incredible that an old man should still possess so much energy, such lively phantasy and unbelievable technique, which he revealed in one single prayer. I do not exaggerate when I say that the Ribono Shel Olom of Sefira took him almost three quarters of an hour.

He was a cantor's cantor. In this respect, he closely resembled the great master, Arye Leib Rutman. Cantors and professional musicians appreciated his individualistic, ingenious style of cantorial interpretation. For plain simple people, it was often too deep and complicated. It was over their heads.

Shliepack was a fine type of the patriarchal, old-fashioned, cantors, with all their virtues and faults. Being rather a relic of the past, he did not fit in very well in the Twentieth Century and therefore he did not receive in America the recognition, which he deserved. He was one of the most dignified, reverent "Shliyach Tzibur's" (advocate of the community), a source of honor and pride for the whole sacred profession.

CHAPTER 31

YISROEIL LEYB TKATCH

Yisroeil Leyb Tkatch, the successor to Bachman in Budapest — Why he was obliged to audition twice — His mighty voice and style of improvisation — He bested both Rosenblatt and Kwartin.

In our last chapter, we had begun to take leave of Kishinev, but, as you can see, we still have not as yet left the city. Like intimate friends of long standing, who find it difficult to part from each other, we, too, still keep on saying good-bye to the town, to which we have become attached. But we cannot tarry any longer. Now we really must get going and be on our way.

To close this concluding chapter of the series in an appropriate manner, similar to the way that is customary at the completion of the reading of the holy parchment scroll of the Bible in the synagogue on the joyous "Festival of the Law" (Simchas Torah), we have in the preceding chapter presented the honor of "Choson Torah" (the bridgroom of the Torah) to Cantor Shliepack.

Next in line comes the "Choson Bereyshis" and we have to designate the recipient of the title, "Bridgroom of the Beginning," so-called because he is being called up to the reading of the initial chapter of the Bible, which starts with the words, "In the beginning God created." This honor we have reserved for the famous cantor, Yisroeil Leyb Tkatch, and the motives underlying our choice spring from recollections of some occurences in the early days of my incipient career.

Let us set the stage. The scene is Budapest, the Hungarian capital, during the stormy period immediately following the collapse of the Communist regime of Bela Kuhn. The government had just fallen into the

hands of the ruling hierarchy of the "Eybredo Madyarok" (the awakened Huns) and "Nyilashok" (arrow-bearing Hungarians) with Admiral Horthy at the helm. Since Bela Kuhn, to our misfortune, happened to be a Jew, the reactionaries who took over, had a made-to-order weapon with which to persecute the "devilish" minority, "zsidok" whom they pictured as having been the instigators and the sole cause of all the troubles that befell the Hungarian people.

I must explain how it came about that I landed in Budapest of all places and what I was doing there. I had previously been studying medicine for three semesters at the University of Klauzenburg (Kolozsvar). My studies were interrupted when I was called to the colors in 1916. I was assigned to the medical corps and by the time the war ended, I had the rank of first lieutenant. I had planned to return to Kolozsvar to take up again my medical courses. When that city, in the aftermath of "World War I" had, together with the rest of Transylvania, fallen under the hegemony of Roumania, I left for Budapest in the hope of being able to continue my studies there. But to my great disappointment, I found the doors of the university in the Hungarian capital, and particularly those of the medical faculty, tightly closed to most Jewish students under the "numerus clausus" (closed number) rule, which had at that time been promulgated.

Driven to despair by this unexpected development, which was a severe blow to all my hopes and ambitions, I roamed aimlessly through the streets of the vast metropolis in which I felt stranded and at a complete loss to know what to do next. I frequented the usual hangout of the Jewish students, the "Menza", which was their gathering place at meal-times and on other social occasions. I also joined their singing sessions and soon earned a reputation in their circle as the best of the group. Encouraged by their appreciation, I occasionally let them persuade me to chant for them a prayer or a psalm from the synagogue devotions.

One of my new friends, who was acquainted with the chief cantor of the Rombach Street Synagogue was quite impressed with my rendition of the Hebrew chants and gave me some practical advice. Knowing of my predicament and what an untenable position I was in, he volunteered to introduce me to Cantor Tkatch, who, he thought, could be of great help to me.

The cantor received me in a pretty friendly manner, but with a patently generous dose of skepticism. His first question was, whether I knew "Ivreh," whether I could read the prayers. When I assured him that having spent many years in some of the most famous "Yeshivas" (schools of talmudic studies) I know something besides "Ivreh," he wanted to know, what he could do for me. I replied that I would appreciate it very much if he would give me a recommendation to some congregation that would engage me as their cantor for the High Holy Days, which were not far off.

My request caught him by surprise. The expression on his face revealed clearly that he could not believe that a young fellow who studied medicine could possibly possess enough familiarity with "Chazzonuth" (can-

torial art) to merit a recommendation from him as one who was qualified to lead High Holy Day Services. But after I had finished chanting several recitatives for his benefit, his attitude toward me underwent a profound change. He sat down at once and wrote a letter of recommendation to the trustees of the regional house of prayer which was located on "Bethlehem Place." With full confidence in and reliance on the famous cantor's opinion, they engaged me for the post without even requiring an audition from me.

There was a follow-up a short time after that, when Cantor Tkatch summoned me to his home and told me, that a friend and colleague of his, Cantor Kavanovsky, who was recognized as one of the most erudite musicians and composers in the city, was getting ready to leave for America. He and his family were sponsored by and received already affidavits from their wealthy relatives, the owners of the well known Ohrbach's Department Store in New York City, who were bringing them out to America.

"If," he continued, "you are in earnest and have really decided to become a professional cantor, this presents a favorable opportunity for you to land a yearly position as his successor at the synagogue on the Arena Boulevard."

Once again Tkatch did his utmost on my behalf. He induced Kavanovsky also to lend a helping hand and to join him in support of my candidacy. And so it happened that, thanks to his wholehearted efforts on my behalf, I obtained my first steady position as the cantor of the "Beth Israel" Congregation of Budapest.

Well, what say you? Does not Tkatch, who was thus instrumental in launching my career from its very beginning, rightfully deserve that I, should award him the honorary title of "Chason Bereishis" (the Bridegroom of the Beginning)? I'm sure, you'll agree, that he indeed does.

Yisroeil Leyb Tkatch (in Budapest they pronounced his name in the better-sounding Hungarianized version of "Takaatch") had the singular luck and honor to have been elected as the successor to the two greatest cantors of his generation, Rozumny and Bachman, one after the other. He must have possessed some kind of special aptitude and expertise in the art of getting positions. Some, even mediocre, artisans have a knack for landing jobs. It can hardly be credited to their superior endowment or ascribed to pure luck or coincidence.

He competed with the biggest luminaries and beat them at their game, running off with the plum. What more proof do you need? After the demise of Bachman, there auditioned at the pulpit of the Rombach Temple such outstanding figures of the cantorial world as Yossele Rosenblatt and Zavel Kwartin, but it was none other than Tkatch, who fell heir to the mantle of the great deceased master and he was elected to the post not once but twice. However, we will come to that later.

Let us first begin with his Bereyshis (beginning). His descent was from a noble family of communal dignitaries. His father was a "daayon" (an associate judge of the religious court), his brother, a Shochet (ritually authorized slaughterer). So all there was still lacking for the completion of

a "Mezoomen" (a trio required for reciting the introductory blessing of grace after a meal) was a cantor. With the advent of Yisrolek'l, the congregational triangle was at last integrated.

In his early youth, he had excelled with the unusual brilliance of his voice, the quality of which was said to have borne a strong resemblance to that of Meyer Pisack, who was the highly valued gem and pride of Nisi Belzer's chorus and later his successor. He served his apprenticeship under such eminent masters as Leyb Shapiro, Itzik'l Shkolnick Kamenitzer, Moshe Kiyevsky (Achler) and Ephroyim Lootzker. Particularly, did the latter make great use of him. Recognizing in his voice a budding, remarkable, natural gift, he gave him solos to sing and the youngster acquitted himself very creditably.

Some time later, he switched over to Zeidel Rovner. His voice by then had developed into a tremendously broad and mighty heroic tenor, one which was a rarity. He was capable of covering up with his tone the whole giant choir together with the orchestra. Zeidel used to beg him to sing only mezzovoce, so that his voice wouldn't drown those of the ensemble.

At his concerts, Zeidel invariably made him take over and sing the solos, which rightfully belonged to and were meant for the cantor. He was overjoyed at seeing the impact Yisroeil Leyb made on the audiences with his performance, although he was not much of a musician. But what did that matter? When he emitted a high note with his full power, the impact was such, that it seemed to the listeners as if lightning and thunder had struck at one and the same time and that the ceiling was about to fall in.

Zeidel had put in much hard work before he had succeeded in getting the raw singer to the stage where he could entrust to him with confidence the task of singing the cantor solos at public appearances. But his perseverance paid off handsomely. Yisroeil Leyb at last mastered the difficult music and knew all the solos by heart. Zeidel could now relax and henceforth take it easy. But, alas, no such luck. Just when he thought he had succeeded and the long awaited results had been attained, he woke up one morning to the realization that he would have to begin all over again. His singing bird had flown the coop. It was quite a predicament. He found to his great dismay that Melitopol had lured Tkatch away from him by an offer to make him the assistant cantor of their congregation.

His defection was a great blow to Zeidel. He missed his soloist very much. Things were not the same without the burly bombastic tenor. He instituted an elaborate search, with the hope of recruiting a suitable replacement, but to find another Tkatch was a big order indeed. None of those who took his place could ever fully compensate Zeidel for his loss.

Tkatch did not tarry long in the provincial city. He felt destined for bigger things and the urgent necessity to improve himself and to broaden his knowledge. He left for Odessa where he consulted with Rozumny. The young man found favor in his eyes and Rozumny took him into the Shalashna syngogue, where he sang in Yakovkin's choir and functioned in addition, in the capacity of assistant cantor, whose duties included leading the services on the Sabbaths when the chief cantor had time off and was

not supposed to officiate or when he was out of town.

His first attempts at filling in for his cantor were clumsy and his ploys and antics in trying to emulate the manner and style of Rozumny were so awkward and downright funny, that many among the congregants found it difficult to suppress their laughter.

But undaunted by his initial strikeouts, Yisroeyl Leyb persevered. He gradually matured, learning from his mistakes. Soon he caught on, employing the suitable trend and eventually he got the hang of the different modes (Nuschuous), with the result, that the scoffers turned into fans.

His voice had from the start greatly impressed everyone and having now in addition acquired the knowledge of how to use his vocal endowments to good advantage in the embellishment of the musical interpretation of the prayers, he was on his way to an eminent stature in the professional fraternity of "chazzanuth." He had learned the ropes and mastered the art and was off to a good start.

Now that he had a competent and capable assistant, in whose charge he could confidently leave his pulpit; Rozumny began to travel extensively and absented himself for long spells, which circumstance gave Tkatch frequent opportunities to substitute for him and get to be a much more experienced practitioner of the cantorial art. He also studied diligently, taking lessons from Cantor Menachem Mendelowitch, who was considered one of the finest educators of cantorial disciples, a very musical man and an artisan of the violin, besides being a great authority on traditional liturgy. Sitting at the feet of this master, he learned a great deal of theory, which he was able to apply in practice, when he had occasion to lead in prayer at the pulpit of the Shalashna Synagogue. He made rapid progress and gradually worked himself up to the point, where he enjoyed a fine reputation, and to draw any kind of attention in a city like Odessa, where the topnotchers of the cantorial fraternity reigned supreme, was not easy to come by.

In style and manner he endeavored to emulate Rozumny and how well he succeeded in this can be gleaned from an episode, which occurred in Sevastopol, the city where he held his first position as full-fledged chief cantor. One time, the members of Tkatch's congregation invited Rozumny for a guest appearance. Listening to the famous visitor, the Jews of Sevastopol were struck by the curious fact, that he sounded just like their own cantor. Later on, they remarked to Tkatch, "Rozumny must have listened to you intently many times. It is remarkable, how well *he* imitates *you.*"

When Rozumny after a short interval in the cantorial post of the large Hekershe Synagogue defected to the Shneidershe Shule and later went back to Odessa, a number of prominent applicants vied for the vacant position. Rabinowitch, a disciple of Kalechnik, the cantor of a regional synagogue in Odessa, was elected.

However he did not last long in the post. After a short stint he accepted a call from Bucharest, Roumania and the large Hecker'she con-

gregation was once again in the market for a cantor.

Applicants came and went. People shook their heads. None of the candidates made the grade. But when Rozumny's former aide blew in from Sevastopol and gave an audition, chanting the Sabbath ritual, the worshipers thought they detected in this aspirant something akin to the characteristic style of the great master, whom they had the privilege of being associated with. It was all over but the shouting "Mazel Tov", the visitor from Sevastopol was unanimously elected and appointed as the new occupant of the cantorial position.

To fill Rozumny's shoes was no small order for Tkatch, but he managed in no time at all to ingratiate himself into the good graces of the Bessarabian Jews and to carve out for himself a niche of high regard and warm appreciation in their hearts.

He became well known in Jewish musical circles as a rising new star, who showed great promise. His great assets, his mighty extraordinary voice, and the warm, temperamental, tradition-true and brilliantly artistic manner of chanting the prayers did not fail to impress deeply the laymen, as well as the liturgical experts, and he was on his way to fame and glory.

On the 30th of April 1905, one of the most outstanding and stalwart pillars of the cantorial world was torn away. Jacob Bachman, who had reigned for many years in Budapest as the unmatched master in his field, passed away. The lamentable news caused deep mourning throughout the world, but it also triggered great commotion, deep interest and lively activity and jockeying in cantorial circles. It was the dream of every cantor of any consequence to be chosen, as the successor to the departed giant of the holy profession.

The race was on. The applications poured in. The first one to try his luck at the pulpit of the Rombach Temple was Yossele Rosenblatt. He struck out and so did Zavel Kwartin and all the others. The auditions went on for months without results. The contestants had their work cut out for them. The people could not forget Bachman, and no matter who showed up and pretended to possess the ability to replace him, he was found wanting and unceremoniously eliminated. Time was running out. Here it was already the end of the month Av. There seemed to be no prospect that the congregation would be able to choose a satisfactory cantor for the fast approaching High Holy days.

Suddenly, like a Lochinvar from the east, a tall young man blew into town at a pace to outrun all the other contestants, sweeping away everything before him. He came, saw and conquered, rocking Budapest back on its heels. All auditions that had been scheduled for subsequent Sabbaths were forthwith cancelled. On Saturday night, immediately following his trial service, Tkatch was unanimously elected and with the signed contract in his pocket, he was off for Kishinev to fetch his family.

He was supposed to return to Budapest in a short while. But weeks went by, and not only was there no sign of the new cantor, but there was not even as much as a letter from him. What happened? Nobody had any idea. They sent telegrams, but there was no response whatever, as if the

cantor had disappeared and vanished into thin air without a trace and "Rosh Hashono" (the Jewish New Year) was around the corner.

How distraught the leaders of the congregation became under such circumstances can be easily imagined. They managed somehow to get through the festivals with the device of reshuffling and temporarily transferring regional cantors for duty to the central temples and recruiting substitutes to take their places at their regular posts for the duration of the emergency.

As soon as the holiest day of the year, "Yom Kippur" was over, the central office of the neologe (progressive) Jewish religious community of Ship Utca 12 issued a public announcement to the effect, that the cantorial position at the Rombach temple was open and applications from candidates, who feel qualified, are solicited. That a lot of eminent cantors from far and near took advantage of the fresh opportunity to enter the contest goes without saying. A new flurry of letters was the result.

Suddenly, not long after the conclusion of the "Succoth" holidays, the long lost cantor showed up and as if nothing untoward had happened in the interim, he announced that he was ready to take over his post. When the surprised trustees demanded an explanation of his puzzling actions, of having left the congregation in the lurch and for the very season, when his services were needed the most, he told a tale of woe and danger, which sounded like fiction.

His story was that just at the time when he arrived back home, there broke out in Kishinev another pogrom (the first occurred in 1903) and in an effort to elude the threatening danger to their lives at the bloody hands of the wild bands of hooligans that lurked in the streets, he and his family fled into a cellar, where they lay hidden during the entire time. It was impossible for them to leave the city, as it was considered unsafe and very risky to emerge from their hiding place. But finally, they succeeded in escaping and here they were. He was taken aback and greatly shaken, when it was made clear to him that his contract had been cancelled, because he failed to comply with its provisions.

Whether or not they gave credence to the excuse advanced by the cantor in support of his claim, that he was not at fault and that it was, therefore, unfair to penalize him for a delay caused by circumstances beyond his power to control, the leaders of the community were not unmindful of the undeniable fact, that Tkatch was after all the unanimous choice of the membership. In spite of all the disappointments, embarrassments and troubles, which his failure to show up in time, whether enforced or voluntary, had caused them, they still were inclined to explore ways and means whereby it would be possible, consistent with congregational dignity, honor and protocol to reinstate him.

But there was the stumbling block of the published "concurs" (advertisement), calling on cantors to apply for the position, which was declared anew as being vacant. A number of responses had already been received and more were expected. The congregation could not possibly backtrack and deny the entries their chance to be considered for the much-coveted

post. After considering the problem from all angles, it was decided that the already scheduled auditions must be allowed to go on as planned. The only concession that could be granted the prodigal son was to allow him to register anew as an applicant. Then he would have to wait for his turn, when he would be afforded another chance to give an audition, take up the challenge on an equal footing and compete all over again with all the other contenders. Having no alternative, the deposed cantor took up residence in a hotel and waited patiently for the Sabbath, when he would at last gain access once more to the pulpit of the Rombach Temple.

There was a long list of candidates before the scrutinizing eyes of the public and vying with each other for their favor. The last one to officiate was Zavel Kwartin, who at that time held down a prominent position in Vienna. Now it was time for the Kishinev entry to try his luck again. The interest of the public and their curiosity were at a red hot pitch. Would the formerly elected cantor be able to turn the trick again? This question was on the lips of all the people. The giant sanctuary was an endless mass of humanity. People were packed in like herrings in a barrel, risking life and limb so as not to miss the big event. Joseph Tink of Hartford, Conn., who recalls having stood there breathless, pushed around and dragged from and to all sides and in imminent danger of being trampled to death, said that as long as he'll live he could never forget Tkatch's service on that memorable Sabbath.

It would seem that even the mere thought that he could possibly fail was unthinkable to Tkatch. For he mobilized every trick in his arsenal of talent and ability in a determined effort to overwhelm his audience to crush the competition and gain his end. The stunned public listened with open mouths to the thunderous bombs, that came in a steady stream from the officiating cantor's lips and threatened to shatter all the windowpanes, and to the exhilarating and deeply moving style of prayer interpretation, the like of which could rarely be heard in those regions of central Europe. It was a revelation, which not only confirmed the favorable opinion the people of the Hungarian capital had formed about this Bessarabian import in the first instance, but it tended to reinforce it even more strongly.

As a result of his decisive showing, he was for the second time unanimously elected, but this time with the proviso, that he would have to begin the performing of his duties at once. No leaving town for him, no taking any more chances of his getting lost again, with the "valachs" perhaps getting the notion of putting on a repeat performance of Jew-baiting and driving him underground again.

Tkatch became very popular in his new environment. His admirers used to gather in groups around the exit, after the conclusion of the religious services, waiting like teen-agers for a matinee idol, for the cantor to emerge, so that they could catch a glimpse of him and give him an ovation. But not satisfied with that, they used to trail him and accompany him all the way to his residence.

So it went week after week, with his entourage getting larger as time went by. Such concrete demonstrations of devotion and faithful admira-

tion were very flattering and complimentary indeed and Tkatch, being only human, naturally relished it. He felt highly honored by so much attention and was very appreciative and grateful to his stalwart, undaunted followers, who clung to him with such consistency. But even of cake, caviar and the best champagne, one can take only so much and no more. What in the initial stages had been a pleasurable experience, an exciting adventure, in time paled, lost its sheen and became a burden and an annoyance.

On a certain festival, an unusually large crowd had gathered in the narrow Rombach Street. No sooner did Tkatch appear, than the whole mob surrounded him, intent on walking him home. Clinging to him, in the familiar manner of Chassidim to their idolized wonder rabbi, they kept singing his praises and extolling his virtues. The further they trudged, the larger the procession grew. The marching column drew unusual attention from passerbys, who stopped in their tracks, gazing at the long line of Jews, decked out in their Sunday best and wondering what it was all about.

Tkatch, glancing back at the marching multitude and realizing that this has already gone too far and that all eyes of the critical gentiles were on him, began feeling quite uncomfortable and embarrassed. As they crossed the broad Andrashy Boulevard, he turned and with a sudden move ran into the jewelry store of a friend of his, leaving his marching companions to fend for themselves. There he remained, holed up until they had dispersed and only when he was assured that the coast was clear, did he emerge and walk home.

The above-mentioned Mr. Fink also relates, that when the Jewish community of London, England, erected a new synagogue, Tkatch and Sirota were invited to the dedication ceremony of the holy edivice. Each of them was also scheduled to lead a Sabbath devotion in the new sanctuary. Tkatch sent his choir master Gottschall to the British capital in advance of the affair to rehearse with the choir the compositions to be rendered, when he would arrive.

The talk in Budapest after that guest appearance of their cantor in London was to the effect, that Tkatch made mincemeat out of Sirota and was the rage of the British Jews. How authentic this rumor, that went the rounds of the Hungarian capital was, is hard to say, but I would imagine and be willing to bet, that in Warsaw people were saying just the exact opposite. Neither they nor their Hungarian co-religionist were present. They were only repeating hearsay evidence, perhaps slanted for home consumption and for the accuracy of which nobody can vouch.

One of the reasons for the great popularity of Tkatch and for the outpouring of such sincere devotion, respect and appreciation on the part of the congregants toward their beloved cantor was his characteristic habit of always being on his toes and invariably trying and doing his very best. He was neither lazy nor stingy; he reveled in his role of dispenser of joy and pleasure in song to his people. He loved to chant and to spread thereby sunshine and relished to observe the glow in the grateful eyes of the pray-

ing devout. It gave him great satisfaction and happiness, when he was able to gladden their hearts with his God-given gift, from which he always was ready to give with a generous hand. He thought that his faithful buffs deserved the best.

For the worshipers of the Rombach Synagogue this was a novel experience. They had been on a starvation diet for too long. In the last years of his life, Bachman seldom used to give much of anything at his services. Only once in a while, when he happened to be in a particularly good mood, did he do his best. It was not for want of capability or for any dimunition of his power due to advancing age, for his voice possessed the self-same might and power and shone with the exact identical shen and brillince, which it always had, down to the very end.

People used to trudge from the farthest corners of the metropolis to the Rombach Temple. Neither rain nor sleet could keep them away. Ignoring thunder, lightning, snowstorm and frost, they kept on swarming in droves each and every Sabbath on the slight chance and hope, that perhaps this was their lucky day, that maybe on that occasion Bachman would delivery. But in most instances, this turned out to have been a delusion, a forlorn hope. The idol of the music lovers as usual, made short shrift of the service, and even when he did chnt something it was a drop in the bucket, just a short interlude, like when the sun emerges from under the clouds for an instant bathing the world in a sudden burst of sunrays and soon afterward disappears again under an impenetrable veil of clouds.

Still his admirers did not get tired of hoping, waiting and keeping up a watchful vigil. They would not think of missing a devotional session presided over by the great master. For if and when he felt like it and chanced to deign to reward his patient listeners with the full power and rich glow of his unmatched talent and the employment of the igniting and at the same time healing, sparkling fire of his peerless temperament chanting of a number of prayers, as only he could, it compensated his devoted followers for all the weeks of disappointed waiting.

When one of his bolder admirers put it to him bluntly, taking him to task for his puzzling unfair habit of running through the services like an amateur, without bothering to show anything of the mettle, with which he was so richly endowed, he angrily retorted, "Let Lazarus work, let him show his wonders and dazzle the worshipers with his shining talents. He gets more money than I."

He was peeved. It was galling for him and it aggravated him, that his colleague, the chief cantor of the conservative Dohany Street Temple, who could not approach his greatness even with a ten-foot pole, neither in voice nor in artistry, who was an old, undistinguished warhorse with a long tenure in office, received a larger paycheck than he, solely on the basis of seniority.

What rankled even more was that Adolph Lazarus also stood higher than he in rank. In the "Tabak Temple," where this senior chief cantor officiated with organ accompaniment and mixed choir, the ritual was set in a stationary pattern. No exposition of intricate musical bravura, no flight of

phantasy, no artistic interpretation of the texts, no presentation of liturgical mastery in the Russian-Polish style, was required or even allowed in that house of worship. The congregants of the main temple of the "cultus gemeinde" (religious cult) community consisted mainly of the more liberal minded, progressive type, upper layer of the Hungarian Jewish society. They preferred the German style, the Zultzer-Lewandovsky line of devotional music. Lazarus himself, in fact, had his roots in Germany where he had served as the Cantor of Hamburg, before coming to Budapest.

The Rombach Synagogue was an entirely different world. It belonged to the same religious association, which was considered to be the left neologe wing of the Jewish community of Budapest, but it was maintained mainly for the more religious minded and observant members. The orthodox strictly pious Jews prayed at the Kazintzy synagogue, where Hartman was the cantor. In sharp contrast to that of their brethren of the "Dohany Templom," their taste ran in the opposite direction. Many of them originated from or descended from parents, who came from Eastern European countries. They relished the "Skorbove gefeehl" chazzonuth, the somber, feelingful, minor-key, oriental style of cantorial chanting. But from the penurious, close-mouthed Bachman, they never got enough of it to satisfy their appetite.

With the advent of the new occupant of the cantorial chair, an era of blissful affluence had dawned for the stalwart music lovers. In sharp contrast to the indifferent attitude of his predecessor toward the wishes of the worshipers, Tkatch was very responsive to public demand, always eager to oblige and anxious to satisfy to the best of his ability. His every religious service was a veritable sacred concert, at the conclusion of which the listeners came out gloriously happy, dazzled and dazed by the thunderous assaults on their eardrums, but gratified and enthused, highly appreciative of the generous treat of their beloved favorite chants and shaking their heads and murmuring in grateful wonderment and admiration "ay-yay-yay, psh-psh-psh," the meaning of which was perfectly clear to all Jews.

The Rombach Temple was a huge edifice and one had to possess a big voice to make himself heard in its spacious sanctuary. Yossele Rosenblatt laid an egg, and for the sole reason, that he was not able to fill the synagogue with the sound of his voice and neither could the other candidates who gave auditions. After Bachman with the lionine voice, their "fortissimos" sounded like feeble squeaks. Yossele's main asset, his falsetto, was a total loss in the vast space.

Tkatch was the ideal choice primarily thanks to his broad mighty, unusually voluminous voice, which had a tremendous impact on the eardrums of even the most distantly seated listeners.

Since rabbis do not as a rule possess particularly powerful lungs, producing clarion sounds, the pulpit from which the spiritual leaders delivered their sermons was not as is the case in most synagogues located on the ground floor of the Rombach Temple, but was suspended high above the heads of the worshipers and to get up to that elevated platform the

rabbi, Dr. Fisher had to negotiate the dozen steps of the spiraling iron staircase. From there he could be better seen and his sermon delivered in Hungarian better heard.

For seventeen years, Tkatch served his community with competence and faithful diligence. He was held in great esteem. He was respected, honored and cherished, not only for the great merits, which he earned by his professional activities, but also for his warm, attractive and charming personality. Far from being a snob, he was easily accessible and radiated friendliness and consideration toward his fellowmen.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered, well-built man with an imposing figure. He was at all times well-groomed, elegantly dressed according to the latest mode, a veritable "Beau Brummel," a fashion plate.

In the course of the years which he spent in Budapest, he became pret-tythoroughly acclimated to the environment, into which he had been transplanted. At first the atmosphere was strangely alien, unfamiliar and confusing to a newcomer, who arrived with the set, ingrained habits acquired in the lands of the East. He readily changed over in all aspects of his mode of living, and adopted the typical, traditional "Magyar" customs, even to the peculiar treatment of applying a generous dose of perfumed pomade to the thick mustache, waxing and winding it upward into a spiral so that it would culminate in a pointed tip, and form the letter W. He also aquired the habit of wearing a monocle and he often could be seen standing on the corner of the fashionable Andrashy Boulevard armed with his monocle in one eyehole while watching the people passing by, with special emphasis on and attention to the attractive Hungarian women, who used to take their daily strolls on the "corso" (promenade). He was a conoisseur of female pulchritude.

Zavel Kwartin, as we mentioned before, was also one of the unsuccessful contestants for the cantorial post at the Rombach Temple. However, not long after that attempt of his failed, he did after all manage to acquire a place for himself in the Hungarian metropolis.

When a vacancy occurred in the Dohany Street Central Temple, the editor of the Hungarian Jewish weekly "Egyenloesheyg" (Equality), Szabolcsi Miksha, who heard Kwartin in Vienna and was deeply impressed with his qualifications, initiated in his paper a strong campaign on behalf of his candidacy, with the result that he was appointed an associate cantor of the conservative temple, where he alternated with Lazarus in leading the services. He was naturally obliged to tone down the predominantly Russian type, fervent style of praying to which he had been accustomed and to conform to the guidelines set for the ritual by his senior colleague, who was firmly committed to a way of recitation, without any uncalled for embellishments.

In 1920, Kwartin left for America, where there was a great resurgence of interest in the cantorial art and where, the way rumors had it, the famous figures of the craft were supposed to be coining money and picking up gold by the barrels.

When reports of Kwartin's great success and of Yossele Rosenblatt's

exalted position in the New World reached the ears of Tkatch, he became envious. Could he let his colleagues reap all that glory and gather in all the treasures and he should be content to stay put and let the parade pass him by?

Remembering how easily he once defeated both of them, he could not bear the thought of being left out of the running and staying on the side lines. He too longed to be in the thick of competition, which was so exciting. He was confident that not only could he hold his own, but that he would be able to play a big role in the cantorial sweepstakes. So following the example set by Kwartin, he also asked for a six months' leave of absence and just as Kwartin did not, he most likely did not either intend to return, hoping also to be prevailed upon by the Americans to remain in the golden land. His request was granted and he left for America in the spring of 1922.

But Tkatch was in for a disappointment. The Jews of America did not receive him with the kind of reception he had dreamed of. His debut had not been prepared with the elaborate care and publicity campaign which had preceded that of Kwartin. In addition, the latter had the great advantage, that even before he arrived in America, his gramaphone records, which had had an enormous circulation there, had paved the way for him.

Tkatch, on the other hand, was little known and did not have the right manager. Not much of drumbeating, as had been the case with Kwartin, had preceded his arrival. There was also the undeniable fact, that by that time his voice, which had always been his dominant asset, had lost a great deal of its former sheen and resonance. He had become more of a baritone and frequently he sang somewhat flat, with the result that he was not a big success in America.

He made his debut in the Roumanian Synagogue on Rivington Street in downtown New York, followed by a guest appearance in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. He also appeared at a concert in Cooper Union together with Mordechay Hershman on March 22nd, 1922.

The response of the audiences was not overly enthusiastic. Their verdict was "Ess failt eehm di rozsinke" (the raisin is lacking in him), meaning that he did not have the real McCoy, the "rozsinke", anything special, unusual in his singing, the sweetness was missing.

But even though his success in America was rather lukewarm, Budapest waited in vain for his return for the oncoming High Holy days. Instead he accepted a call from Canada and officiated on the holy festivals of 1922 at services arranged at the Mount Royal Arena of Montreal, where Caruso and other world famous luminaries of the musical world used to make guest appearances. Arriving at last at the conclusion, that America does not hold great promise for him, he decided to try Canada, where he might be able to play the leading role, among the lesser lights. He settled down in Montreal, where he occupied the cantorial "Omud" at the synagogue of the "Beth Yehudah" congregation of Duluth and Kedzie. For three years he remained at that post, in the meantime making frequent excursions to other cities.

For a while he tarried in Canada, alternating between Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Halifax. But his real target still was New York, the center of cantorial activities, so he came back time and again, making fresh attempts at winning over the public, but it remained rather cold and indifferent to his courting. Real, genuine, decisive success, which he had so confidently expected, eluded him.

Seeing his cherished hopes fading and coming around at last to the inevitable realization that the chances of his making great fortunes in America were not very bright, he concluded that he would be better off in the Old World, so he decided to pull up stakes and return to Budapest.

Once again, just like twenty years ago, the lost sheep unexpectedly turned up, claiming to have been innocently hijacked and led astray and being happy at finally succeeding in finding his way back to the bosom of the shepherd. The scheming Americans had kidnapped him and would not let him go, but he had finally managed to free himself from the bonds that held him on that foreign continent against his will. He was happy to be back and ready to assume again his duties. But the same strategy, be it even the most clever masterstroke, is hardly likely to work as well and be equally effective the second time around. Far from greeting the returning prodigal son with open arms, his former bosses gave him the devil. His excuses this time fell on deaf ears and were taken with several grains of salt, at least by the people who had the say. They were determined not to forgive him for his failure to return at the expiration of the leave of absence that had been granted him.

After his disappointments in America, this new adverse development which had the effect of pulling the ground from under his feet, was the crowning severe blow to Tkatch. To have to sit with arms folded confined to inactivity without a pulpit to his name, was a new, unfamiliar and painful experience for him. But give up he did not, and neither did his numerous friends. They launched a powerful campaign on behalf of the cantor, who still was very popular with the general public, which was in favor of letting bygones be bygones. His staunch supporters went to work gathering signatures of members, urging the reinstatement of the people's favorite. They sought interviews and confrontations with the hierarchy of the religious association. They enlisted the cooperation of the Jewish press and appealed to the rabbinical authorities to lend the weight of their influence to the cause, to the furthering of which they had dedicated themselves.

Their concerted effort bore fruit. Tkatch was at long last reinstated and he regained possession of his former status. But he was penalized all the same in one respect. He was considered a newly appointed cantor of the congregation. His past services were disregarded and forgotten. This attitude, taken by the powers to be, had the effect of depriving him of the pension rights, which would have been his on the basis of his long tenure in office.

Even so, under the circumstances, he did not fare too badly after all. He got a pretty good deal and had good reason to be gratified with the

outcome. His declining years were uneventful, lacking in exciting adventures which he cherished so much and no doubt did miss. But it was some compensation to feel that no more sudden, humiliating disappointments were in store for him.

The days of Tkatch's sunset flowed quietly at a peaceful pace, without any worries, in the service of his community, where he enjoyed generally high esteem and regard to the end, which came to the famous cantor at the age of 72 in January of 1945.

He left behind one record on Premier label containing the selections "Adoshem Adoshem" and "Av Horachamim." Oddly enough, the cover shows a barefooted farmgirl playing a violin; hardly an appropriate symbol for chants of the synagogue.

Tkatch used to come on Sundays to the "Mincha and Maariv" (evening) religious devotion of the "Chevrah Thilim" association, which was located at the corner of Rombach and Kiraly Streets on the second floor.

The frequenters and members of that group were recruited from among the more observant pious Jews of Budapest. And not only would he visit his small house of prayer, but he would occasionally also lead in the services.

Zavel Kwartin was another of the great cantors of the city, who used to drop in and not let himself be coaxed too much before he would step up to the "Omud," and chant the ritual. Both of them, as they themselves confessed, enjoyed this extracurricular performance even more, than their grateful audience. Especially did Kwartin relish the opportunity, which this informal praying session, before a particularly observant, in-tradition steeped group afforded him to air out his "Skorbove" virtuoso-style cantorial interpretation, which was taboo in his temple of the Dohany Utca and had lain dormant in his heart ever since he was obliged to adapt the modern simplified recitation of the prayers, that was in vogue in the position, which he occupied in Vienna, St. Petersburg and Budapest.

After their exertion they usually found that they had developed a good appetite and they almost never failed to satisfy their craving for a delicious meal by stepping into the foremost kosher food dispensing establishment of Budapest, the "Stern Restaurant" which was located on the ground floor, beneath the "Chevrah Thilim Beth Hamedrosh.

That they both were fond of the old fashioned, time-tested liturgical art is attested to by the fact, that whenever guest cantors of the old school came to town for a professional appearance, they invariably made every effort to free themselves of their duties, so that they would be able to also go and listen to the religious service of the visiting celebrity.

In contrast to Kwartin, who was more formal and of a rather reserved nature, Tkatch was a warm person, who wore his heart on his sleeve. On one occasion some little known cantor from Poland came to Budapest and was scheduled to lead in the Sabbath ritual in the house of worship that was located on Teleki Teyr. As it turned out, he happened to be a very gifted, excellent "Chazzan" and Tkatch was so moved by his rendition, that he ran over to the visiting colleague, embracing and kissing him in

front of all the worshipers. He was always lavish in his praise of talented colleagues.

When Tkatch, after his disillusioning experiences with America, left for his return trip to Budapest, he carried on his body in cash the saved-up money of the years which he spent in the U.S. and Canada.

However, in addition to all his troubles and to the frosty reception which awaited him, he discovered on arrival at his destination, that his whole accumulated fortune, which he had to show for his years in the golden land had been stolen from him en route. No wonder therefore, that whenever the "Medinah of Columbus" was henceforth mentioned in his presence, he visibly squirmed, as if he had been bitten by a snake. It was a chapter of his life which he preferred to forget all about.

From Cantor Miklohsh Klein, who languished together with Tkatch in the ghetto of Budapest under the Nazi occupation I learned, that Tkatch wasted away and literally died from hunger just before the Allied troops recaptured the Hungarian capital and liberated the starved, incarcerated Jews. The German hordes were driven out of Budapest on January 18, 1945, one day too late to save the life of Tkatch, who passed away on January 17th. What a pity that his emaciated body was unable to hold out a little while longer when rescue was so near at hand. What a tragic finis to the life of such a noble soul!

CHAPTER 32

CHAYIM CYPRISS

Chayim Cypriss, the last of the great cantors of Kishinev — His brilliant short career and his tragic end.

Having thus disposed for better or worse, of our "Choson Bereyshis", it behooves us to follow up, if we are to be consistent and emulate the custom of the synagogue on "Simchas Torah," with the "Choson Maftir" (the bridegroom of the conclusion).

Our candidate for this honor, with which we intend to bring to a close the Kishinev section of our series, is of necessity the last famous cantor of the Bessarabian capital, Chayim Cypriss, although there is very little to rejoice about his life story, which does not fit in very well with the spirit of the most joyous festival of the Jewish calendar and certainly has not much in common with the happy state of mind of a bridegroom. There was no happy ending to his life. If anything, he was a "Choson Domim," a bridegroom of blood and tears, of suffering and misfortune, which followed him around like a shadow and finally felled him in the prime of his life.

Cypriss, a native of Kishinev, was the possessor of a wonderful tenor voice and endowed with great musical talent, which under normal circumstances would have undoubtedly propelled him to the front ranks of his sacred calling. He was the soloist in Rozumny's choir, when the great master resided in Kishinev. The adroit aperformance of the young prodigy drew warm praise not only from the appreciative audience but also from the famous cantor himself, who foresaw a very promising future for the little fellow.

He also sang in the chorus of Kalechnik. Later, when his voice changed

he sang as tenor in the choir of the renowned Kalarash'er chazzon: Kalman Zaslavsky, who was a very erudite and pious man. He was also a noted composer and an expert in training and conducting ensembles a la Nisi Belzer. The Kalarasher was the cantor of the Tailor's synagogue of Kishinev. Chayim excelled particularly with his mesmerizing high notes.

Little he remained even as an adult in physical stature, small, almost like a midget, but his brilliant, helden, heroic tenor voice soared in majestic splendor to heights rarely reached by the greatest singers. To sing a high D with ridiculous ease was for him something to be taken in his stride. As he was a confirmed disciple and admirer of Rozumny and Kalechnick, he followed in style the paths treaded by these two greats in liturgical art.

One of the sure-fire koniok's (hit) was his imitation of Rozumny's "Yehey Raavoh". He was in a sense, the Roumanian equivalent of our American Yossele Shlisky with a more voluminous voice.

His great ambition was to gain the pulpit of the great central synagogue of Wilna and he would have surely achieved his coveted goal were it not for the fact, that in an accident he lost one of his eyes, which afterward had been replaced by an artificial glass eye. He had two strikes against him. For there was a rule of long standing in the statutes of the Wilna community that no "Baal-mum," (an individual with a physical defect), may be appointed to the hallowed altar of the historic holy edifice.

His star began to shine and he was appointed to the chief cantorial post of Krakow, Galicia, while he was still wet behind the ears.

However talent will out and soon his fame reached as far as Germany and when a vacancy occurred in Leipzig, a call went out to the tiny Chayim'l to come and demonstrate that "precious things come in small packages" and he did most convincingly.

So in July of 1927, having been offered more advantageous conditions than he got in Krakow, he accepts the cantorial post at the hand of the Leipzig community. However something repeatedly pulls him back to Kishinev and when Kilemnick leaves the modern "Choralna" synagogue, he takes up, where Kilemnick left off.

When during World War I, the city was occupied by the German army, he fled to Bucharest, where he occupied the cantorial position at the Mamoolar Street Synagogue of the Roumanian capital.

His place in the Choir Synagogue at Pushinskaya Street was taken over by Yaakov Rivliss, who originally was brought up in an assimilationist atmosphere. His parents were acclimatized, russianized Jews, and Yaakov, far from having any thought of embarking on a musical, much less a Jewish liturgical career, enrolled in a college and graduated as a lawyer.

Later however, he changed course. It seems that the "Pintele Yid", his Jewish conscience woke up in his heart and he became a disciple of "Yoyne the Lomer," (the lame) who was the cantor of the Shoemakers Synagogue of Ilinska Street and a great expert in teaching fledging can-

torial aspirants. He made such rapid progress under the tutoring of Yoyne Dinowitzer, that he won the plum of the prestigious cantorial post, that had just been vacated by Cypriss. Later he became the chief cantor of London, England, where he occupied the post at the Duke's Place Synagogue.

When the fortunes of the battle turned and the Bolsheviks succeeded in recapturing Kishinev, Cypriss came back, together with all the other Jewish refugees from exile, where they had undergone untold suffering. The regime of the Bolshevik overlords was far from benevolent, but still tolerable.

This time there was a vacancy at the large Hecker'sher Synagogue of Maylavska Ulitza and his numerous fans, happy to see him back in their midst, received him with open arms and he was installed with great fanfare into the cantorial post of the synagogue where once reigned the great Rozumny.

But not long after that, the German hordes, aided and abetted by the Roumanian hooligans, rallied, driving out the Russians and bursting into the Bessarabian city with murder in their eyes. The convenient targets of their bestial rage naturally were the Jews, from whom they took bloody revenge for allegedly having shown sympathy and sided with the rule of the Russians. Only a very few managed to escape their hellish terror. To the great loss of the cantorial world, Cypriss was not among the lucky ones.

The first scapegoats were, as is always the case with the nazis, the religious dignitaries. Chayim Cypriss, even though by that time he was not any longer connected with the great Hecker'sher Synagogue, but had taken a civilian desk-job in the "Kehillah," where he thought to be inconspicuous and safer, still remained high on the blacklist of the German invaders.

So was Zsoriny, Meyer Kalechniest, the last cantor of the large Hecker'sher Synagogue, formerly cantor of Galatz, a phenomenal baritone with a remarkable range up to a high "C", who was a graduate of the Kishinev conservatory of music, but was unable to get admitted to the opera company, solely because of his being a Jew. Having no alternative, he decided to become a cantor, and after having completed a crash course in liturgical subjects under the tutelage and direction of Aaron Dinowitzer, he was elected to the post, as the successor to Cypriss.

Both Chayim and his colleague were taken out and shot to death in the street by the bestial murderers, and this was only the inauguration of a mass expurgation of Jews in a bloodbath of unprecedented savagery.

It is idle to speculate how far he could have gone, had not a cruel fate overtaken him in his very bloom and caused us to finish the so auspiciously begun Kishinev section, contrary to every inclination of ours, in such a sad, minor key.

CHAPTER 33

WILNA, THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS JEWISH CENTRE AND THE MECCA OF CANTORS.

After having visited and gotten to a certain extent acquainted with the great important cantorial centres of Russia and Bessarabia, beginning with Berditchev, following up with Odessa and having just left Kishinev, let us now undertake an excursion into Lithuania.

Lithuania is almost synonymous with Wilna, its one-time capital and the pride of Lithuania and of all Jewry. This may seem to be a "guzmah", an exaggerated statement, but actually it is not too farfetched. For if there was one city, that enjoyed the highest esteem and a preeminent status in practically every aspect of Jewish culture, it was undoubtedly Wilna, allegedly founded by Prince Gedimin (1316-1341).

It was during the reign of this liberal-minded and tolerant ruler that Jews settled in Lithuania and particularly in Wilna.

The number of these immigrants grew in the following decades and in addition to Wilna the newcomers took up also residence mainly in Brest Litovsk, Grodno and Trok, the principal cities of the country.

Gedimin's successors continued his benevolent open door policy, which fact enabled the Jews to establish themselves in their new environment.

Especially did his grandson Vitald (1386-1430) recognizing the beneficial contribution of the Jewish inhabitants to the welfare of the population, befriend them, make them feel at home and welcome. He granted them privileges similar to those that Duke Boleslav of Kalish had given to the Jews of Poland.

This state of affairs of amiable, harmonious coexistence between Jews and gentiles did however not last long. The attitude of the authorities toward the Jewish communities grew more and more hostile, culminating in the issuance in 1495 of a decree by the Grand Duke Alexander Yagelontchik, ordering the expulsion of all Jews from his realm.

For ten years their banishment remained in force and it was not until April of 1505, that it was lifted.

That Wilna was a great, and perhaps the greatest center of "Torah" and "Haskalah" (enlightenment) has long been known and generally recognized by Jews everywhere. Not for nothing was the she referred to by people of all shades of conviction as "Yerusholayim D'Litteh," the Jerusalem of Lithuania.

It earned that distinction thanks to the happy coincidence, that in its midst happened to have concentrated throughout the eras of its existence the most creative minds, the most gifted artists and the most brilliant personalities of the Jewish people. It was their fruitful activities in the various fields of endeavor that was instrumental in propelling Wilna to the forefront, elevating its standard and holding it up as the shining symbol of exemplary achievements, the repository of great spiritual values.

Wilna or Vilnius boasted of the largest Jewish population of the Commonwealth. In 1878 there were 41,000 Jews residing in Wilna, about half of its total population. At that time in Jerusalem only 13,000 Jews were living as against 15,000 Moslems and 8,000 Christians.

But if Torah was their main concern, "Avodah" (service) which means "Tefillah" (prayer) was also an important matter and a highly regarded activity in this age-old city. In addition to being a world-famous seat of learning, Wilna represented also a great center of "Chazzanuth."

There is, to be sure, a prevailing opinion in some musical circles, that "Litteh" (Lithuania) did not bring forth great Cantors. To the "Litvak" people are wont to append adjectives that rightly or wrongly, would tend to bear out their contention, that he lacks the prerequisites for stirring vocal expression, to wit warm feeling, passionate ardor and sensitive, rapturous emotional capacity.

The general public image pictures him as "Ah Gebrutener, Kalter, Pahaner, Trukener Litvak", a cold, dry, calculating, unimpressionable, inanimate creature, who has a good brain, a receptive mind, but no soul, no heart, and public images die hard.

There may be some sound basis, in the view of their detractors, for such an appraisal. For Lithuania is a Baltic country with a cold climate and like all the people of northern lands its inhabitants too, as a rule, would not have the disposition to be very sentimental.

It would however be unfair to generalize, for the facts prove such a view to be untenable and at variance with actual reality. No Lithuanian great Cantors? How about Nisi Belzer, Sirota, Kashtan, Rutman, Chagy to mention but a few names. They were all Litvaks. Need we cite more examples?

Moreover as far as Wilna is concerned, the whole subject may be irre-

levant and inapplicable, since the question of its nationality has always been a bone of contention between Lithuania and Poland, both of which had historical claims to the City.

After Poland regained its sovereignty as the result of the Versailles Treaty, it demanded that Wilna be incorporated into its territory. It was even ready to grab the City by force if necessary.

At one session of the League of Nations in 1920 Marshall Yosif Pilsudsky, the Ruler of Poland, got up from his seat and strode over to where Waldemaras, the President of Lithuania was sitting. All the Delegates present held their breath as the two adversaries confronted each other face to face. It was a dramatic moment, when Pilsudsky, offering his stretched-out hand to Waldemaras, who was caught offguard, posed the question, "War or Peace?" Taken by surprise, Waldemaras hesitated for what seemed an endless minute. But finally accepting the outstretched hand of Pilsudsky, he resignedly muttered, "Peace". And so by that audacious maneuver of its ruler, Poland came into the possession of Wilna in 1920. But in the final analysis, Wilna as of this writing belongs neither to Lithuania nor to Poland, both of these formerly sovereign, independent countries having subsequently been swallowed up by the Big Bad Papa Bear. It is at present languishing under the heel of the Bolshevik regime. What we are trying to bring out is, that even if it were a fact, that "Litteh" did not produce great Chazzanim, it would not necessarily apply to Wilna and that Wilna was a great centre of Chazzanuth, whereto flocked cantors from far and near, is a matter of record, which nobody can deny. So what difference does it make, where their cradles stood?

The greatest Cantors of their time vied for the singular honor and privilege of being chosen as the "Chazan D'moso" (city cantor) of Wilna, notwithstanding the fact that from a financial standpoint the post was not very lucrative.

In the official documents confirming the appointment of the "Wilna Balebeysel," Chayim Lomzer and Yehoshooa'ke Finesinger, the compensation of the cantor is invariably stipulated as four rubles per week, which was to be paid from the treasury of the "Tzedoko Gedola" (great charity), the institution which administered the affairs of the synagogue. An additional fifty kopecks a week was to be paid him by the "Bedek Habayis" (restoration of the building fund). Some seasonal side-income he derived from occasional gifts, which customarily were sent to the cantor on the "Chanukah" and Purim festivals and from "Haskoras Neshomo" (memorial) contributions. Although funds kept flowing to him from all directions, the total income from so many diverse sources still did not amount to a very large fortune, and not even a tiny one.

But after all, money is not everything. They gave him bucketsful of honor. However even that not always, but only in case they discovered in him outstanding sterling qualitites and rare talents. That they knew how to judge voices and estimate accurately cantorial ability, and that they were great experts in evaluating musical and talmudic knowledge, style of presentation, and interpretation, is beyond question and an old established fact.

Peeking some more into this much revealing antique contract, we find the duties of the cantor enumerated in scrupulous detail. Aside from his main duties of conducting the religious services at the pulpit of the great synagogue on certain Sabbaths and the holidays, he had the obligation of attending the daily services, mornings and evenings (a duty which every Jew has). He was in addition expected to join daily the elite circle of scholars a the "Beys Hamedrosh" (house of learning), and to study a "Perek Mishnaayos" (a chapter of the scriptures of the early sages) and a page of "Gemoro" (Talmud) each and every day. Not a mean requirement. To most cantors this was a much harder task than to chant all the services on the long "Day of Atonement." They used to sit through these lectures bored and fidgeting.

Wilna was as deeply concerned about the cantor's private life, as his public functions. They were anxious to make sure, that he conducted himself at all times in a manner befitting his high and sacred post and that he carried out meticulously his religious duties, so as to give no cause for rumors and gossip. As a rule, they were careful to choose a cantor, who was well versed in Jewish religious law and who had a good Hebrew education.

But there were cases, when other considerations predominated and tipped the scale in favor of a candidate, who had little Jewish education. So they saw to it, that in case he was at the time of his arrival in town something less than a "Ben Torah" (Talmudic scholar), he should at least try his best to make up for the deficiency and in time become one. An "Am Hooretz" (ignoramus) Wilna hated and despised as much as a "Chazzir" (a pig).

There were two main synagogues in the city, the "choir synagogue" on Zavalno Street and the great community synagogue on the corner of Jewish and German Streets. In the choir synagogue, the choir was the dominant element and of major importance in the service. The repertoire consisted largely of modern choral compositions like those taken from the works of Zultzer and Lewandowsky.

When it came to choosing a cantor, they did not search the horizon for a hero in shining armor, for a glimmering star with extraordinarily powerful lungs, whose voice would storm the heavens. They wanted a capable, competent professional, who would fit in well with the choir, a cantor with a good musical background who would conduct a well-regulated, quiet, dignified, modern service.

Here the "Emissary of the Community" was no "prima donna" who would just make guest appearances once or twice a month. He was supposed to officiate every Sabbath and the worshipers did not expect of him thunderous outbursts. He did not have to present something new and exciting each time. A fairly stabilized routine was the rule. In this synagogue came to pray scholars, members of the upper strata of society, of the intelligentsia, teachers, professors, doctors, big businessmen and manufacturers. On the other hand, in the community central synagogue it was quite a different story. The worshipers here were "Amcho" (plain common

folk), of the working class, the proletariate, who had little pleasure in life. They came to the synagogue, because it afforded them the only pleasure and enjoyable diversion which was available to them. They came not so much to pray as to listen to the heavenly singing.

In the great synagogue with its capacity of three thousand, actual worshipers, who could be discerned by their being enveloped in prayer shawls, could be counted very easily. If fity, or at the most a hundred did pray, it was a great deal. The rest of the congregants had already said their morning prayers and had even had their breakfast. Now they were ready to be entertained by the cantor and choir. This was their sole enjoyment, their opera and theatre, and if given a choice, they would've much preferred their favorite cantor to any of the other pleasures, which only the rich could afford.

The cantor officiated only once in four weeks on the Sabbath "Mevorchim Hachodesh", when the prayer of the new moon is recited, but on that one occasion he had to give more of his strength and energy, than his colleague of the choir synagogue did on ten Sabbath services. Here the emphasis was on the cantor. He was the "big banana," the main attraction. Assisted by his choir, which played only a minor role, he was expected to give a veritable concert each and every time he ascended the pulpit.

In this synagogue, the election of a new cantor was a long drawn-out process. It was a matter of significant and overriding importance. The moguls used to look, search and choose repeatedly and endlessly. There used to be quarrels, arguments and intrigues galore between the different cliques and parties until finally heaven had pity on them and sent them a contestant, upon whom the experts with so many differing opinions could agree or at least half-heartedly compromise.

In the big synagogue some of the greatest cantors reigned at one time or another, although this position was by no means the ultimate goal for most of them. It only served as a very useful platform, where they had the opportunity of gaining a solid foothold and recognition and to making a name for themselves in the cantorial world with an improved prospect of being noticed and in time getting a good-paying position in another rich big city.

The name "chief cantor of Wilna" was what the Germans call a "Tittel ohne mittel" (a title without substance) but it had a fine important sound, as far as the outside world was concerned. It meant a diploma in the cantorial craft, eminence in the liturgical art and as such it was a very valuable springboard to take off from to greener pastures, even though the Wilna position brought in very little cold cash.

A really good cantor as a rule did not tarry long in Wilna. The facts reveal that except for Hirsh Lowenstein, the father of Wilna Balebeysel, not a single one of the cantors, who graced the pulpit of the great synagogue, died in Wilna or was buried there. In many instances, they did not stay put even long enough to get warmed up in their cantorial chair, when they already proceeded to pack up their valises and take off. No soon-

er did they become well known in the world, than they were lured away by other cities, and the blame for having them wooed away can be laid directly at the feet of the Jews of Wilna themselves.

In case they became enamored of a cantor, they became his best volunteer press agents, beating the drums, sounding the trumpets and proclaiming his greatness and wondrous achievements from the house tops, far and wide, to the world at large, until they became the envy of the other cities, whose appetite was whetted by their boasting. No wonder then, that the much richer communities impressed with the rapidly spreading fame of the new star of Wilna, were eager to acquire him for themselves and not beyond trying to lure him away with much more favorable conditions, than he was getting there, to which temptation the cantor, being only human, willingly succumbed. The sad result for Wilna was, that the cantor whom they had so extolled, left them. This was their reward for the vast propaganda which they made for him.

If the salary was nothing to brag about, the synagogue itself certainly made up for the skimpiness of the pecuniary reward. It was something to behold and admire, outstanding in every respect among all the sanctuaries of Europe. The Jews of Wilna used to say that for the mere privilege of being allowed to officiate in such a synagogue, a cantor ought yet to pay them and many members of the cantorial fraternity would have been only too glad to do just that, if that could enable them to bag the coveted plum, but those they would not even consider under any circumstances. Only the cream of the crop would be considered for their Holy Sanctuary.

The foundation for the Great Synagogue was laid in the year 1562 and the imposing holy edifice was erected in 1563, although Jews had already lived in Wilna long before that, for it is known and confirmed by an official entry in the "Pinkas" (minute record) of the "Chevrah Kadish" that the Jewish cemetery, which was located opposite the Shlossberg (fort-mountain) was founded in the year 1487, about the time when Wilna or Vilnius began to spin and weave the legends of its origin. The burial ground of Shnipeshok, the suburb of Wilna, also dates from the same year. The old cemetery was closed in 1836 and the new one was opened up on Zaretche Street.

The number of Jewish inhabitants however, was small and did only begin to considerably increase, when on the heel of the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, a steady stream of these uprooted wanderers sought a haven of refuge in the Lithuanian city.

The architect and contractor who built the great Synagogue was Shimeon Doctorewitch of Krakow, Galicia, and he accomplished the realization of the monumental task with the help of his partner, Reb Yisroeil, son of the famous Rabbi Reb Sholom Shachne of Lublin, Poland.

Some seventy years after the Synagogue was erected, in 1635, vandals broke into the sanctuary, ransacked the installations, cleaned out the communal treasury and made off with eighteen holy scrolls and their silver crowns, and other holy paraphernalia, some of which were adorned with ornaments of gold, diamonds and other precious stones. In order to pre-

vent the recurrence of such attacks, the magistrate, in accordance with subsequently adapted city regulations, ordered the erection of walls and gates at both sides of the streets, populated by Jews. In this way came into being the Jewish ghetto and originated and evolved the original and unique Wilna synagogue court compound, onto which the crooked and curved small ghetto streets converge radiuslike. The court broadens into a big round square, which takes in and houses besides the larger main synagogue, numerous clusters of small houses of worship and rows of "Botey Medrosh" (houses of study) one adjoining the other and in some instances on top of another in a huge circle. In front of the entrance to the great synagogue stretches a long corridor with a row of columns (colonnades) which ranges right and left through the whole length of the street and serves as a shopping center. It is open on both ends and covered only with a thatched roof on top.

In this narrow corridor, dotted with cleavages, plucky, nimble female hucksters and eager-beaver vendors, busied themselves around their stalls, some of them wedged in narrow crevices of the wall, on which were exhibited, stacked and sorted out heaps of all kinds of pastries, mounds of bagels, rolls and "Chaleh" (festive white twist), batches of vegetables, pots of sour pickles and preserves, baskets-full of apples and all kinds of fruits, hot chick peas and other delicacies. In every nook and cranny of the old wall, someone sold something on a cluttered hole-in-the-wall stand and the customers were accosted, belabored, dragged and lured from all sides. The din and tumult carried on by the shrill voices of the busybodies extolling the virtues and high quality of their wares, was deafening.

Even worse or better, depending on whether you were a seller or buyer, became the situation on the days preceding a Sabbath and especially a holiday. Then the market really was in full swing. Many more of the bargain hunters showed up and the turnover of goods got a considerable boost, but the noise and tumult also grew in corresponding measure. And the salesladies? My oh my, were they yelling! Like fish wives! And did they become exhausted! For weeks after such a hectic day, their husbands were in seventh heaven. The reason? Why, for once they had peace in the house. Their wives had lost their voices from so much hollering.

But let us get away from the distracting, annoying chaos of the flea market and enter the synagogue and its calming tranquility. The first feeling which possesses you is that of awe and reverence. You get the impression, that you stepped into a different world, a secluded spot that is hallowed ground. You are overwhelmed by the grandeur of the four giant limestone columns of the immense edifice's interior which are covered with beautiful frescoes, depicting sacred props and accessories of religious worship and which are supporting the three galleries of the sanctuary. At the entrance, the two giant massive iron gates open up only by turning on wheels. Four people were required for setting the mechanism in motion. The entrance is so wide, that a carriage drawn by four horses would have been able to drive in, clearing it by a comfortable margin.

The most beautiful piece of architectural art of the whole synagogue

beside the mighty stone colonnades, on which the balconies were resting and whose immense height and tremendous circumference filled the observer with awe and was bound to evoke in him great admiration, was the Balemer (pulpit) which in conformity with strict orthodox customs was in the center of the synagogue. It was made of granite and grew out of one solid piece and massive entity as part of the stony walls and columns. Topped was the pulpit by a marble table, which came from the holy land and was sent to the Wilna community as a present from the Jews of Twerye (Tiberias). The interior of the Holy ark was covered with hammered copper plates, on which were engraved wonderful likenesses of a "Hodos" and "Arovo" (stalks with green leaves used in the ritual on Succoth) of an "Esrog" (citrin) and the box in which the Esrog, wrapped in hemp, is reposing, of "Havdolo" candles (used in a ritual, bidding good-bye to the departing Sabbath). There were also pictures of "Kiddush" goblets (used at the ritual of welcoming and blessing the arrival and entrance of the Sabbath or holiday for drinking wine from it) and pictures of other similar sacred accessories and objects, which were used for ritual purposes.

The ceiling of the Synagogue consisted of a row of giant white squares made of plaster. They were arched in a deliberately placed ingenious manner, designed to produce an acoustic and echo of sound, which was the marvel of the world.

The central community Synagogue was a five story edifice, even though from outside it did not loom nearly as high. The reason for the deceiving impression one got from the street level was, that upon entering one had to walk down a flight of stairs to get to the floor of the Synagogue proper.

Above ground it looked like a three story building. The reason for having planned and erected it in that way, was most likely so as to comply with the rule, that no building and particularly no Jewish house of Worship may rise nearly as high as the "Kashtchiol," the Pravoslavno Church.

The men worshipers could not see the women on the gallery. Their view was blocked by the brick walls and iron bars that rose up to the "weiber" (women's) Schule as effective partitions. In these partitions there were a considerable number of small windows, which however were covered with little curtains.

Still and all any female, who had a desire to observe her man at devotion time was able to do so by peeking through a window, if she could spot him among the immense crowd. It was an ideal situation. She could watch him, but he could not watch her. Score one for the ladies.

Around the "Bimah" (Estrada) there towered four pillars of striped marble. These huge columns rising at the corners seemed to bend toward each other, thus forming an arching, shielding semi-circle over the "Omud", in front of which was suspended an artistically designed "Harp of David."

And over the broad cement steps, that were leading up to the Holy Ark, where reposed the "Sifrey Torah" (the parchment Scrolls) and in front of which would stand the "Kohanim" (priests, descendants of the

Tribe of Leyvy) when blessing the congregation, hung overhead a plaque, on the face of which was engraved the biblical quote: "And I will bestow my name upon the children of Israel and bless them."

From the Western wall in the rear of the sanctuary was prominently protruding the large "Shkioh" clock, designed to inform the worshipers of the time of the onset of Sundown.

Only about half of the space of the Synagogue was furnished with rows of pews and these were quickly occupied by the early birds who, to make sure that they could get a seat, were on hand and already standing in line when the doors were swung open, while the Johnny's come lately had to be content wth crowding into the bare, vast section of the sacred edifice, where there was standing room only, and quite often not even that was available.

On the walls of the outer Vestibule (Polish) there were hanging Tzedokoh "Pushkes" (boxes) for all kinds of charity institutions: For the poor sick, for the old folks home, for the "Masmidim" (diligent talmudic scholars) and for "Meir Baal Haness" and when people came in for a prayer session, they would drop in coins and sometimes even stuff banknotes into the slit of the "Pushke". His good deed for the day done, the worshiper felt more justified to address his Father in heaven and more entitled to a sympathetic consideration of his requests.

When Napoleon came to Wilna in 1812, he paid a visit to the synagogue and was so impressed by the exquisite beauty and charm of the sacred edifice, that he remarked that it was one of the most magnificent buildings he had ever seen, a veritable marvel of architecture.

The acoustics in the auditorium were extraordinarily keen and sharp. The voice carried to such an extent that when two people conversed in whispers, they could be heard in every corner of the synagogue. This was the reason why the ordinance requiring all worshipers to observe absolute silence during the services was strictly enforced.

Therein also, it seems, lies the explanation and solution to the puzzling fact, that among the cantors who occupied the pulpit of the great synagogue were some whose voices were not particularly big or powerful. Still they managed to succeed and to hold the worshipers in the palms of their hands. How could they make themselves heard in such a vast sanctuary? The answer is that the uniquely good acoustics helped them out.

"Mincha" (evening) devotions went on for hours, from early afternoon on until dark, in the "Polish" (antehall). No sooner did one "Minyan" (group of at least ten) finish than another began to pray. In the small synagogues in the Shoolhoif (synagogue court), services continued all day long, with people going and coming, one minyan entering as another was leaving. In front of "Zaavel's Shule" baal agoles with their horse and buggies by the dozen used to stop by toward eventide, rush in to do their Mincha devotion in a jiffy and drive away to take up where they had left off.

Across the street from the main synagogue was the Kobriner Synagogue. There people sat and studied the Torah. One group learned "Ayin Yaakov," another, "Mishnayos." In one corner, members of the "Chev-

ra Shass" were immersed in the study of the Talmud (Gemora). These were plain people — laborers. A shoemaker often presided over such a session, saying the "Blatt" (giving the lecture), a "baal agoole" (driver) could be seen reading the "Hameylitz" (Hebrew newspaper), a water carrier, the "Hatzfira," and a baker, the "Hazman" (Time). In Wilna, the simplest folk were scholars, well versed in Hebrew subjects. Practically everybody had some religious education, could sit down to a "Gemoro" (Talmud) session and take part in the discussion or read a Hebrew book or newspaper. Even the "Tzeylem-kep" (crossheads, nonbelieving and nonobservant Jews) used to sit and ponder the problems of the "Talmud" folio in front of them and could be always observed holding a sacred volume (Seyfer) in their hands.

It was a proverbial characterization of Wilna, that the "Kol Hatorah," the voices of the study of the sacred scriptures emanating from its houses of learning were so resounding and penetrating that even the cobblestones, with which the streets and alleys of the Jewish ghetto were paved, became permeated with their holy aroma.

The tag "Jerusalem of Lithuania" was given and stuck to Wilna ever since the days when in Brisk (Brest Litovsk) were assembled the representatives of the Jewish communities of four countries—Poland, Lithuania, Raaysen and Wholinia. They constituted themselves a body, which was called "Vaad Arbah Ahrotzos," congress of the four provinces.

Wilna demanded separate representation for herself and the adjacent territories. When her request was turned down for the reason that her population was small and insignificant both in quantity as well as in quality, for, after all, who lives in Wilna? Workers, tradesmen, plain, simple proletarians, this aroused the ire of the proud Jews, who gave their detractors some statistics, which silenced them and proved convincingly that they were indeed an important factor to be reckoned with.

A thorough investigation which they instituted and a census that was taken revealed, that among the inhabitants totalling less than four thousand souls, there were three hundred and thirty-three individuals (equalling the number of the word "Sheleg" [snow] 333) who knew the entire Talmud by heart.

When this impressive fact was presented to the assembly, the presiding Rabbi declared, that if for no other reason, Wilna ought to be recognized as a separate land just for the sake of these three hundred and thirty-three great scholars and he cited a sentence from the Book of Job, 37:6 "Ki l'sheleg yomar hevey oretz" (a word play — it should be called a land thanks to the 333 [sheleg]).

Since that time Wilna attracted the attention and admiration of the scholarly world. When New York was looking for a chief Rabbi in 1887, they brought from Wilna the Maggid "preacher" of that community, Reb Yaakov Joseph. This was his title, for after Reb Shmooel Avigdor, Wilna did not bestow any longer the title of "chief Rabbi" on any of her spiritual leaders.

The autonomy self-administration right which the Jews of Poland and

Lithuania received at the hand of King Sigismund August II (1520-1572), toward the middle of the 16th century was granted them chiefly out of political and practical economical considerations. The powers to be wanted to create a central organization, which would have the responsibility of collecting and turning over to the government the head tax.

The smaller communities were subjected to the control of the large centres of great cultural and economical importance. The representatives of these principal cities were in turn organized in a "Vaad", a central committee, whose members were selected in accordance with the diversity of the political provinces, Great Poland, Small Poland, Reissen and Wohlin.

The Parliament of the Jews was given wide authority over the administration of the Jewish communities to adjudge court cases in accordance with religious law and to mete out punishment. The "Vaad" would excommunicate Jews and have the jurisdiction to punish the stiff necked with stripes and heavy fines.

Reb Yitzchok from Lvow, the supervisor of the royal treasury of King Sigmund III was head of the "Council of Four Lands". Among the members of the "Vaad" were such great Talmudic authorities as the "Maharam Yaffe" (the "Baal Halevoshim"), Reb Avrohom of Lublin, the Mharshooh, the Maharam of Lublin, Reb Yeshaayeh Horowitz (the "Baal Hashelooh") Reb Avrohom Lantchitz and Reb Shmuel Laneyden (the "Baal K'ley Yokor"). The "sofer," secretary of the Vaad was the grandfather of the well known American writer Joseph Margoshes. At one time the Parness, head of the Vaad, was Dr. Simcha Menachem of Yano, Italy, the personal physician to King Jan Sobiesky, who reigned 22 years and was a "melech chesed" (gracious king).

The last "Parnassim," chairmen of the Vaad before its dissolution were Rabbi Meyer of Dubno and Rabbi Moshe Pinkas of Zsolkov.

The sessions of the Vaad were usually held in the cities where country fairs took place. Jews from all corners of the realm were wont to frequent these convergences of tradesmen.

Some of these fairs would last for weeks at a stretch and before the "Vaad" would be brought all kinds of problems and controversies. The "Vaad" was also instrumental in intervening and seeking the protection of the crown against oppressive measures on the part of certain christian power-organizations as well as against the blood "bilboolim" (unfounded charges that Jews are killing christian children in order to be able to use their blood on Passover) which were conducted, propagandized and incited by the catholic hierarchy.

The resolutions and ordinances of the "Vaad" were usually entered in the records (Pinkasim) of the leading representatives of the respective provinces of "Medinoth" (countries) as they were called and they were all lost. All that survived were three original leafs, that were discovered in Dubno, Wholin, in which city resided the last chairman of the committee. This find was sent to the historian Shimeon Dubnow, who in turn gave it as a present to the "IVO" Institute of Wilna. The precious papers however shared the fate of all Wilna Jewry, when the Nazi hordes descended on

the historic city pillaging and burning everything in sight, that belonged to the "damn Jews". Some of the ordinances were however copied and preserved in the record-books (Pinkasim) of different communities and scraps of material found their way into the books of certain rabbinical authors in some archives that were found in Poland and in the general historic literature.

Thus is to be found in the volume "Nesivos Olom" by the famous creator of the GOLEM, "Maharil", Rabbi Loew of Prague, a decision which was handed down by the "Vaad". So was also discovered in the "Pinkas" of the Jewish community of Krakow, which was found in a hidden corner of the "R'mooh" synagogue a strict "ISSUR" (prohibition) for any Jew to take in "arenda" (rent) the monopoly of collecting the tax, which was slapped on the arendars trading with alcoholic beverages. This prohibition by the "Vaad" was linked with the threat of excommunication (cherem) of the offender.

In the Pinkas of Lublin there is also recorded an "ISSUR" with the threat of punishment by "Cherem" against having any dealings or social contact with the "Shabsi Tzvi" faction, the followers of the false Moshiach" (Messiah). There was also found an approbation (Haskomo) of the Beth Din (religious court) sub-committee of the "Vaad" for the Talmud (Shass) edition which was published in 1559.

The committee remained in existence for over 200 years until it was dissolved by a resolution of the Polish Seym (parliament) in 1764 under the regime of the last Polish King Stanislav August Poniatowsky.

Lithuania eventually resigned from the "Vaad Arba Arotzos in 1623 and formed a "Vaad" of its own, "Vaad Medinas Litteh". This Vaad, succeeded in organizing the Lithuanian communities of the three "Gelilim" (provinces) Brisk, Huradno and Pinsk, centralizing the whole Jewish public life of the country under its supervision. The Vaad of Litteh continued functioning until 1761.

But the fact that Wilna counted among her inhabitants proportionately more ingenious scholars than any other city in the world caused also a considerable diminution and lessening of the "Kevod ha Torah," the respect and awe shown by laymen toward their spiritual leaders and rabbinical authorities. For practically every street cleaner or tailor knew, or thought he knew, the ritual laws. If not, he was able to look it up himself and did not have to depend on his Rabbi to decide it for him.

In fact there were frequent cases, where a layman disputed the ruling of his Rabbi, arguing that he knew better what the law prescribes. They tell the story of a lowly laborer, who found a piece of thread of cotton in a Matzoh (unleavened bread) on Passover. So he came to the Rabbi to present his problem and ask a "Shaaloh" (request a ruling) not because he did not know what the law was, but because he wanted to see, whether the Rabbi knew. The answer of the Rabbi was, "Nothing to it, you may eat it in good health." "But, Rabbi," protested the inquirer, "Are you making fun of me? You think I am a simpleton and an ignoramus, who doesn't know the law? Isn't it plainly and clearly stated: 'Matzoh v'chitim nimsho-

chim mimenoh chometz", Matzoh from which threads are pulled is unfit for consumption on Passover."

And he kept arguing and insisting and giving a hard time to the patient Rabbi, who finally managed to get a word in edgewise explaining to the hotheaded visitor, that it was not meant literally but figuratively, and the idea was, that it was not permitted to consume a "Matzoh" which is not well baked and still so raw, that when you break it, strings of dough hang from it and like threads can be pulled from the edges.

The last officially appointed Chief Rabbi, Reb Shmooel, also had much to endure. Rabbi Shmooel (Son of Raav) Avigdor was the son-in-law of the wealthy philanthropist and learned scholar Reb Yehudah Safrah Vedayna, who built at his own expense the so called "Old-New Kloiz," the house of prayer and study of the "Yesod."

He offered to leave in his will a huge fortune to the community, provided his son-in-law, who was a great Talmudic authority, would be appointed Chief Rabbi of Wilna. It was a very generous offer and a quite tempting proposition for the "Kehillah," which was always hard put to make ends meet. And since there was no question about Rabbi Shmooel being eminently qualified to competently fill the post, the "Parnassim" (Solons) readily agreed and Reb Shmooel Avigdor was duly elected to the post of "Raav D'moso" (Chief Rabbi of the town).

Everything was fine and dandy as long as the Rabbi's father-in-law was alive. But no sooner did Reb Yehudah close an eye and the bequeathed "Mayontek" was collected and safely tucked away, than the bigwigs of the community began finding faults with the Rabbi and also his helpmate.

His difficulties began when the high-toned spouses of the powerful congregational trustees seemed to sense a certain haughty, patronizing behavior on the part of the "Rebetzin" (Rabbi's Wife). They thought she was too stuck-up and did not give them the honor and respect which was their due.

It stands to reason, that having herself too been raised in affluence and splendor, she did not feel inferior to the dames of the powerful trustees and did not stand humbly in awe before these pompous matrons.

This proud demeanor of a "mere" Rebetzin was galling to the snobbish femmes, so they incited their husbands to take the Rabbi to task. Relations between them had already been tense and strained for some time for the reason, that these leaders ruled over their community with the iron hand of a dictator and brooked no contradiction or opposition.

They manipulated their stewardship in accordance with the old autocratic recipe "Sic Volo, Sic Yubeo" (So I want it and so I order it). They even reserved for themselves the veto right to ignore approved rules by the simple expedient of declaring "Nye Pozvolyam" (I don't allow it).

Their arbitrary practices triggered widespread public resentment, that eventually led to open challenges by organized groups of resistance. In the era of the Wilna Gaon the castle of the Radzivill's in Nesvizs sheltered such a rebellious group of Jews from Wilna, who had thrown down the gauntlet to the ruthless Brahmins of their community's bureaucracy.

Rabbi Shmooel viewing with apprehension their excesses in abusing their power, undertook to restrain them. In his sermons he openly criticized their high-handed ways of handling the public trust. He kept chastising them, telling them "Mussar," advising them to mend their ways. This they couldn't tolerate. The stage was thus set for an open confrontation.

A campaign was set in motion by the adversaries of the Rabbi to discredit him, tear down his authority by trying to convince the people, that he was not worthy of occupying his high office. It became open season to malign him. A Rabbi is supposed to study the Torah day and night, burn the midnight oil till the small hours, and in his house at midnight all lights were turned off. Did this not prove that he was not a "Masmid" (a diligent scholar)?

They also accused him of letting himself be influenced by certain cliques and rendering unfair, biased, and prejudiced decisions in disputes, that came before the Rabbinical Court. They even claimed that he was not a "Nkee Chapayim" (clean handed), not above stooping so low as to accept bribes.

The quarrel was submitted to the "natchalstwo" (ruling authorities). Governor ("Voyvoda") Radziwill held with the trustees; the Bishop Massalsky on the other hand took the part of the Rabbi. The scandal grew and assumed uncontrollable proportions. There was never a definitive, legally binding verdict or ruling rendered in the matter. But the Rabbi's enemies made it so hot and uncomfortable for him and things became so rough that he was obliged to flee from the city and seek shelter and the protection of the bishop in the suburb of Antokoly.

So for all practical purposes the mighty trustees had their way and to make sure that no rabbi would ever again challenge their absolute rule, they abolished the office entirely. An ordinance was promulgated under a "Cherem" (strict religious ban) according to which henceforth there would never again be named a chief Rabbi of Wilna. The highest religious authority was to hold the title of "Maggid," preacher and his religious and mainly political power should accordingly be considerably curtailed.

There is though some indication, of a posthumous poetic vindication. It seems that after the hounded and humiliated Rabbi Shmooel not long after having been practically driven out of the city, passed away in 1791, most likely from aggravation, heartache, suffering and shame, his antagonists had a change of heart and were plagued by pangs of regret at the disgraceful manner in which they had treated their Rabbi.

And by way of making some amends for the unjustified wrong done to him, the congregation ordered that a large rock be placed at the spot, where once stood the Rabbinical chair of Rabbi Shmooel Avigdor, the last Chief Rabbi of Wilna, thus marking and sanctifying the place, where he used to sit and making sure that nobody else would or could ever sit in his place. "Achrey mows Kdoshim Emor," after he died they called him a saint. (These are three consecutive sedra's in the Bible). Posthumous rehabilitation is a vain gesture.

But if some of the great Rabbis of Wilna had difficulties and fallings

out with the "Parnassim" or the "Balebatim" (members), there was one outstanding personality, whose name forever remained revered and held sacred by all the Jews of Wilna. It was Reb Eliyohoo Landau, the "Wilner Gaon" (genius) whom the whole Jewish world held in highest esteem, calling him "Hamohor Hagodol," the great light, whose rays brightened up the scholarly sky of Judaism in the diaspora. In spite of the fact that he never held an official position in the town, or anywhere else, his unquestioned greatness eclipsed that of any authoritative office holder.

The "gaon" became the symbol of persistence and diligence in the tireless perusal of the holy books and sacred scriptures. The story goes that when a Yeshiva student asked the Wilner Gaon how he could become a Wilner gaon, the sage replied, "Willnor [if you will only want to strongly enough] you too can become a gaon." He combined genius of mind with a steely willpower.

The Wilna "Gaon" (1720-1797) ran away from money and honor, as one would from a plague. He would accept no official rabbinical post and was sitting in his own small Kloiz, which was located on the second floor of a little shack in the synagogue court with windows closed and shutters lowered to keep out street noises, that might distract him when immersed in praying and the study of the sacred scriptures day and night.

When his sister, who hadn't seen him for years came from a distant city to visit him, he exchanged but a few words with her and went right back to his books. Greatly disappointed at such a cold reception, with tears in her eyes she reproached him: "I came from so far to spend some time with you and all you have to spare for me is a few minutes?" But Reb Eliyahu said: "You must excuse me, my dear sister, but I cannot waste my precious time on idle chatter. I still have so much to accomplish in this transitory world and every minute must be utilized. When we'll meet again in the hereafter, we'll have more time to talk."

For a time the leaders of the Wilna "Kehillah" sent him through his "Shames" factotum a few rubles regularly every week. But this secretary of his never turned over the money to the Gaon. Before his death the "Shames" in his "Viduy" (confession) admitted, that he used the money for himself, knowing full well that the Gaon would have anyway refused to accept the stipend and would've made him give it back to "Kohol."

When his wife complained that the children are hungry, he told her: "Jews are 'Bney rachmonim' [kind and full of compassion]. Go to the neighbors and they will give you bread for yourself and the other members of the family." He used to say: "Eliyahu can serve the Lord without expecting any reward of even 'Olom Haboh' [in the world to come], and most certainly of 'Olom Hazeh'."

When still a tot of seven, he already delivered a "Drosho" (lecture) in Talmudic "pilpul" (sophistry) in the great Synagogue, which astounded the listeners. The historian Greatz writes that the Gaon never forgot anything of what he ever learned. He had instant recall of about 2500 volumes of scriptures like T'nach, Midrashim, Megilloth, Toseftah, Seyder Olam, Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi, Zohar, Rashi, and Rambam. What is

there left? Still I wouldn't bet that I have in the above list enumerated all or even approximately all the subjects, which he had mastered in religious scriptures alone.

But his all-encompassing mind absorbed also a great store of knowledge in secular sciences and particularly astronomy. The Gaon left seventy volumes of "Sforim" (expository writings) in manuscript. Twice (in 1772 and again in 1782) he set out on a journey to the Holy Land with the intention of making his home in Jerusalem, but insurmountable obstacles forced him to turn back.

When he passed away at the age of seventy seven, the whole city was plunged into deep mourning. The "Oron" (coffin) of the saintly prince of Wilna was carried on the shoulders of select Rabbinic greats. In their wake followed behind the casket an endless line of bereaved admirers of the Great Sage, bemoaning the loss of the crown of Jewry. Practically the whole population of the city was in the funeral procession from city and Gubernia officials to professors and students of the University. The "Shulehoif" was empty on that sad day. No "Minyan" was available for the "Mincha" devotion in that beehive of religious activity.

Another great sage of whom Wilna was proud, was Reb Yisroel Salanter (1810-1883), who founded the "Chevrah Mussar." From Wilna he later transferred its seat to the Slobodka Yeshiva "Knesseth Yisroel" at the outskirts of Kovno. Each and every day for two hours the "Yeshivah Bochruim" (talmudic students) were learning "Mussar" (ethics reproof) from the "Chovath Halevovoth" by Rabeynu B'chayeh" and from the "M'silas Yeshurim" by Rabbi Moshe Lutzatto.

In an apparent reference to the ignominious fate of Rabbi Shmooel in retaliation for his words of "Mussar", Reb Yisroel Salanter said: "Any Rabbi whom the congregation does not chase out of their city must be derelict in the carrying out of his obligation as a spiritual leader."

Although it was the consensus of the great Torah scholars of that era, that Reb Yisroel towers over all of his contemporaries, he too would not accept any compensation for his activities in disseminating knowledge of the sacred literature and his pioneering work in the launching of the "Mussar" movement, neither would he accept gifts. So Yisroel Salanter studied Torah living in dire poverty. He tried to go into business to support his family, but failed to make a go of any of his enterprises.

Such were the ways of the Talmudic giants of Wilna. The study and knowledge of Torah and the propagating of religion and faith, was not something to be exploited for personal gain. In eschewing any compensation for religious obligatory activity they claimed to be merely emulating the "Midohs", the ways of the Good Lord, who grants everything for free: "Mah Ani Bechinom Gam Atem Bechinom."

A worthy successor to these great luminaries was the famous religious spiritual leader of Wilna of the world war era: Chayim Oyzer Grodzensky. When the Kehillah decided to bestow upon him the title "Rosh Beys Din", Head of the Rabbinic Court, he declined to accept the honor. He still was recognized as "Primus Inter Pares". First among equals.

There were twenty three "kloizes" in the area of the Shulehoif compound. To mention but a few, there was the "Shomrey Shabos" Kloiz, the Kloiz "Yoshan" (old), the "Old-New Kloiz", "Baal Agolishe" Kloiz, "Shoelke's Kloiz", Shoemaker's Kloiz, Tailor's Kloiz, Gaon's Kloiz, Kavronishe Shule, Rameyles Shule, Zavels Shule, Chevra Poalim, Tifereth Bachurim, Koydenover Shtibel, Shavler Kloiz.

To get to the Gaon's Kloiz one had to walk up a flight of stairs, and it was odd to find that right next to the Kloiz of the Gaon, who was such a determined crusader against "Chassidism," that when the two most prominent Chassidic Rabbis, Reb Mendel of Vitebsk and Rabbi Shneyer Zalman of Liady made a special trip to Wilna to have a discussion with him, he refused to even meet with them, is located the Koydenover (Gubernia of Minsk) Chassidic "Shtiebel." Was it a mere coincidence or a deliberate confrontation?

A Chassidic Shtible was of course a rarity in Wilna. That city was not anything like Warsaw, where "Chassidism" was thriving and the zealous devotees of the various wonder Rabbis and primarily of the Ger'er Rebbe dominated the Jewish religious scene. Wherever one turned, he would run into some of these in "Capote's" (caftans) clad ultra-pious, militant followers of their saintly spiritual leader. With their attire of black velvet, wide brimmed "Kapelyushes" and on festive occasion "Shtreimlech" as head gear, they were conscpicuous all over town and drew the attention of the Polish inhabitants, who looked upon them with jaundiced eyes, considering them an alien, undesirable element.

Neither was Wilna a fertile breeding ground for the proletarian Chassidim with the tight little "Hitelech" (caps). The overwhelmingly "Misnagdish" (opposing) community looked upon them with disdain and the "Agudahnicks" (The "Agudas Yisroeil" organization is at the extreme right of the religious spectrum), the Jews of Wilna hated like poison.

Wilna's system, method, style, and philosophy of Torah study also differed fundamentally from that of Warsaw. Whereas the latter housed the school of thought, that brought forth towers upon towers of ingeniously contrived, sophistic expositions of Talmudic themes, with emphasis on a display of sagacious, sparkling, hairsplitting mental exercises (Pilpul), Wilna laid stress and accented the plain meaning, the logical, cut and dry understanding and interpretation and above all the relevant practical application of the tenets of the Holy Writ (Pshat).

In Reb Shoulke's Kloiz, which was located on Yatkeve Street, all the walls were hidden behind tall massive bookcases filled with tightly packed sacred volumes of Holy scriptures and all the benches were at all hours of the day occupied by pious Jews diligently immeresed in the study of the Torah, the thick folios of the Talmud or other commentaries of the Pentateuch. Not for nothing were the people of Wilna wont to say, that in Reb Shoulke's Kloiz, there is so much study going on, day and night, that the benches are "treyfe" (unholy, unfit, forbidden) from the wax that is dripping down on them from the buring candles, but the hearts of the devout

students who burn the midnight oil, are as "Kosher" as can be.

In the southwest corner of this house of prayer and learning there was hanging a plaque, commemorating the largesse of the patroness Libe, the daughter of Azriel Helin, who left a bequest of three thousand rubles for the support of the steady frequenters of the Kloiz, located at Shavle Street, where the worshipers were mostly poor working men and which was also a handy place for busy storekeepers to drop in for the purpose of hurriedly reciting the "Kadish" (prayer for the dead). The same was true about the "Yagiches Kloiz" and many other such small "Beth Hamedrashim", Peseles Kloiz, Dvoyre Esther's Kloiz, which dotted the Jewish section of Wilna and particularly the "Shule-Hoif", the court of the central community.

Special mention rates the "Shivuh Krooim" Kloiz. No Kloiz attracted so many worshipers as this one did. One "Minyan" after another crowded into it to pray. This went on until late at night.

On a sign that hung on the iron gate of the Wilna great synagogue the availability of a "Mikva" (ritual bath) and of a regular steam bath site within the confines of the synagogue compound was made known to the public.

From the wall that surrounded the "Shulehoif" all kinds of exhortations were bombarded at the bypassing Jews on placards, printed posters or in letters painted on the plastered bricks in eye-catching, usually red, colors. These were urging the reader, who cared enough to halt in his walk and bother to find out what the authors of the writing on the wall want him to do, to vote for this or that list at the Jewish community elections, to contribute for some charitable or social organizations, or to buy only products of the holy land.

There was in Wilna besides the Kehillah (Jewish Community) another great organization called "Tzedokoh Gedolah" (Great charity). The great Synagogue was under the aegis and control of the latter. The Kehillah was always struggling with steadily mounting deficits, while the "Tzedokoh Gedolah" was amassing great fortunes. To it belonged rows of bequeathed buildings, properties and estates, that yielded great income, but the guardians of these trust funds would not respond to the plea of the Kehillah for financial assistance.

Originally conceived as a surrogate, a mere branch of the "Kehillah", the "Tzedokoh Gedolah" outgrew its parent organization and declaring its independence, it became the dominant factor in all aspects of Jewish life, while the Kehillah wallowed in debt, which in 1922 amounted to 7 million zlotys.

It was a lucky break for the "Kley Kodesh" of the "Shtodt-Shule" to be employees of the "Tzedokoh Gedolah" and not the "Kehillah", for those who were working for the Kehillah had to go often for months without a pay envelope. Being the responsibility of the organization whose coffers were bulging, they didn't have to worry about getting paid. True, the bosses were tightwads, but nonetheless quite fussy and finicky in choosing the synagogue officials, and they never lacked candidates. It was more

the honor than the money that attracted the aspirants.

Not only did Wilna insist on having as their cantors the very best available, but even for a "Baal Koreh" (reader of the Torah), they had an exceptional one. He was Reb Avrohom Chayim, generally called the "Mohilever," who possessed a voice, which reminded one of the sound of a piccolo. Where other voices end up, his only began. He was able to climb up into the heavens and his piercing voice could be heard for several blocks.

When Pinye Minkowsky applied for the position of chief cantor of Wilna which had become vacant when Yisroeil Cooper left for New York, and he received an invitation for an audition, the trustees (Parnassim) upon his arrival took him to the "Shtodtshule" to have a look-see at the holy edifice.

Pinye was very impressed with what he saw, but when he noticed that the "Omud" in front of which the cantor is chanting the prayers is built at a lower level than the rest of the floor of the sanctuary, he asked his hosts what the reason for this arrangement was.

These congregational officials in characteristic Jewish manner replied also with a question: "How come you should find this peculiar? Don't you know the 'Posuk' [verse] of the Psalmist: 'Mimaamakim Korossicho Adoshem' [From the depths have I called to Thee O Lord], therefore it behooves the 'Shliyach Tzibur' to implore the Almighty from as low a level as possible."

This explanation did however not satisfy the guest cantor. He was apprehensive, doubting that his not very voluminous voice could muster enough power to fill the huge tabernacle with sound, while occupying such a low stance.

He therefore requested that a "Bret'l" (wooden pedestal) be placed on the floor for him to stand on, so as to enable him to be elevated to the level of the congregants.

The trustees grudgingly granted his request. But if Pinye thought that this device would be of great help to him in landing the post, he was greatly mistaken.

On the contrary. By his curious insistence on towering over the worshipers he only alienated most of the trustees and this proved to be one of the reasons for his having been found wanting.

None of the great cantors who graced the pulpit of the great synagogue of Wilna needed any such props to find favor in the eyes of the "mevinim" and as these experts used to say: "It is not the Bret'l that makes the chazzan, but the chazzan that makes the Bret'l."

CHAPTER 34

LEGENDS OF THE GREAT SYNAGOGUE OF WILNA

How the synagogue falling into the hands of the Karaite was foiled — The heroic sacrifice of the tailor — The grandeur of the interior of the synagogue — The saint of Wizonn — Count Pototzky's tragic fate.

In our desire to give a comprehensive picture of the unique quality of the Jewish communal life in the Jerusalem of Lithuania, we got somewhat derailed into side roads, and carried away from our actual theme, which was: the cantors and the great synagogue of Wilna.

So let's get back on the tracks.

The great synagogue of Wilna is a unique edifice. If one should travel, and search all over the glove, could he find her equal? When one returns home, after having been away and after having visited all kinds of synagogues in other lands, this ancient synagogue, this remarkable time-honored landmark becomes even more dear to his heart and precious in his eyes.

In the introduction to this series we have already attempted to give a general idea and to draw, in a few strokes, the contours and lines of the impressive, revered, sacred, historic building.

But the theme can never be exhausted. No matter how much one writes about the significant and remarkable peculiarities of this unique synagogue, one still remains her debtor.

So turning our gaze once more upon the great synagogue and viewing it with renewed interest, as if we were observing it for the very first time, let us use the opportunity to record a few legends, which are connected with this landmark.

Hundreds of years ago there went on a festering feud between the "Karaim" (Karaites) (a sect of Jews which does not believe in the Torah "Shebaal peh", the Talmud and any of the sacred commentaries and is following only the precepts contained in the "Torah Shebiksaav," the written law, which was handed down to Moses on the mount of Sinai) and the Jewish community of Wilna.

The apple of discord in this case was the great synagogue. It was the Karaites who brought the charge of illegal occupancy and trespass against the Jews contending that they were entitled to the possession of the edifice by virtue of their having settled in Wilna prior to the Jews.

Both parties went to the potentate, who ruled the city and laid before him their arguments.

Both insisted that they are the real true legitimate Jews and are practicing the genuine unadulterated brand of Jewish tradition and both laid claim to the synagogue as being the only ones who are rightfully entitled to be given sole possession of it. The Jews also categorically denied having been preceded in Wilna by the Karaites. Before deciding the issue the Duke went with them to the building which was the bone of the contention to make an on the spot investigation but upon arriving there he found the giant iron gates locked.

While standing in front of the closed door and waiting for the arrival of the sexton who was sent for the "Poritz" (big boss) got a ingenious idea how to solve the involved contraversy and cut the intricate Gordian knot by a salomon-brand adjudication. He declared; "whoever among you will be able to open up with his bare hands the gate, pick up the two iron doors and place them on his shoulders, carry them to the pulpit, return with them and hang them back on their hinges — to his people shall belong the coveted synagogue."

A plain, simple Jewish tailor, who was reputed to be a man of unusual strength, stepped out of the group and volunteered to have a try at the feat demanded by the nobleman.

With one tremendous push he broke the locks and pulling apart the doors of the gate he lifted the enormous crushingly weighty monsters balancing them with remarkable dexterity on his broad shoulders. Weighted down by the backbreaking heavy load, he proceeded to the pulpit turned around and with unfathomed unexplainable superhuman tenacity he managed to carry his burden back to the point from where he started out and put back the iron doors into their original place.

He accomplished the seemingly impossible task all right, but the effort was too much for a human being and it drained his body of all his energy. Suddenly he tumbled down with a heavy thud to the floor and died on the spot. But thanks to his heroic deed and to his having sacrificed his life the great synagogue remained in the hands of the Jewish community.

The Karaimites did not take their defeat lying down. They carried their fight to the higher echelons and when stymied again in their endeavor to get the upper hand, in the year 1776 they complained to the king of Poland claiming that undue favoritism was shown at their expense to a peo-

ple, who were in fact not Jews but impostors, who arrived on the scene later than themselves the true Jews and corrupted the Torah of Moses by unauthoritative commentaries. "Therefore" they said "we beg the King to make arrangements for a debate between representatives of our and their sects to determine who are the true descendants of Moses".

King Stanislaus August Poniatovsky, the same one who dissolved the "Vaad arbah arotzos" in 1764, yielding to their request designated a certain Saturday for the debate to be held in his throne room.

The Jewish community appealed to the "Wilna Gaon" to represent them in the dispute, but due to ill health Reb Eliyahuh Landau did not feel up to the demanding task and appointed one of his brilliant disciples, Rabbi Yehuda Leyb Mitus of Pinsk to appear on behalf of Torah true Judaism. This sage succeeded in totally demolishing the case of his opponents and he accomplished this feat not by means of the devastating arguments with which he had armed himself for use in the debate.

For the way things turned out there was no need for any debate. The spokesman for the Karaites himself by his own first words unwittingly proved convincingly that he has no leg to stand on. He himself handed Reb Yehudah Leyb the victory on a silver platter over the plaintiffs whom he was supposed to represent.

The issue was right at the outset decided and oddly enough by a pair of shoes. When the contestants arrived at the palace, the Lord Chamberlain asked them to remove their shoes, for no one may enter the presence of the King with shoes on.

Rabbi Matus removed his shoes but did not leave them in the ante room as did dutifully the Karaites. When the king saw the Jew standing before him with the shoes in his hands, he angrily upbraided him, demanding an explanation of his irreverent action which he must have surely known was contrary to court protocol. "I beg your Majesty's kind compassion" replied Reb Yehudah Leyb "no disrespect was intended by your humble servant. But we Jews had a bad experience with the Karaites".

"When Moses went up to Mount Sinai to receive the tablets he removed his shoes. But when he came down, they were gone and as it turned out one of the Karaites had stolen them. So your Majesty can well appreciate that when I see Karaites around I am concerned for the safety of my shoes. And I am obliged to hold on to them, least they swipe them."

Up jumped the representative of the Karaites and addressing the King he vehemently denied the accusation: "Your Majesty" he cried "The story is patently a contemptible lie, a figment of the sly Jew's fertile imagination. How could a Karaite have stolen the shoes of Moses, when at that time no Karaites were yet in existence?"

"That's exactly what I am saying," chimed in triumphantly Reb Yehudah Leyb addressing the Monarch. "First there were Jews and only long afterwards came the Karaites. The same holds true in regard to the sequence of our respective arrivals in Wilna."

"Well then," commented the King turning to the professor, who headed the Karaite group from Troky, "If you yourself admit, that at the

time of Moses it was the Jews, who were the recipients of the Ten Commandments and your sect came into being only much later, then it is clear, that your claim, that your are the true legitimate descendants of the original Jews, to whom was given the Torah, is without any foundation whatsoever.

"Consequently I must find, that not the Jews are, as charged by you, the impostors, who altered and forged the true meaning of the laws of Moses, but it is you, the Karaites who are guilty of the falsification which you are blaming the genuine Jews for. Now get out of my sight, before I order charges of misrepresentation brought against your sect". That was the last challenge posed by the Karaites. The Jews having thus been confirmed as the rightful owners of the holy edifice by royal decree, the "Karaim" moved their headquarters to Troky near Wilna where they built a beautiful synagogue of their own.

"The founder of the Karaites was Onon Ben Dovid, who eventually was killed by members of his own sect. He coined the slogan: "search diligently in the bible". While the Rabbis were preoccupied with swimming in the "Yam Hatalmud" (in the sea of the commentaries) and neglecting "Tenach" hebrew, and "Dicduck" the Karaites made an intensive study of these latter subjects to the exclusion of latter-day folios.

Friday nights they would sit in their homes in total darkness. They took literally the prohibition "you shall not light a fire on the Sabbath." In their living room there always hangs a "talis" in compliance with the direction contained in the bible; "and you shall see it" (ureihsem oso).

At a wedding ceremony the "chacham" takes out the holy scroll from the ark, then blesses the "Chosson" and the "Kallah" and reads for them the blessing, that was bestowed on Jacob by his father Yitzchok "Vayiten Lecho" (B'reyshis 27/28) "May God give you from the thaw of Heaven etc."

In contrast to the discrimination practised against the Jewish population in Russia, the Karaites enjoyed all civil rights and were given the status of full equality with all other citizens of the Czarist realm.

Toward the end of the 18th century the Russsians laid siege to Wilna. The stormy bombarding of the city was so vehement caused so much damage and ruin and claimed so many lives, that it looked like the end, that the city was doomed.

Scared to death the Jews fled into the synagogue and kept praying and reciting from the Thilim (psalms of David). In the great emergency even the Wilner Gaon (sage and scholar) put in an appearance joining the people in prayer.

This was the only time that the Gaon who always attended services in his own Kloiz (private house of prayer) came to the great synagogue to be with his people in time of great stress and agonizing peril.

Suddenly there was heard the thunderous sound and echo of a tremendous bang and detonation under the immense impact of which of which the building of the synagogue began to sway and shake like a drunkard unable to stand on his feet. Apparently she was the victim of a direct hit by a

shrapnel and it looked as if she was about to crumble and disintegrate into dust.

At that critical moment of wild panic the saintly Wilner Gaon calmed and quieted down the frightened worshipers. Rapping with the palm of his hand on the "shtender" (wooden stand) in front of him he succeeded in reassuring the assemblage by telling them: "Don't panic, my dear flock. Our father in heaven has heard our prayers and diverted tragedy from our beloved house of worship. The bullet got stuck in the roof. There is no immediate danger. With God's help we will be spared."

Throughout the ages following that miraculous episode people from all over the world who came for a visit to Wilna, would never fail to make a point of going especially to see the wondrous sight of a cannon ball embedded in the roof of the synagogue and pointing skyward.

One of the unique rarities of the central synagogue was the antique voluminous community "Siddur" (Prayer Book). It was under constant guard like a precious gem and was only used on special festive occasions when the extra features to be found exclusively in that age-old folio were to be recited by the cantor.

The famous prayerbook made of parchment contained different versions of dirges (Moley's) and appropriate prayers to be recited in memory and for the salvation of the soul of the sainted "Ger Tzedek" (virtuous proselyte) Count Pototzky, who was executed on the second day of the Shevuoth Festival in the year 1780 for heresy for having embraced the Jewish faith. Count Valentin Pototzky or Polototzky was by nature a profound thinker and having become disenchanted with the faith into which he was born and raised, he decided to renounce it and embrace the mosaic religion. Intent on studying Torah in preparation for eventual conversion, he journeyed to Paris, where he was indoctrinated with the precepts of the Jewish religion by Rabbi Menachem, the son of the earlier mentioned Rabbi Yehuday Leyb Matus. Subsequently, he betook himself to Amsterdam, where he converted to Judaism assuming a new identity with the name Avrohom Ben Avrohom.

In spite of having been warned by his parents, relatives and friends not to come home, because his life would be in danger, he returned and took up residence in Ilia, Gubernia of Wilna where living incognito he devoted his time to the study of the Torah and the preaching of the tenets of the Jewish religion.

As was to be expected, the hierarchy could not tolerate such open defiance of the Russian Orthodox "Pravoslavno" Faith even by such a high-standing nobleman. Apostasy had to be nipped in the bud and dealt with decisively in conformity with the canons of the church. A search was instituted to apprehend the turncoat.

When his true identity was leaked allegedly inadvertently, by a Jewish tailor, he fled to the nearby village of Starinka. But the Jewish "Kretchmer" (Saloon Keeper) in whose home he sought refuge, fearful for his own safety, blurted out to the inquiring authorities his hiding place.

The count was seized and imprisoned in the tower carcel of Wilna. In

vain did his mother plead for mercy, he languished in the jail of the fortress until he was brought out in chains for the trial, which was held in the open. The court convened on a specially erected platform facing the great cathedral of Wilna.

That he was found guilty of traitorous abandonment of the faith of his progenitors and embracing the false teachings of the infidels goes without saying. Penalty for such a grave sin was death and he was sentenced to be burned at the auto-da-fe (stake). The day set for carrying out the verdict was the 24th day of May 1780. Did they choose purposely the date when Jews are celebrating the giving of the Torah? It seems likely. When his father heard the verdict he dropped dead.

According to the legend his mother rushed to the capital, flung herself to the feet of the King to whom she was related begging for mercy. She succeeded in obtaining from the monarch a pardon for her convicted son, but she arrived with the document of clemency just a few fateful minutes too late. He had already met his death. They had burned him on the stake in the name of the religion which he had the temerity to forsake.

The holy synod, jealous of its prerogatives and fearful of just such an intervention and countermand by the royal court, which it regarded as undue interference with the jurisdiction of the church made haste to carry out the sentence. The last words of the "Ger Tzedek" which he uttered as the flames rose from the stake and were engulfing his body were: "Beyodcho afkid roochi podiso osi hasheym kail emess; into thy hand I commend my spirit, thou hast redeemed me, Lord God of Truth."

His grave at the old cemetery is marked only by an old, bent, crippled tree, the contours of which, with its peculiarly formed curving branches conjure up the image of a tortured suffering man moaning in agony and with his outstretched arms beseeching the heavens. The strange tree grew out from his ashes that lie under the tree, having been buried there secretly in the pitch darkness of the night by a certain Wilna Jew, by the name of Reb Leyzer Suckess, who bribed the executioner and bought up from him the ashes, the sole earthly remains of the nobleman who gave up his life for his belief. Adjoining the tree is a green "Ohel" tentlike monument the funds for the erection of which were contributed by the pater familias of the Pototzky clan the grandfather of the immolated young idealist.

The Yahrtzeit (anniversary of date of death) was religiously observed. The appropriate prescribed ritual was conducted and the "Kadish" recited by the whole congregation always on the second day of the holiday of Shevuoth (Pentecost).

But the "Yahrzeit" of the Martyr, whose young life was snuffed out so tragically was observed not only in the great synagogue of Wilna but also by some mysterious visitors, who throughout the years never failed to drive up in elegant carriages with liveried coachmen at the helm to the old Jewish cemetery, walk up to where the ashes of Valentin Pototzky are buried and place a wreath of flowers on the grave. When the Polish troops entered Wilna in 1919 some noblemen who seemed to have come from afar were seen prostrating themselves at the hallowed ground.

In the same parchment Siddur (prayerbook) there was also printed a dirge (hazkoro) perpetuating the memory of the holy man of Wizzon who sacrificed his own life in order to save the whole Jewish community from extinction, which threatened them as a consequence of a dastardly act by a converted Jew (Meshoomed) who was taunted and ridiculed by the Jews for having denied his past and deserted his people.

In a rage the turncoat vowed to get his revenge on them for his grudge. He took a holy catholic picture, desecrated it and hid it in a niche under the holy ark of the synagogue. Then he went to the Kniyaz (count) the head of the community with the libelous charge, that it is an old Jewish custom to acquire in some way or other and even steal, if necessary, a sacred picture of the holy Christ and when "Hoshana Rabah" (last day of Succoth, when stalks, twigs of scrubs are tied together and are beaten, banged and whipped on the benches of the synagogue until the blades and leafs fall off) rolls around; they desecrate the holy picture, by beating it in a wild ritual ceremony.

When the charges were examined and the holy picture was found torn and spat on, the pravoslavno Russian priests in their churches went all out in their denunciation of the Jews. They incited their followers with their fiery sermons and called for retaliation. Streaming out from the churches into the streets in a nasty mood, the mob went out in search of scape goats, on whom to vent the accumulated bitterness and fury and the artificially stimulated, boundless hatred, which they felt toward the damned Jews, who dared to commit such an audacious heretical act.

The incited bands went swarming in a wild romp through the town. There was plunder of Jewish stores, burning of homes and massacre of innocent people. The bloody pogrom continued for days. The count demanded that the Jews hand over the one who perpetrated the crime or they will all perish. In the face of such great peril to the whole community , the Vizzon'er Kodosh (holy man of Vizzon) insisted that he be given the chance to expiate for the whole community. He confessed his "guilt" and was executed.

The stories about Wilna are mostly tragic. In this they resemble the history of many other Jewish communities as well as the history of the Jewish people in general. Misfortune galore, sun-shine very little.

She does not stand and does not exist any more, the historic grand synagogue of Wilna. She fell, as a sacrifice to savage hatred by the same abominable dastardly murderous hands that exterminated practically the whole of the Lithuanian Jewish population.

Sad to relate the chronicle of martyrdom of the great venerable Jewish community of Wilna and the destruction of it's most sacred hallowed edifice is no legend but a tragic fact, a sorrowful saga of man's inhumanity to his fellowmen. It was in Wilna and it's environs region that the Nazis first launched their devilish campaign of liquidating the Jewish communities for the final solution of the "Yudenfrage". As early as October 1941 did they begin the methodical extermination of the hapless Jewish population by driving them out to the "Ponar" forests and killing

them off in a mass blood bath that has few equals in barbaric sadism in the annals of history. The Jewish inhabitants of Troky (a suburb of Wilna) were forcibly piled into freight trucks, taken to an island that was located in the midst of the Troky Lake where they were summarily machinegunned and their cadavers tossed into one gigantic gaping ditch turned into a mass grave. They were aided and abetted in their gory chores by the bloodthirsty Lithuanian Hordes who were only too glad to help the Germans kill off the Jews. The Nazis even tricked some Jews into becoming the tools of their nefarious scheme. If one "Yudenrath" would not cooperate in betraying their brethren it would in short order be deposed, liquidated and replaced by another. Thus perished the chief engineer Shouhl Trotzky who headed the first "Yudenrath" together with the other recalcitrant members of the governing body.

Several "Yudenraths" were appointed and in turn removed until the Germans found one more to their liking in the notorious Ghetto-Commander Yaacov Gens and his band who to our shame played to their tune a disgraceful role in the bloody drama of Wilna Jewry. Warsaw learned of the grisly goings on in her sister city for the first time from the Plotnitzka sisters Chaika and Frumka.

The unprecedented holocaust wiped out the Jewish community of 80,000 among them such personalities as Rabbi Shub, Rabbi Eiggs and Engineer Krakowsky, son of the last "Maggid" of Wilna. They too shared the fate of their brethren in Ponar. For the whole of Lithuania the tragic statistic reads: out of a prewar Jewish population of 150,000, 130,000 were exterminated.

Only after the blood letting of the world war stopped, did some remnants begin drifting back to the once so much admired centre of throbbing Jewish life and as of this writing about 12,000 Jews are residing in Wilna and there is only one synagogue left standing among the ruins: The Zavalno Street "Choir Shule" a solitary mute reminder of the glory that once was Wilna.

CHAPTER 35

THE WILNA BALEBEYSEL

The Wilna Balebeysel officiated at the pulpit at the tender age of eleven — When he became Bar Mitzva, he was already a full-fledged Hazzan-Minister — Soon afterward, he married the daughter of the richest man of Wilna — When he reached his twentieth birthday, he was appointed to the post of chief cantor of the central synagogue.

One of the first and most famous cantors of Wilna was Yoel David Loevenstein-Strashunsky, better known as the "Wilna Balebeysel" (young recently-married head of the household). His tragic life story has in the course of the passing years, served as the basis for scores of works of literature, and has been treated, adapted and presented in various forms — books, poems, plays, motion pictures — by many poets, writers and playwrights. Consequently, the name of the Wilna Balebeysel has long since become a part of the lore of the Jewish folk-masses, and even of the populace, who have no knowledge of nor interest in, cantors and the cantorate in general. These too have, on some occasion, heard, read or seen, a play about the famous ancient cantor. The events of his turbulent life held great fascination for Jewish audiences as witness the fact that one of the most successful presentations of the famous theatrical company "The Wilna'er Troupe" was "The Wilna'er Balebeysel," by M. Orenstein.

But the novels and plays which grew out of the pathetic and sensational story of the Wilna Balebeysel have surrounded his name and his life with numerous legends. To get to the heart of the true story, as it actually occurred, and to separate the genuine facts from fiction, from the invented and often contradictory versions of the events that dotted the turbulent life of this musical genius, is not an easy task.

The true, unembellished facts of his life story are colorful enough, and abound in so many highly dramatic moments, tragic scenes and heart-rending experiences, that they can furnish more than sufficient material for a most gripping, thrilling novel or play, which would unquestionably deeply move the reader or listener and bring tears to his eyes. To add anything would be counterproductive.

That it was his fate and lot to become a cantor was ordained early in his life. His father was a cantor. In most cases, this means that the newborn child, if it happens to be a male, will most likely follow in the footsteps of his father.

But in case you are inclined to disagree with this prognosis and taking the negative position, argue that it would not be accurate to generalize, your point would be well taken, for we know that in many cases a son chooses a quite different profession from that of his parent.

In this instance, however, it seems to have been preordained, and unqualifiedly and definitely confirmed, when the infant at the ceremonial occasion of his circumcision cried so sonorously directly into the ears and face of the "Sandek," the godfather, who held him on his lap and his cry was of such musical quality, that the proud father remarked, "Well, it seems that he will have a bigger and better voice than I have. No question about it. Here goes a new, improved version of a cantor."

As is well known, somewhere in the sacred books, it is written that ever since the holy temple was destroyed, the gift and power of clairvoyance was given to fools, and need I tell you what the generally held opinion of the public is regarding the wisdom of cantors? No wonder, therefore, that the prophetic prognosis of his father was fulfilled soon after it was uttered.

Yoel David was six years old when his father, Tzvi Hirsh Bochoor Haleyvi Loewenstein, the cantor of Libau, Kurland, was in 1822 elected to the post of Chief Cantor of Wilna. Very little is known about him.

According to the data, which we were able to uncover about his life prior to his appointment to the post of Chief Cantor of Wilna, as early as in 1816 he was serving as the cantor of the Choralna Synagogue of Libau, Kurland, which at that time was a mere, modest wooden structure.

After Hirsh Bochoor moved to Wilna, his older son Mottele (Mordechay) was elected to succeed his father as the cantor of the congregation, which eventually succeeded in raising the funds that were required for the erection of a new synagogue built of brick.

Tzwi Hirsh was undoubtedly overshadowed by his brilliant son. But even if we presume, that he was not a great cantor, he must have been a competent craftsman, since he was chosen for such an eminent position, for it is not conceivable that in Wilna, a non-entity would be appointed to the pulpit of the central synagogue. Traditionally, the cream of the crop would vie for this highly regarded, prestigious position, and the successful one must have necessarily had something outstanding to offer.

And as the saying goes: "The apple does not fall far from the tree," and in this particular instance the son inherited his father's natural gifts,

multiplied manifold by an abundance of additional features of sublime quality. When still a child Yoel David also learned how to play the violin, which his father bought for him, when the young boy's musical inclination manifested itself clearly.

When he moved to Wilna, the famed seat of learning, he hired a well-known music teacher for the talented youngster. At the same time, he entrusted him to the care of the best "Melamed" (teacher) at whose "Cheyder" (Hebrew school) he accumulated a considerable store of knowledge in the sacred subjects of "Tnach" (Torah, Neviyim and Kesovim, the Holy Scriptures), the "Talmud" and commentaries. In addition, he took lessons from secular teachers in Hebrew, Russian, German and French.

Even for an adult, this would have been quite a heavy program of education. Yoel David however was possessed of a tremendous driving desire and thirst for knowledge, and he was blessed with a rare power of quick comprehension. He absorbed evey crumb of information like a sponge, stored it away in his mind and never forgot it. Above everything else, he loved and had an affinity for music and singing. In no time at all, he mastered the art of playing the violin and piano.

Sitting in front of the "Gemoro" (Talmud folio) immersed in the disputes of "Abaye" and "Rove", he used to hum a tune and the Melamed (teacher), as well as the pupils, were enthralled by the sweetness of his voice. But as soon as he became aware of the stir which he had caused, and that he had an audience, he abruptly fell silent.

He had just celebrated his eleventh birthday, when he was called up one Sabbath morning in the great synagogue to the reading of the Torah (holy scroll) for the "Maftir aliyah," the concluding segment of the portion the week. His chanting of the "Haftorah" (final additional reading from the Prophets) and the concluding "Brochos" (blessings) was a sensational revelation, and made such a profound impression, that the trustees felt impelled to bestow upon the youngster the singular honor of letting him continue with the reading of the "Mussaf" service, replacing his father, the cantor.

It was an unprecedented, risky business to entrust such a serious task to a mere child, but Yoel David fulfilled it with flying colors, and in the process, he charmed the whole congregation with the magic of his brilliant voice and his complete mastery of the liturgical chants.

After this auspicious beginning, he was, on several occasions, afforded the opportunity of substituting for his father at the pulpit and officiating in a part of the Sabbath service or the entire one. When word leaked out, that the wonder-boy was scheduled to take over the chanting of the services, the masses would stream in from all sections of the city, filling the giant sanctuary as well as the synagogue court, in their eagerness to catch a glimpse of the remarkable little fellow, who was so talented, and to hear him render the age-old prayers in his inimitable, exhilarating manner.

Each time there was such tumultuous excitement after his services, that it was feared the young, delicate boy would be crushed by the on-rush-

ing mob, which usually pushed and shoved its way toward him from all sides in an effort to at least touch the little genius or, if possible, give him a kiss. To avoid an accident and to make sure that no harm would come to Yoel David, the sexton used to pick him up and lift him up to his shoulders. Accompanied by two policemen who walked in front of them to disperse the throng in order to make a passage-way for them, the sexton carried him through the streets to deposit him safely at home.

Elated by the overwhelming success of his son who had become immensely popular and the talk of the town, Cantor Zwi Hirsh Lowenstein proceeded to intensify, broaden and accelerate the tempo of his training, preparing him for the next step in the mapped out plan of progress.

Meanwhile, the Feast of Passover rolled around. The chief cantor had just concluded the "Shemono Esra" (eighteen blessings) of the "Shacharis" morning service, when he turned, went to his chair and sat down. His puzzling action took the whole congregation by surprise. There was a commotion in the synagogue, as people tried to figure out what was wrong. Many were concerned and thought that the cantor had suddenly been taken ill. But soon the matter was cleared up. Yoel David got up and placing upon his narrow shoulders the oversized, woolen Talis (prayer shawl), he went up to the pulpit. It was simply a fair exchange, as long as matters remained in the family. The father was out and the son was in.

But this was something novel. A Sabbath Service is one thing. But "Yom Tov" is something else. This time he was aspiring higher and was attempting a much more exacting and difficult task. The special holiday prayers require a higher grade of qualification, not to mention elaborate preparations and considerable experience. Would a boy of such tender age be equal to the task? As he began to chant the "Brocho" (blessing) of "Halleil" (glorification), the tension in the synagogue heightened and mounted perceptibly. Everyone was rooting in his heart for the valiant boy, fervently wishing and hoping that his gallant try would be crowned with success.

As it turned out they need not have been at all concerned or worried. As he went on with the recitation of the Psalms in the confident, self-assured manner of a seasoned trooper, it soon became apparent that Yoel David was about to pluck himself another, even more colorful feather, with which to adorn his cap.

He revealed an astounding, mature versatility, and a ripe, profound familiarity with the traditional tunes, that are peculiar to the Passover religious service, and he sang them with such brilliant vocal clarity, emotional feeling and discriminating artistic flair, that the worshipers remained flabbergasted. It was utterly unbelievable, that a mere "Cheyder Yingle" (parochial school pupil) should be capable of bringing off a musical feat of such magnitude and excellence.

When he was done, pandemonium broke out in the synagogue. The whole throng gravitated toward the hero of the occasion in disorder and confusion. He was in danger of being crushed by the onrushing well wishers, who almost tore him to pieces in their eagerness to express their grati-

tude and admiration. The women, especially, were ecstatic and besides themselves, and unable to restrain their compulsive desire to lavish their love on the marvellous little cantor. The wife of the chief trustee, Mordechay Reiness Strashun, with her young daughter trailing behind her, managed to get to him and plant a kiss on his forehead, while showering him with her best wishes. It was afterwards rumored in knowledgeable circles that, the Madame had her eye on Yoel David, whom she considered a suitable prospective bridegroom candidate for her daughter Chanele, who was her only child.

It did not take long for this assumption of the people-in-the-know to be confirmed, at least by circumstantial evidence. As time went on, the cantor's son was often seen visiting the home of "Motye" (Mordechay) Strashun who was considered one of the most prominent and wealthiest members of the Jewish community and in his capacity as a highly influential senior trustee of the congregation, he was in a strategic position to do a great deal to help the career of Yoel David.

It isn't clear, whether the youngster was really very much in love with Chanele, or whether the practical considerations so favorable for his great ambitions, induced him to pay court to the girl.

At any rate, the secret was out, that something was brewing between the youngsters and there was talk all over town, that any day now an announcement would be forthcoming, making it official, that the cantor's son was betrothed to the tycoon's daughter.

Meanwhile, time did not stand still. The little man grew up and reached a significant milestone of his young life. He became "Bar Mitzva" (son of the Commandments). For that Sabbath, elaborate preparations were made. Yoel David was presented with a large Talis on the top of which was sewed on an expensive silver cornice, a crowning ornament. On that momentous occasion, he also wore for the first time a highpointed, six cornered cantorial Yarmulke (ritual headgear) which made him look considerably taller and older than his thirteen years.

The celebrant conducted the entire service with such entrancing effect, that the enthusiastic audience could barely control itself from bursting out in a storm of applause. The festive affair was celebrated with splendour, pomp and lavish extravagance, and the expensive presents which the beloved Bar Mitzva received added up to more than Reb Hirsh Loewenstein earned in a whole year.

Soon after he became of age, a full-fledged Jew, his engagement to Chanele Strashun was announced and the date was fixed for their wedding.

Wilna had seldom witnessed so elaborate a wedding celebration. It was a real "blow-out," as only a magnate like Strashun could afford. Everything was done in grand style, and why not? What other chance would the father of the bride have to show off his great wealth? Chanele was all he possessed, his only heiress, and having succeeded in acquiring a precious, rare diamond of a young man, who was the rage of the whole town, for a son-in-law, this was the occasion for him to make a grand cele-

bration toasting his singular good fortune.

Everybody who was anybody in the city was invited to the grand affair, and the festivities went on full-steam throughout the "Shivo Yemey Hamishteh" (seven days' celebration of marital bliss). A host of relatives, friends, and admirers filled up their house with silver and gold wedding gifts of all descriptions for the happy young couple. It was a wedding long to be remembered.

Bride and bridegroom became husband and wife and, as is customary, the people began calling the new husband "The young Balebeysel." The couple was happy and contented. Reb Mordechay took them into his home and vowed to provide them with "eybige Kest" with all necessities of life forever, a generous pledge indeed, but one which a man of his financial position and circumstance could easily afford. They settled down to the everyday routine of marital bliss. Everything seemed to move along in a planned pattern, smoothly and blissfully. Every sign pointed to a successful, blessed union. The sun was shining upon them with its warmest rays. Not a trace of the slightest, blighting cloud was discernible on the bright horizon. Their future promised to be as glittering as was their wedding and their path in life strewn with roses.

But things do not always turn out as expected. The best-laid plans often fail to materialize. Nobody can foretell what fate has in store for him. Yoel David was unaware of what was hanging over his seemingly unperturbable course of life. The first blow came in 1829 when his father suddenly passed away. He was then not quite fifteen years old. He had lost not only a self-sacrificing and most devoted parent, but also his untiring teacher on whom he could always lean, and to whom he owed all his acquired knowledge and traditional musical treasure which had propelled him to the eminent status he had succeeded in reaching so early in life.

The congregation was in a quandary. When the question of a successor to the deceased cantor was discussed, every one inevitably thought of the same person. The only one the trustees could think of as the most logical and suitable choice was naturally Yoel David. Who else would be able to fill as well and as competently the shoes of his sainted father? There was a consensus of opinion and complete agreement that he was the only candidate who could come under consideration for the vacant post, and that there was no point in looking any further. But there was, of course, one great drawback and handicap—his age. Nevertheless, where there is a will, there is a way. The dilemma was finally solved by the device of electing him and, at the same time, stipulating that his term of office would begin at a future date.

He was given a contract dated four days in the month of Sivan in the year 1829, making him the de facto Chief Cantor of Wilna, with the provision, that it would take full effect after seven years, when he will have reached his twenty-second birthday. By that time, he would have a beard and would look the part of a congregational dignitary, as befits a great community like Wilna. Then, he would officially inducted into his high office. Meanwhile, the second (assistant) cantor, Reb Yossef Kantor, fa-

ther of the writer Dr. Yehuda Leib Kantor, would officiate and serve as the provisional occupant of the post.

When the general public found out, what kind of arrangements the leaders of the congregation had agreed upon, there descended upon their heads a storm of protest and condemnation. They frowned upon the decision of the leading lights and demanded that, in spite of his youth, Yoel David be installed at once as the full-fledged, official occupant of the pulpit, and that he begin to function immediately as the active chief cantor of the great synagogue. They were unwilling to brook any further delay.

The roar and indignation of the masses compelled the officials to retreat somewhat. They were obliged to call a meeting to reconsider the matter. After protracted heated debates, a compromise was reached, providing for a division of the duties of the cantorate. It was agreed that the assistant cantor would take over the "Mussaf" services on the High Holidays, with Yoel David officiating at Kol Nidre on the eve of Yom Kippur. On the other holidays of the year, the two of them would alternate at the pulpit, one day each. And, as a final concession to public demand, the date for his sole occupancy of the position was advanced to his twentieth birthday.

The people were counting the days until the Day of Atonement in great anticipation of finally being afforded the opportunity of hearing Yoel David chant Kol Nidrey. So, you can imagine the surprise and disappointment of the congregants, who were packed like sardines in the synagogue, when they saw the assistant cantor ascend the pulpit.

The reason for the change of arrangements was the then current menacing political situation. It was the fall of the year 1831. These were turbulent times. In Warsaw, an upheaval of the Polish populace erupted against the foreign ruling overlords resulting in the defeat and expulsion of the Russian hordes. Seizing upon this favorable opportunity to do some plundering, the hooligans of Wilna were organizing themselves into bands with the object of attacking, killing and fleecing the Jews of the city. Their plan somehow leaked out and was confidentially whispered into the ears of a leading Jewish personality, who had secret connections. He received the disturbing message only a few hours before the fast was to begin. According to his information, the pogrom was scheduled to be launched that very evening.

The Jewish population was greatly alarmed, and the officials of the congregation, fully conscious of their great responsibility, came to the conclusion that this was no time for singing. It was imperative to get through with the service as quickly as posssible and to send the people home. Such a great assemblage in one place would be a tempting target for the bestial murderers. If they were dispersed, they would have a better chance of hiding from the wild bandits.

It would seem that it was not in the cards for Yoel David to lead the congregation in the sacred prayers on that holy night of Kol Nidre. His destined time to be the emissary of his community on the holiest day of the year was not yet at hand, and therefore, fate had to take a hand to counter-

mand the premature ordination bestowed upon him by the trustees, whose hand was forced by the insistence of the impatient membership.

As for the dastardly plot, it too, was countermanded and failed by a benevolent act of fate, and the Jewish population of Wilna was spared the bloody experience. Luckily, the assault did not materialize. The fly in the ointment was the fast action of the alert Jewish leaders who pointed out to the city authorities the imminent danger to their lives. They demanded and received military protection. That they had to grease certain palms goes without saying. But the important thing was to get quick results and this was the only way to make sure that their frantic pleas would be speedily heeded.

When the bloodthirsty plotters, who were getting ready to assemble for the kill, saw the Cossack patrols cruising demonstratively in the Jewish quarter and keeping a particularly watchful eye on the synagogue, they saw the handwriting on the wall, and thought it to be the better part of wisdom to make a strategic withdrawal.

The Jews of Wilna had reason to be gratified with the way things had turned out. Nevertheless, they had a disturbed holiday. They were chagrined for having had to forego the long awaited Kol Nidre chants of their Chief Cantor in-name-only. But, for everything there is a proper time, and if one waits long enough, his patience is bound to be rewarded. Time was passing too slowly to suit the Jews of Wilna, but finally they lived to see the day, on which Yoel David attained his twentieth year. They had figuratively held their breaths for this great moment. Now they could relax, inasmuch as this was a turning point for their community. They had acquired at last a chief cantor, to whom nobody in the whole world could hold a candle.

Yoel David had grown into manhood. He had developed into a handsome, slender, sympathetic young man with chiseled features. He wore a trimmed beard which fitted him to a tee, and a thick, curly mop of hair adorned his head like a crown, giving him a dignified and attractive appearance. One only had to look at him to get the impression, that this must be a great artist. His whole being oozed distinction and bore the mark of eminence. His physical bearing unwittingly betrayed the secret of his being an exceptionally gifted individual.

During the years which had passed since his wedding, he had lived amid wealth, splendour and comfort in the home of his in-laws. But he did not waste his time in idleness or in the quest of good times and physical pleasures in the usual manner and fashion of the "nouveau riche". Instead, he utilized his enforced leisure to broaden his perspective in various fields. He devoted a great part of his spare time to the study of the Torah, the Talmud and the Commentaries. He was, in addition, quite occupied with intensive preparation for what he considered his life-calling.

His father-in-law spent a fortune on music lessons, which Yoel David took from the best professors, who could be found in Wilna. Even when he seemingly did nothing, the young Balebeysel's agile mind was in deep thought, indulging in his favorite mental exercise, which was to spin the

threads of novel musical ideas and to create original tunes, which would reflect as closely and faithfully as possible the deeper meaning of the prayers.

By the time he was twenty, he was fully prepared. He had accumulated a rich repertoire of precious compositions and an enviable musical background. His voice had also undergone profound changes in the interim and luckily for him, all for the better. It had ripened into full bloom and had acquired additional power and resonance.

When the longed-for day of the 15th of Teveth arrived, the Board of Directors of the congregation assembled in high spirits for the pleasant duty and the cherished purpose of proclaiming Yoel David Strashunsky Chief Cantor of Wilna in fact, as well as in name, and to celebrate his official installation into his office with a joyous ceremony and a sumptuous feast. He received the document of appointment, which was signed by the five Rabbis who constituted the communal religious court, and by the eleven trustee headed by Reb Nachman Parness, chairman and chief trustee.

From then on, every "Shabos Mevorchim" (Sabbath on which the blessing for the new moon is recited) became a momentous occasion, almost a holiday for the Jews of Wilna. They were looking forward to the day, on which the Balebeysel was scheduled to officiate with suspense and impatient expectation.

There was good reason for the unusually heightened interest of the populace in the new cantor. He had a way with him. Like a shrewd traveling salesman, he came equipped with a sample case crammed full with great selections, a great variety of the first-grade material in the latest fashions. And as he was unpacking and displaying his merchandise to the prospective customers, he showed the cheaper line first, gradually working up to the better and more expensive masterpieces.

Every Sabbath he served up something new from his rich, well-prepared repertoire, on which he had been working for the past several years with ever-growing and constantly increasing impact. There was something electric and magnetic about him which enthralled his listeners. And just when they thought that he had already emptied his sample case, and when it seemed that he had exhausted his bag of tricks, Yoel David played his trump cards, surprising them with a whole new line of musical goodies.

He was the talk of the town. Happy was the man who was privileged to exchange a few words with him. He was a social lion. His company was sought after and he was wooed constantly by people of the highest social strata. But he shunned the friendship of the idle rich. Being that he was a Bohemian intellectual, he felt at home with and gravitated toward the circles of the elite professionals. He became very friendly with the most prominent writers, poets, artists, professors, doctors and philosophers, who regarded him highly and were attracted to him by his unusually rich store of knowledge. He spent a great deal of time with them.

His status was greatly enhanced by his having become a member of one of the most prominent and influential families in town. The Strashun clan not only excelled in every field of communal activity, but left its indel-

ible mark in the Jewish life of Wilna for centuries to come.

One outstanding member of the prestigious family was the famous Rabbi Shmuel Strashun (1794-1872) whose grandchildren "Hoachim Romm Vehoalmono" (The Brothers Romm and The Widow) were the publishers of the highly regarded Wilna'er "Shass" (Folios of The Talmud), with all commentaries, including the brilliant commentaries of Rabbi Shmuel Strashun under the title "Hagohos R'Shash." He was blessed with great wealth which he used for tzedoko purposes.

This great scholar also left his invaluable library, containing tens of thousands of rare books to the Jewish community of Wilna, and the "Strashun Library" is housed in the "Shulehoif," the synagogue compound, next to the great synagogue (that was) and under a joint roof with that holy edifice. It was claimed that in this library reposed the most authoritative account of the lifestory of "Yoshuah the Nazarene." The street where the Jewish Museum is located is named after this scholar and philanthrope "Strashun Street"

CHAPTER 36

HOW THE WILNA BALEBEYSEL APPEARED IN AN OPERA PERFORMANCE

Noblemen and women throw bouquets of flowers at him — the tragic death of their three children — The power of his voice.

In the previous chapter, we carried our hero, the young Balebeysel, to his 20th birthday, when he was officially proclaimed as Chief Cantor of the great synagogue of Wilna. It marked his coming of age. There was great rejoicing in all circles of the city. The people adored him and carried him on the palms of their hands. After every service of his there were enthusiastic demonstrations of love and affection for the virtuoso-cantor.

He lived in the sumptous, lavish house of his father-in-law, and he even adopted his name calling himself "Strashunsky." By the time the young couple celebrated the first anniversary of their marriage, their number had grown to three. Soon there was another visit from the stork and later a third one. Chanele used to rock the children with the old lullaby, "Unter Deym Vigele Shtait Ah Veiss Tzigele" (Under the child's carriage there stands a white goat) in Yoel David's Hebrew translation and to the sweet melody which he composed. All the neighbors listened and were proud of the idyllic family and wished them all the luck in the world.

Yoel David enjoyed great popularity, which grew as time went on. His name became a household word known far and wide. The greatest musical authorities used to come to Wilna, to hear the celebrated cantor, who was spoken of as a wonder-artist. A great Rabbi said that in Yoel

David's throat there is lodged the harp of King David.

And now it is perhaps about time to let you in on the secret of his success and find out what he did possess in the way of talent and ability, that so enchanted and fascinated his audiences. His voice was a lyric tenor of crystal-clear and valvet-soft quality and of indescribably wonderful sound and lustre. No matter how large the synagogue and how numerous the worshipers, his voice penetrated the farthest corner to the most distant listener. Not one note, not one word, not even the softest pianissimo was ever lost in the process. His song poured from his lips so easily and naturally, so effortlessly, like a bubbling well. He did not have to move a muscle — no jerk, no quiver, no tug or shrug.

You cannot even imagine the artistic thrills and coloraturas which he was capable of executing. Everything was accomplished in full repose and sureness, and yet sharply marked and accentuated as if pearls were pouring out from his throat in an endless stream.

Oh yes! He could become excited, dramatic and stirring, giving vent to his passion with the whole power, temper, sound and splendor of his mighty voice, when he felt that such an outburst was called for and when the text demanded such an interpretation. But whether in a lyrical or in a dramatic mood, he always remained the sensitive artist, who never veered from his high plane and his exalted standard. No cheap affectation ever.

How do I know all this? I surely could not have known him personally and there are no phonograph recordings of his voice to judge him by. In his time, they did not even dream of ever being able to perpetuate the human voice. Well, it is very simple. I cited the above from an appraisal of Yoel David's art written by Cantor Isaac Lachman of Herben, Bavaria, after he heard the Wilna Balebeysel in his native city of Dubno in the year 1849 shortly before his death. At the time, when he was already only a shadow of his former self, when the great singer of yore was a broken man, physically as well as mentally, a sick and confused human wreck. If at his worst he was still so marvelous, we can just imagine how brilliant he must have been at the height of his career.

No wonder, therefore, that Wilna coddled him and tried by all means to satisfy his every wish and desire. They sent him expensive presents on every occasion, in spite of the fact, that he was living in the rich splendor of his father-in-law's mansion and he did not need their presents. But these were intended as tangible tokens of their affection and high regard. However all was not hearts and flowers. Although he had all the luxuries that a human being can wish for, he was not happy. Deep in his heart, a curious restlessness dominated him. He used to walk around and pace the floor of his house daydreaming and absent-minded, as if his thoughts had carried him far away. His wife was aware of the change in his behavior, and after observing him for a time, she asked him what was bothering him. She could not get a satisfactory answer from him. How could he possibly explain it to her, when his feelings were not clear even to himself.

It was his unfulfilled, unsatisfied ambition that plagued him. He grew in years and in his art. He was frustrated longing for a broader field, in

which his talents and potential qualities would have greater opportunities to develop and where he would be able to ripen and shine in his full glory. He yearned to realize fully his artistic goals. He heard the call of the wide world. The fame of the great singers of his era reached his ears and he was jealous of them. He heard about the big time operas and symphonies and he was nagged by the feeling of being left out of his right place. He learned of the existence of famous temples of music and grand opera palaces. It seemed to him, that happiness and success could be found only there and that was where a singer like him belonged.

What was Wilna with her old synagogue in comparison to what that great wide outside world had to offer? The small provincial city with its age-old out-of-date customs, oppressed him. He felt trapped like a canary in a cage. Oh! If only he could get out! How he would stretch his wings and fly away. He was confident that he could reach the sublimest heights and become the most celebrated singer in the world.

He used to stand for hours at a time at the open window and listen to the sounds of music, piano and violin that issued from a nearby house. There lived the composer Stanislav Moniuszko, and Yoel David heard the melodies, which he afterward tried to repeat. Many times he would stand near the window until after midnight, lost in his thoughts and being under the spell of the music, he did not even hear the voice of his wife who called to him, reminding him that it was time to go to bed. He would not move from the window until the music stopped. One day Moniuszko happend to pass by the house of Strashunsky, when he heard familiar tunes. Somebody was singing whole arias from his new opera, on which he currently was working and which was not yet even completed. And how remarkable! He who sang them did it so flawlessly, as if the composer himself had taught him, and the stanger had such a superb voice. He halted and stood there, completely baffled. How was that possible? He was quite sure, that he had not as yet shown anybody his newly composed music. He knocked on the door, and when he was admitted lo and behold! Whom does he find there? The cantor of the great synagogue, who reveals to him the secret of how he came by his music.

"If you do not want anybody to steal your music, you ought to play in a soundproof room," Yoel David commented. In a jocular vein he told him, that recently while strolling in the street he passed some chimney cleaners at work, who were singing melodies from some of his compositions, which they had apparently heard at his religious services. So he remarked to a companion, "My father-in-law spends a fortune on my musical studies and how much effort and work does it take before I succeed in creating something worthwhile. But lo and behold! The chimney cleaners get to learn them without any effort and cost."

"The same, Panye Moniuszko," he concluded, "applies to your case. You're sweating and working hard, exerting your brain, and it is only as a result of intensive effort, that you finally succeed in creating an opera. But I merely have to stand by the window to get it scot-free on a gold platter, complete, ready to serve, without any cost to me."

The result was that Moniuszko invited the cantor to visit his studio. He gave him lessons in vocal training, harmony and composition and they became close friends. His wife and her parents did not approve of his becoming so chummy with the composer and such a frequent visitor at his house. They were of the opinion that it was not fitting for the chief cantor of the Wilna great synagogue to be such an intimate friend of a Gentile musician and to sing in the company of Polish men and women at house parties. But their protest did not stop Yoel David and he continued his connection with Moniuszko. If anything, their relationship became even closer as time went on.

When Moniuszko was appointed to a professorship at the Warsaw Conservatory and was also named Director of the symphony orchestra of the Polish metropolis in the year 1841, Yoel David's melancholy deepened. He felt like a fish out of the water. He was lost. He missed the musical and artistic atmosphere to which he had become so accustomed. He could not find a place for himself. He was restless and distraught. Soon after that, he suffered a far greater blow. He was stricken by the terrible tragedy of the death of his three beloved children in the course of a short time, one after another. This crushed him completely. He wandered around like a ghost. He sought consolation in his violin and in his singing laments in a bitter heart-rending voice in the loneliness of his empty house. Tears glistened in the eyes of the neighbors when they heard him sing for himself and lament "Mipney Chatueynoo" (for our sins we were punished), blaming himself for the great misfortune. To get over his sorrow and to overcome the stupor which enveloped him, he suddenly decided to travel with his choir. It soon became widely known that the Wilna Balebeysel was taking to the road.

The leaders and representatives of many cities took advantage of the great opportunity and sent invitations immediately, trying to arrange an appearance of the famous cantor in their community and offering him generous rewards, if only he would grace their city with a guest appearance.

Everywhere he received a tumultuous welcome and a royal reception. The crowds were enthusiastic and grateful. It was a triumphant tour without parallel. But the object of his travels was not to make money or to gather laurels. The goal of his tour was in reality Warsaw, where his teacher Moniuszko was conducting his many-sided musical activities. When the news that the Wilna cantor was on his way to the capital reached Warsaw, the leaders of the Jewish community travelled to the outskirts of the city to meet him and to welcome him on behalf of their constituents. After the greetings, they took him to the central synagogue where an official festive reception was given him in the presence of a mammoth mob that overflowed into the street.

Among those who were present was also Moniuszko, who greeted him warmly and proceeded to arrange a concert for him in the palace of the governor and viceroy of Poland, County Paskiewitz with the assistance of a large choir and orchestra. For his program, Moniuszko selected

for him suitable arias from the operas of mostly Italian masters. His lyric tenor voice was perfectly suited to this music which had many coloratura passages and through which he could excel and show off his mastery in that art.

He had just finished his first number when, in one of the front loges, a woman fainted from the sweetness and magic of his singing. Disorder and tumult broke out in the hall. Yoel David became frightened and ran out to the back of the stage. But Benjamin, the basso, who was always at his side and served as his confidant, gave him courage by exclaiming, "What are you afraid of? Can't you hear the thunderous applause and the calls for an encore?" He finally composed himself and went out again before the footlights where he proceeded to sing excerpts from Moniuszko's new opera "Halka." There followed several cantorial chants, such as "Vehaviaynu lesholom" (bring us in peace) and "Halleil" (adoration). After each number, there was unending clapping of the palms. Finally, he took his violin in hand and with a combination of playing and singing he completely captured and enchanted his audience. Dozens of bouquets were brought up to the stage from all sides, and the women threw the singer their silken handkerchiefs. This was considered the greatest token of their expression of admiration. After the concert, the daughter of Count Paskiewitz ran up to Yoel David on the stage, and brushing aside his wet curls, gave him a kiss on the forehead. She then took a picture with him.

The second concert took place at the palace of Count Platz. These concerts made him very popular in the whole of Poland. The newspapers printed long and enthusiastic critiques about him and he was the talk of all the aristocratic circles, who could not get over the fact that a Jewish cantor should prove to be such a sensational singer. He was invited to conduct Sabbath Services in the large synagogues and temples of Warsaw, and, inasmuch as he had taken along (on his concert tour) only part of his regular choir, he now arranged to bring to Warsaw the rest of his singers to assist him at the services. The charge for admission was unusually high, but the demand for tickets was so great, that every appearance of his was sold out weeks in advance. To his services too came droves of Gentiles and noblemen, high-ranking military brass, and artists of the opera, people who were never before seen in a synagogue. All the richest and most prominent Jews of Warsaw vied for the honor and privilege of having the famous cantor of Wilna as a guest in their homes and they were willing to go to any length in order to induce him to do them the honor.

The head of the Choralna synagogue's hierarchy was one of the lucky ones whose invitation Yoel David accepted. Overjoyed, the president gathered into his home for that occasion a great number of his friends and associates, who represented the cream of society. Turning to his guest, the host suggested, "Cantor Strashunsky, perhaps you would like to honor us with conducting the evening service. None of us has yet had occasion to pray the Maariv Service."

Yoel David did not wait to be coaxed and implored too much. He im-

mediately intoned the "Vehoo rachum" (He, the Merciful) and he went so fast that before they knew it, he had almost finished. They all looked at each other in wonderment, "What is this?" But suddenly he halted before the last prayer and began to say "Boruch adonay bayom" (blessed be the Almighty in the daytime) and as he went on with his interpretation of this chant, he tore at their heartstrings and left them in tears.

During the entire time he spent in Warsaw, Yoel David lived in a dream world, in the stupor and intoxication of victory, triumph and general adoration. He was wholeheartedly and sincerely convinced that he was truly the greatest singer of his time.

His choir conductor, Benjamin Basso, related that while they were sojourning in Warsaw, the Balebeysel at one time called in the members of his choir and told them confidentially, "Before long, they will appoint me as professor of music at the conservatory of Leipzig" which was founded by Mendelsohn in 1842. His newly-found Polish admirers assured him that they would see to it that he shall obtain that post.

Meanwhile, he worked diligently and studied under Moniuszko's direction the role of "Antek" in his opera "Halka" and, naturally, you cannot possibly sing such a role wearing a beard and "peyes"(side curls) and dressed in an old-fashioned, long coat (surdut). Consequently, he was obliged to shave off his beard, change his clothes completely and lead altogether the life of a Bohemian, as was the vogue in the circle, in which he now traveled.

When the date of the premiere finally dawned, he was ready and eager for the great moment. The performance in the Royal Theatre of Warsaw was a smashing success and Yoel David was in seventh heaven. He was acclaimed by the audience and by the press as the new find of the century, a singer of God's grace. His old dream of singing in the opera finally became a reality and the resulting tributes exceeded all his expectations.

He now felt that a new horizon, with endless and boundless possibilities, had opened up before him and that he was on his way to the top of the ladder of success and world fame to which he had strived and aspired for so long.

CHAPTER 37

THE TRAGIC LOVE OF THE WILNA BALEBEYSEL FOR A POLISH COUNTESS

How it began and its tragic end — He divorces his Chanele — His mental breakdown.

We left Yoel David in the last chapter in a happy frame of mind, brimming over with joy and satisfaction after his successful debut in Moniuszko's opera "Halka."

But before we proceed any further, we will have to go back to the day, when Yoel David arrived in Warsaw. Fatigued from the trip and from the grand reception tendered him on his arrival, he returned to his hotel room and laid down to rest for a while.

When he awakened, it was already dark. Feeling refreshed, he went out into the street to see the broad boulevards, the tall buildings and beautiful parks of the big city, which he had never seen before and which made a big impression on him.

Walking along immersed in his thoughts he suddenly halted and contemplating the outlines of a beautiful palace, which had caught his attention, he suddenly heard the strains of music from a piano which seemed to come from the direction of the grand imposing palace. And to his great surprise, what did he hear, but arias from Moniuszko's new opera, "Halka." He halted and remained standing in great astonishment. "What goes on here?", he wondered. Who on earth could possible know and play arias from an opera, whose first performance was still some time away? It

could only be some intimate friend of the composer, to whom he must have given it in advance of the premiere.

He stationed himself in front of the building and listened. As the playing continued, it became clear to him, that the pianist, whoever it was, was making a shambles of the music of his beloved master. He could not restrain himself any longer and accosting the uniformed guard, who stood at the entrance, he asked him to go in and get for him from the owner of the palace permission to come in, as he had an important matter to discuss with him. The palace was the residence of none other than Count Kniaz Ivan Fiodorovitch Paskiewitz, the Polish viceroy of Tzar Nicolay the first, and the piano player was none other than his daughter the countess. The reason why she was playing the new opera of Moniuszko was, that she was the one whom the composer had chosen to play the heroine's role in his new opera. Besides being a rare beauty, she was also a wonderful singer and she was a pupil of the master, in whose studio she took lessons regularly.

But of course, Yoel David did not know any of these facts. How could he, when he had been in Warsaw only a few hours? All he knew was, that he could not let anybody make a farce out of the wonderful music of the great composer.

When the porter entered the room, where the countess, surrounded by a number of her admiring cavaliers, was playing and singing and reported that some crazy "zsidak" asked permission to come in and confer about an important matter, there broke out general laughter at this unheard of Chutzpah (nerve) of the cursed Jew. But, at the same time, they were all also curious to see the damn Jew who dared make such a request. They were also interested to hear what it was all about.

Inasmuch as they were, at the time, in a merry, cheerful mood, they were glad of the opportunity, which they thought God sent them, to have some unexpected fun with the despised Jew. So they urged the countess to admit the Jew to her presence. When Yoel David entered and the countess asked him, what the important business was, that he wanted to talk about, his reply was, that she had made several mistakes, when playing, and if she would permit him, he would be glad to show her, how these arias should be played and sung. At these words of the interloper, all present burst out into loud laughter. Now it was obvious to them that this "parshive zsid" (dirty Jew) was out of his mind. For how was it possible that he could know this new music which nobody had yet heard in a performance. Oh, would they have fun! "Well," teased the young Polish noblemen, "You cursed Jew, go ahead and show us."

Yoel David sat down at the piano, and when he was through, the high and mighty cavaliers remained speechless. As for the countess, she could not believe her eyes and ears, and she could only manage to utter these few stuttering words, "Who are you? How do you know Moniuszko's music?"

When he revealed to her how he used to stand for hours at Moniuszko's window in Wilna and listen intently to his playing of "Halka", and that furthermore the master wanted him to sing the role of

Antek at the premiere, the countess almost fainted. Such a remarkable coincidence! It is hardly necessary for us to go into further details. You can easily imagine what happened after that first meeting between them. Now you will understand how and why the first concert of Yoel David was held in the private concert hall of Count Paskiewitz's palace, and how it came about that the countess ran up to the stage, kissed him and let herself be photographed with him. They became close friends and met daily at Moniuszko's studio for rehearsals. Yoel David was often invited to the palace. They diligently worked for the great day when the opera in which they both were to play the leading roles would finally have its premiere. After the extraordinary success of the first performance, they were both in seventh heaven, and made plans for further appearances together.

Their frequent meetings and her flirting with him inevitably led to a love affair between these two young people. Yoel David gradually succumbed to her charms and fell in love with her, and don't you wonder how such a thing could occur between a Jewish cantor and a Polish countess. It was not the first time that anything like this had happened and neither was it the last. What the true feelings of the countess were toward Yoel David is not very clear. According to one version, she did not take the affair seriously, and at the same time she was having another affair.

It allegedly was for her a great triumph and satisfaction that the singer who was acclaimed and adored by Warsaw kissed her feet. It inflated her ego to see how he suffered from his burning love for her. It was a pleasant feeling to be able to hold him prisoner in her net, an obedient slave of love. In any event, whether or not this was indeed the case, or she really loved him with all her heart, he, on his part, was deeply in love with her with the burning passion of his young soul. He was also convinced that their love was mutual, that she was true and faithful to him, and that she was ready to join him in an eternal alliance, as soon as he could free himself from his marital ties.

At home in Wilna, his dear ones began to suspect that something untoward was happening to the Balebeysel. His wife did not receive any replies to her letters. She asked questions. What kept him so long in the strange city? How long did he think the Wilna congregation would wait for him? He surely would lose his position if he did not hurry home.

A shower of urgent letters descended upon him not only from his wife, but also from his father-in-law, and from the trustees of the congregation. But there was no answer from him and, no wonder, for he himself was at sea and knew not what to do. His conscience began to torment him. His inborn inclination to strict religious conduct, his God-fearing upbringing, and the insistent letters from home had after all a disturbing effect on him. They woke him up to some extent from the blinding and dazzling dream world, into which he had strayed. They sobered him up a little, made him think realistically about the dangerous situation, into which he had let himself be drawn. His conscience bothered him so strongly that he could not face his contemplated actions with equanimity. They were a denial of everything that he was taught to hold precious and holy.

In his heart and mind there was brewing a terrific conflict between desire and duty. It was a matter of whether he should give way to his passionate desire, to let the "Yeitzer horo," the bad nature ride over him roughshod and direct his actions, driving him toward this sinful love or should he take himself in hand and repel the "Satan," ignore his advice and with all his might try to conquer and suppress the burning passion, that possessed him. Thus he could prove to himself, that he was equal to the challenge and able to stand up in the face of temptation. He knew and felt that he was falling deeper and deeper into the swamp, and that the longer he stayed on in Warsaw, the less chance he would have of escaping from the net, which was closing about him. He also had some inkling that his beloved's interest in him was waning. He found her too often in the company of his rival for her affections. So he suddenly decided to flee without saying goodbye to anyone and left for Vienna, where he was a guest in the home of Solomon Zultzer.

Vienna opened the eyes of Yoel David. There he learned that there was a cantorial art of an entirely different sort and style — a new school of thought, which brought the classical musical forms into the temples of prayer. He found out that there was still a lot that he did not know and this had the effect of confusing him still more. Which road should he now choose? Should he stick to his Lithuanian-Polish cantorial method, in which field he was considered the incomparable master or should he switch to the new school of Zultzer? Or maybe it would be advisable for him to give up his entire cantorial past and take the advice of Moniuszko, who promised him a great, brilliant future in the opera?

On the other hand, how can a man suddenly throw away everything that he has so painfully built up, deny his whole past and start a brand new career from scratch, after he has for the past twenty years been acclaimed all over the world as the sweet singer of Israel?

His head almost burst from assessing all these different possibilities, and in addition to all these burning questions that agitated him, there was the main trouble that made him miserable. All the time his unquenchable love for the countess did not cease to burn in his heart. All the arguments against his feelings were to no avail. The heart could not listen to reason. How to get out of this dilemma? What was the solution? Who could give him the right advice? He could find no way out. The ceaseless self-tortures resulted in a complete breakdown, physical as well as mental.

He returned to Wilna in a depressed mood, in a condition of melancholy and mental exhaustion. His wife and his in-laws were shocked by his appearance. They could not imagine what happened to him. Somebody must have given him an evil eye (ayin horo) or used witchcraft to snare him. God's grace (the shechina) had turned away from him. Warsaw ruined him and spoiled his life.

The whole city was agog. It was not the same Yoel David. There was talk all over Wilna, that a woman in Warsaw, an opera singer, invited him after the performance to drink a cup of tea with her and she poured some powder into his cup which paralyzed his mind. She allegedly did it so that

he would not be able to give any more concerts, as he was too much of a competition for her and the other opera singers.

His father-in-law took him to the best doctors, but none of them were able to diagnose his sickness, because symptoms of any malady of the body they could not detect in him even after the most thorough examination and the doctors of that era did not as yet have even the faintest idea about Freud's theory.

Meanwhile, at home, arguments and quarrels were the order of the day. His wife began nagging him. Reproaches, complaints, demands, jealousy, and scenes were an every day occurrence in their family life. She upbraided him, demanding to know how come he was not ashamed to walk around dressed in a short coat, German fashion, what had made him shave off his beard and side burns and how could he show his naked face as if he were a Gentile? What would people say and what kind of respect could he command with such a face and dress? How could he look into the eyes of the congregants, who used to think the world of him and who were very proud of their cantor. But this new look would surely be his undoing.

After a while, he came to the conclusion that the wife, with whom he had lived for so many years was a complete stranger to him. She did not understand him. All she knew was to read her prayer book, her Bible and her Tzena Urena (Yiddish commentary on the Bible). They had no common interests.

Since after the great tragedy there were no more children in the house, nothing tied him any longer to the big empty house of his father-in-law. The constant fights and scenes got on his nerves. They excited him and made him sick. He could not stand it any longer. So one day he got together some of his things and left. He went to live with his sister, Gitke Toibe.

He decided that it would be best for him to divorce his wife, but she would not even hear of it. Her father sent influential prominent members of the congregation to Yoel David to try to dissuade him from his weird plan. They spoke to him, urging him to return home and forget about the divorce. But to all their arguments, he turned a deaf ear. He was determined to get his freedom. One day a messanger came to him from the governor, who wanted to see him. What, he wondered, could the governor want of him? When he appeared before the mighty ruler, he found out. It turned out, that his father-in-law, Reb Mordechay Reines Strashun, who was one of the most distinguished citizens of Wilna, had the ear of this highest authority of the state. In desperation, when all else failed, he turned to his friend, the governor, imploring him to use his influence on his son-in-law to prevent his administering this ultimate, insulting slap-in-the-face to his beloved daughter. But the stubborn Yoel David did not stand in trembling awe even before the great man. With pride in his voice, he replied, "You great 'Poritz' magnate are one in a state, but I am one in 20 states, and maybe even in more, and I am not afraid of you. My personal affair is nobody else's business."

Yudel Apatov, one of the most prominent trustees of the great syna-

gogue, was also asked to intervene but he was of the opinion that antagonizing the cantor was a bad policy, so he remained neutral, refusing to take sides. He invited Yoel David to be his guest, and the cantor stayed for a time in his house. He remained adamant about the divorce. But what could he do, when Chanele categorically refused to even consider a divorce? He was helpless. Finally, under the circumstances, some of his friends suggested how he could in the quickest time get rid of his recalcitrant wife. It was an unwritten law in Wilna that whoever passed the Cathedral had to take off his hat. Jews therefore never would go near that street. They advised him to demonstratively pass before that church and remove his hat. In the eyes of his ultrareligious wife, this act would mean as much as if he had converted to Christianity and after that she surely would not want to live with him any longer. So she would have no other alternative but to get a divorce. It worked and the divorce was granted. His friends hoped that now he would recover. But this didn't help his condition either. On the contrary, his mental breakdown became worse and his melancholy more pronounced. He wandered around as if in a dream, like a sleepwalker.

After his act in front of the Central Provoslavna Church, he was, of course, obliged to resign from his post of cantor. Inasmuch as he consequently remained unemployed and without any income, three trustees - Chayim Nachman Parness, Yudel Apatov and Hirsch Katzenellenboigen, supported him with their private contributions and they saw to it, that he would want for nothing. They did it out of the goodness of their hearts and out of compassion, since it was clear and evident, that they had on their hands a very sick man, who was in need of sympathy, help and compassionate understanding until God would, in his infinite mercy, have pity on him and send him a lasting and complete healing. They hoped and wanted to believe that it was only a matter of time before the beloved Balebeysel would be back on his feet fully restored to health.

CHAPTER 38

THE FINAL TRAGIC YEARS OF THE WILNA BALEBEYSEL

The last years of his life spent in self-imposed wanderings as a penance — His deep melancholy — His death and burial in Warsaw.

In the previous chapter we left the "Wilner Balebeysel" in the home of his sister where he had moved after he, at last, had succeeded in divorcing his wife. It was generally assumed that his motive in seeking tirelessly to free himself from the marital bond was to make it possible for him to marry the countess whom he had met in Warsaw. But to the great surprise of his intimate friends and relatives and, for that matter, of that of the whole community, thereafter he never again even mentioned her name. Moreover, he never even made any attempt to get in touch with her. That romance was apparently a closed chapter.

It became evident that he had lost his mental balance. From then on, he could be found most of the time sitting in the house deeply absorbed in his thoughts. His sister hired a "tooter" (Tartarian, Mongolian) to watch over him lest he, God forbid, make an attempt to commit suicide. It was her fervent hope that this bodyguard, who was also supposed to possess some latent magical power, would completely cure her unfortunate brother with the help of his sorcery, conjuring pronouncements and his whip. She gave the bodyguard strict orders not to let Yoel David out of his sight for even a minute. He heeded her instructions carefully and dutifully he constantly used to follow his trusted ward around like a shadow.

There were occasional lucid moments when he suddenly began singing, but as soon as he would notice that the people, who happened to be

nearby were listening, he would stop, and no words of persuasion could induce him to continue.

There were instances when he would, after having taken a stroll, halt suddenly near the wall of some building and stand there motionless like a statue for hours at a time, without uttering a word or taking notice of the crowd that invariably was gathering around him. He would refuse to budge until finally the tooter had to threaten him with his strap to make him move on and only then would he reluctantly follow him, returning to his home. Once there, he would slump into his chair exhausted (after standing on his feet for such a long spell.)

He used to frequent the old "Zaavel's Kloiz" (small house of prayer) for his daily devotion. He chose a seat near the wall, in the rear, and there he always recited his prayers. He also used to sit there sometimes hunched over a folio of the Talmud, studying the tenets of the sacred volumes to the accompaniment of a quietly hummed sad tune.

There were occasions when he would don his silk top hat and steal away from his room to prance in the street, clad in the festive vestiments that he used to wear on the holy Sabbath or on holy days in the synagogue. But he could not very well hide for any length of time from his keeper who, upon realizing that his ward was missing, immediately took off in search of him and made him return home.

One time, though, he did manage to evade the ever-watching eye of his guard. The house of his sister was in an uproar. The cause? Yoel David was nowhere to be located. It happened on a Friday afternoon. He had dressed himself up in his Sabbath best and had made good his getaway. After running through the "German Street," he turned into an obscure narrow little street adjoining the great community synagogue and, entering the building on the corner, he went upstairs to the residence of Reb Wolf Klatzko, the "Mohel" (religious functionary who performs circumcision rituals), who maintained in one room of his home a steady "Minyan" (literally "number" — ten is the number of adult male Jews needed for a public worship session).

Several people who had come to join in the Sabbath service, were already assembled. Yoel David stationed himself in front of the mirror that was hanging there, and in the process, while observing himself and adjusting his tie and forcing back a stubbornly protruding curl under his skull cap, he was seen grimacing and making all kinds of funny faces, but not one of those present dared approach him or try to engage him in conversation. When Yoel David heard somebody remark that it was time to begin the prayer session, the "Kabolas Shabos" (the reception of the Queen Sabbath), he rushed up to the pulpit, as if he feared that someone would take it away from him and started at once to chant "Lechoo Neraneno" (Let's Sing to the Lord), sounding out the words with the full power of his voice.

He continued with the presentation of a new "Lecho Dodi" (Let's Go My Friend), a tune which nobody had ever before heard him sing. He had apparently composed it only recently and this was the first opportuni-

ty for him to sing it publicly. As ome of those who were lucky enough to hear it later recalled, it was unique, a veritable masterpiece. But when it came to "Borchu" (Bless Ye), the initial prayer of the Maariv (evening) service, he took off his prayer shawl and quit the pulpit, refusing all entreaties to continue. It would seem that all he wanted was to try out his new composition. With that accomplished, he was not interested in officiating any further.

There were periods, albeit rare, when the state of melancholy, that depressed his spirit, was lifted temporarily and his mind cleared. At such times, when he regained his composure, his actions would become normal and natural. One Sabbath morning, when a number of guests at Klatzko's "Beys Hamedrosh" (house of prayer and study) were present, including businessmen from out of town, they implored the famous ex-cantor to honor them with the recitation of at least one prayer.

Yoel Davis happened to feel pretty good. The "devil" (evil spirit), as they used to call his illness, had let up on him somewhat and yielding to the insistent requests of the visitors, he recited his famous "Ezras" (the shield) quite a long prayer from beginning to end. It took him almost a half hour, but it was something to behold. His voice rang out in its full splendor and strength, clear as a bell. His interpretation was a masterpiece of liturgical art.

When his grateful audience afterward flocked to him to congratulate him for his matchless performance, surrounding him with love and deep appreciation, they bombarded him also with questions about his future plans. This time he was talkative, and in reply to their inquiries he readily admitted that he had great plans, first and foremost of which was to embark on a concert tour, which would ultimately take him to St. Petersburg where he had scheduled a number of appearances, including a command performance in the royal palace of Tzar Nicholas the First.

One particularly memorable occasion was when he accepted an invitation to conduct a complete Sabbath service in the "Gaon's Kloiz" (the synagogue where the world famous scholar [Gaon] of Wilna, Reb Eliyahu Landau, used to pray). Tickets of admission were sold for that date. When the news got around, people streamed in droves from all corners of the city to witness the great event. Only a small portion of the crowd could be accommodated in the small synagogue, located on the upper floor to which a narrow staircase had to be negotiated. Those who were unable to gain entrance, climbed up to the roofs of the nearby located buildings.

There was naturally some lingering doubt in the minds of the populace of Wilna about the ability and readiness of the "Balebeysel" to honor and fulfill his commitments at any given moment. It was largely dependent upon the state of his mental health. But this time, fortunately, he was as good as his word. He was in high spirits, notwithstanding the fact that during the religious service his "shadow" was watching over him all the time.

Not only did nothing untoward occur, but those who had a chance to observe him closely were later quoted as saying, that from the way he con-

ducted the service, from his whole behavior and post-service remarks, they had gained the impression that Yoel David's condition was definitely improving and that he was returning to normal. In their opinion, the great artist would soon again be the outstanding person that he was before his illness.

They found confirmation for their belief that their hope was not just wishful thinking in one significant incident which occurred during the service and which attracted the particular attention of all the worshipers. Standing in front of the open ark after having placed the holy scroll into the sanctified ark, Yoel David recited, in his marvellous way, the prayer "Uvnuchu Yomar" (When It Rested He Said). When he came to the concluding three words, "Chadeysh Yomeynu Kekedem" (Renew Our Present Days So That They Will Be Like the Days of Old), he poured out his heart with such prayerful intensity, repeating them over and over, emphasizing them with ever-increasing, almost tearful, insistence, that not an eye remained dry as the meaningful text's relation to the praying cantor's mental condition was realized by the congregation, sinking into their minds and making the hearts of all those present tremble. And they all joined him in the prayer and the hope that his request would be granted him by the Merciful Father in heaven.

Many years had come and gone since Yoel David had quit his post and his former employers were still unable to pick a successor to occupy the pulpit vacated by him. Actually, they had not even tried to choose a new cantor and had no intention of doing so for the simple reason that they were waiting for a miracle. They were still hoping that the thick fog that had enveloped the mind of their beloved "Balebeysel" and had darkened his life, would one lucky day be lifted by a heavenly edict and he would be completely cured and able once again to return to his orphaned "Omud" (pulpit).

They would wholeheartedly gloss over what happened before his nervous breakdown and forgive all the misdemeanors committed by him, for now it was apparent that he had been acting under mental stress, in a state of temporary insanity. Surely one cannot be held responsible for deeds committed under such circumstances and there would be no justification for judging him harshly. At any rate, whatever mistakes he had made were not of such a serious nature that they could disqualify him from reoccupying his post. If only God would send him his healing angel as he did to the patriarch Abraham. But the Jews of Wilna waited in vain. The so-fervently desired miracle did not come to pass.

The last concrete effort to bring the "Balebeysel" back into the sanctuary, where his voice used to enchant thousands of worshipers, was made in the year 1846. The season was spring when nature is waking up from its wintry slumber and renewing itself, shedding its drab facade and clothing itself in garbs of an endless variety of colors.

The Passover holidays were around the corner, and now Wilna was expecting a very prominent guest. The great Jewish statesman, world-famous philanthropist, spokesman for world Jewry, for whom the doors

of kings and rulers of nations were always open, Sir Moses Montefiore, was about to pay a visit to the "Jerusalem of Lithuania". How highly regarded this visiting English dignitary was in the government circles of Petersburg, as well as in the royal court of the reigning czar, and how much importance was attached to gain his goodwill, may be deduced from the fact that the governor of the region, undoubtedly on instructions from his superiors, called in the leaders of the Wilna Jewish community, advising them officially of the impending arrival of Sir Moses, and adding that it would please the administration very much, if he would be given a grand gala reception by his co-religionists.

Taking the hint, the leaders of the Jewish population made elaborate preparations. It was decided to decorate the interior of the great synagogue and the surrounding synagogue court as well with flowers. As a highlight of the occasion, Yoel David Strashunsky was invited to chant the religious services on the two Sabbaths, which, according to the schedule, Sir Moses Montefiore intended to spend in their city. The "Balebeysel" readily agreed to officiate on those auspicious occasions to make the visit of the great guest as memorable as possible.

(For the sake of objectivity, it must parenthetically, be stated and duly recorded, that even though the impending visit of the most respected and beloved Jew of his generation was of tremendous importance to the Jews of Wilna — and they were looking forward to it with much joy and great expectations — it is nevertheless a fact, that they were even more excited about the prospect of at long last seeing Yoel David back at his old post and listening to his sweet chants. Their hopes were fired up to a high pitch, but at the same time, their hearts were beating with anguished concern lest something go wrong at the last moment.)

Well, sad to say, the cards were stacked against things going smoothly. If something is not destined to happen, human beings are helpless in their efforts to bring it about. No matter how tight their plans and preparations, it will avail them nothing. In the end, they are bound to fail. This was one of those hopeless cases. As the time for the big event approached, Yoel David's condition grew worse by the day. He regressed into a state of deep mental disturbance. It became evident to all that he would not be able to make an appearance before the great number of people who were expected to pack the synagogue to the rafters. There was nothing to do, but to make other arrangements, and at the last moment the trustees succeeded in engaging the famous cantor of Ponyevezs, Yisroel Yaakov Shkooder, a native of Shkud Gubernia of Kovno to fill in for the indisposed Balebeysel.

And here we are again obliged to refer to the inscrutable ways of destiny. Fate intervened in an apparent effort to save the life of the Balebeysel. It was widely commented upon in the days to come, and it was the general opinion that Yoel David was lucky that he had not been able to officiate on that Sabbath, for the visit of Sir Moses ended with a tragic mishap.

Sir Moses Montefiore arrived in Wilna on April 19th to a roaring enthusiastic welcome. He was greeted on his arrival with a grand parade. The

streets were lined with tens of thousands of people in a festive mood, and they gave the honored guest an enthusiastic reception and a noisy ovation. Even the gentile population turned out en masse in honor of the visitor whom they called "Zsidovsky Krool" (the Jewish king).

Montefiore's visit had the salutary effect of bridging the gap and healing the rift, at least temporarily, between the strictly religious circles and the "Maskilim," the free thinking groups of the so-called "enlightened minds," who took the tenets of their faith lightly. There used to be constant friction, and even what one might call distinct enmity, between the two differently oriented parties. But for the reception of Moses Montefiore, the Chief Rabbi of Wilna rode in the same coach with Berke Michaylishker Lebensohn, better known by his nom de plume "Adam Hakoheyn," the most representative individual of the "Maskilim."

On the holy Sabbath, Montefiore was assigned the seat of honor in the central synagogue. It was so crowded, that the mounted police had to be called out to keep order, but they were unable to cope with the ever-increasing crowd. It proved to be beyond their power to stem the tide of the mob, that stormed the entrance to the house of worship, determined to get a glimpse of the great humanitarian and to hear the message that he brought them. Not to be discounted was also the additional attraction of the imported famous cantor. Inside the sanctuary there was pandemonium. It was impossible to move. People stepped on each other's toes, since they were packed like sardines. How they were able to breathe was indeed a mystery.

While the reading of the weekly portion of the Bible was in progress, Cantor Shkooder made his way somehow through the throng to the lavatory, but he was not that fortunate once he tried to return to the pulpit. People were pushing each other and as the waves of humanity were swaying back and forth, Shkooder was caught up in the crush and sustained such a wallop straight to his heart, that he lost consciousness and it took sometime to revive him. However, the damage done to his heart turned out to be fatal, and after lingering for three days between life and death he passed away, in the prime of his life, at the age of thirty-six years. This fatal incident threw a saddening pall over the planned festivities.

When Moses Montefiore came to Wilna he was the guest of the greatest and most revered magnate of the city Joseph Zakheim. He placed at the disposal of the famous philantropist from England a whole wing of his home, which was a veritable palace. The whole city was agog with the distinguished visitor. The house was besieged by thousands of petitioners day and night, who sought admittance to see Sir Moses to ask help from him.

There surely was no lack of poverty and "Tzores" (troubles) in Wilna and the arrival of the English magnate evoked hope in the hearts of the needy and miserable Jews and they came in droves to submit to him their petitions in the hope of getting relief from him.

To protect the guest from the insistent crowd, watchmen were placed around the house. All those who asked to see Sir Montefiore were given the same answer: "Put your request in writing and we'll hand it over to the

secretary of Sir Moses."

There was in the Vilna of that era a "Sofer" a lithographer,an excellent penman who was well known for his expertness in several languages and for his beautiful hand writing, which was like painting. His name was Reb Hirsh Bunimovitz. So people came to him to have their petitions written out. Everyone wanted Reb Hirsh to write a whole "megillah" the more the better about his Yichuss (family tree) and his great need, in which he and his family find themselves.

Reb Hirsh was besieged by so many people, that in desperation he begged of them: "What do you need long petitions for? Sir Moses wouldn't be able to read them all anyway. Come to the point. All I need to write on your behalf is: 'Deitshele, gib gelt'; [Dear German coreligionist (all foreigners were grouped under one umbrella and called 'Germans') give money] and that's all."

From then on all over Lithuania spread the saying: "Deitschele gib gelt, un duss alles". Montefiore needed no prodding and that Reb Hirsh was right and is attested by the figures. He spent eleven days in the city and by the time he took leave from his Lithuanian Jewish admirers on April 30th he had distributed a fortune in largesse for charitable causes. A partial list of his magnificent donations included five hundred rubles which he handed over to the civilian governor (Gubernator) for distribution among needy families. To the "Maggid" (spiritual head of the Wilna community) he gave six hundred rubles for help to the poor and one hundred eighty rubles for his own needs. To four Kloiz's (small synagogues) twenty five rubles each, a total of one hundred rubles. For Ramoyles Yeshivah five hundred thirty five rubles. To the numerous writers and poets several of who dedicated special poetry in his honor a total of three hundred rubles. For helpers who rendered services at his visit to the cemetery eighty rubles. His pledged donation at the last religious service thirty five rubles. To a certain Jew named Matus three hundred rubles. To great many persons who applied to him by letters for assistance a total of 600 rubles and to the widow of Moshe Bahumova three hundred rubles — To the "Polkownik" Kamayevshy for his services, hundred rubles — and to the bereaved family of the cantor Yisroel Shkooder five hundred rubles. It was also recalled that he left the sum of four thousand rubles in silver coin to the Jewish community of Wilkomir for some sentimental reasons. When the leaders of the Wilna community thanked him profusely for his unparalleled generosity, when bidding him a tearful goodby he gallantly replied: "It is not I who deserves your gratitude. All thanks and credit is due to my dear wife. It was her wish and desire and it was at her urging that I was moved to do my modest good deed. I wish that my main mission in St. Petersburg will bring some beneficial results." Alas as it turned out it did not. The Russian leopard did not change his spots, in spite of Sir Moses' "shtadlonis" [persuasive pleading]. Moses Montefiore's visit, even though it became to a great extent beclouded by the tragic death of Yisroeil Shkooder brought a little sunshine into the lives of the Jews of Wilna.

His presence among them lifted their spirits and his evident interest in

their welfare raised some hope in their hearts. But there was one individual in town on whom it had just the opposite effect.

The tragic fate that befell one of his favorite colleagues had a bad effect on Yoel David's deteriorating state of health. It wounded his soul to an additional considerable degree. He became disdainful of all that Wilna stood for. He was irritated by all his friends and acquaintances who were looking at him with expressions of sorrow, pity and deep concern. He was particularly annoyed and vexed by the strangers who would accost him whenever he went out and would even follow him around as if he were some kind of a freak on exhibition in a circus.

In the course of his attempts to weigh and assess his actions he had come to the inevitable conclusion that there was no getting away from the fact that he was a sinner. He had carried on a love affair with a strange woman while married, a sin even more aggravated and compounded by the fact that the woman was a gentile. It was unforgivable. The fact that his love was hardly reciprocated and had gone no further than platonic sentiment could, as he saw it, not mitigate his guilt one bit.

His heart was overflowing with a feeling of deep regret. What he must do now he concluded was not only pray to the Lord for forgiveness, but also do penance. He became a "Baal Tshoovah" (a penitent) and decided to henceforth deny himself the enjoyment of any worldly pleasures, of any comforts of life and to leave Wilna forever and to become an eternal wanderer, a homeless exile.

His friends caught wind of his plans and tried to dissuade him from carrying out his senseless project. In vain, they argued that if he did indeed commit a sin it had been merely in thought, and according to our sages, God does not count an evil thought as a sin. It is only when one intends to do a good deed that the Lord gives him credit for the thought, even though it is not carried out. Consequently, they pointed out that there was nothing for him to repent, but their arguments fell on deaf ears. Neither was he moved by the desperate pleas and threats of his devoted sister who had been alerted by her friends to the danger that her sick and impulsive brother might do something foolish and irresponsible.

For a while nothing untoward happened and his sister was thereby lulled into the optimistic supposition that Yoel David most likely had reconsidered and had given up his wild ideas. But one day when the vigilance on her part and that of his hired guard was relaxed, the "Balebeysel" packed his sack, got away unnoticed and set out on the road to nowhere in particular.

For five years, he was a "nah venadnik" (vagabond), trudging and wandering around from town to village to hamlet, back and forth, with no goal save that of doing penance. He denied himself food, sleep and decent clothing. If he spent the day in one place, at night he was off to another, never allowing himself any rest or peace. He felt that he had to suffer in order to expiate his sins, while still in this vale of tears, so that when the time for his demise arrived, his soul would go to its heavenly rest purged of all impurities.

He went around swathed in tattered clothes and with shoulder-long hair. If he laid down his tired body for an hour of sleep on one of the bare benches of some Bais Hamedrosh (house of study), he did not remove his clothes.

After long years of leading the thorny ascetic life of a repentant "Nozir" (one who vowed not to cut his hair or drink wine), of wandering around and fasting, he was by now more spirit than body. He wanted to have nothing to do any more with earthly desires or interests. He cut himself off completely from society. He refused and repelled any and all approaches on the part of even the most well-intentioned people. He wanted to have no social contact at all. He kept to himself and it was almost impossible to get a word out of him.

If he did settle down for a while in any one place, it was only to go straight to the synagogue to pray and then to bury his face in the sacred books of the Talmud and other scriptural volumes that give guidelines of conduct for the God-fearing Jew. Wherever he could put his hands on the folios containing the teachings of the sages of old, he studied them until his eyes closed from sheer exhaustion. Only then would he stretch out on the hard bench for a short interlude and a fleeting nap.

The study of the holy books was his exclusive preoccupation. No wonder then that he became extremely well versed in the labyrinths of the Talmud and its various commentaries. He still possessed the rare brilliance of mind, the intellectual excellence and the phenomenal memory that had always been one of his outstanding characteristics.

A large part of the religious literature he knew backward and forward, by heart. To get an idea of the breadth of his knowledge, it may suffice to record the fact that carrying out to the letter the instructions of the "Sheloh Hakodosh" (the holy "Sheloh" a scholar of saintly memory), he reviewed mentally each and every Friday, from memory, the whole tract (Mesechta) of "Eyroovin" from the beginning to end (it contains laws concerning preparation for the Sabbath). On the Sabbath, he rehearsed again from memory the tract of "Sabbath" from beginning to end — an astounding feat even for the greatest of Talmudic scholars.

It was only natural that, wherever the Wilna Balebeysel appeared in the course of his aimless wanderings, that people used all means of persuasion to get him to their pulpit to chant a service. But it goes without saying, that all such pleas bounced off him like peas thrown at a wall. All such efforts were in vain. He would not even listen much less answer favorably.

Still it did happen once or twice, that he was caught in an obliging mood and to the surprise of everyone and to their boundless joy, he would agree to conduct a prayer session. Such was the case in Dubno. He was in that city in the year 1849. It was on a bitterly cold winter day. He was clad in very tattered summer clothes, that hung on his body like torn rags. As was his habit, he went directly to the house of religious study (Bais Hamedrosh) to warm up his frozen bones. He climbed to the top of the round-bellied brick furnace, and stretching out his legs, he fell asleep on

its chalky surface. By sheer coincidence, Cantor Yitzchok Lachman, who in later years became connected with the Jewish community of Hirbin, at that juncture still a young lad, became interested in the Wilna Balebeysel of whose exploits he heard so much. When the word got around that the Wilner Balebeysel was observed entering the town, he decided to try his luck with him.

He alerted the trustees of the Dubno synagogue, and together they went in search of the elusive Yoel David, pounced on him and began working on him to soften him up. It took some doing. They had to summon all their persuasive powers to get anywhere with him, but, they finally succeeded in breaking his resistance, and extracted from him a promise to make an exception and to chant the ritual this one time. Ignoring his vigorous protests, they gave him a new outfit and made him don the warm clothes that were more in keeping with the rough weather of the season. On the Sabbath, he did himself proud and left them something to remember him by. What they heard was the ultimate in liturgical art.

We also have a record of one such other occasion, when the Balebeysel yielded to the pressure brought to bear upon him and ascended the pulpit. In this case, Grodno was the lucky beneficiary, according to the testimony of the well-known writer A.S. Friedburg, who was an eyewitness to the event.

In both of these instances, the Wilner Balebeysel was by now only a shadow of his former self, weak, and thin as a rail. But we have the reliable testimony of the above-mentioned, well-qualified connoisseurs that his exhausting constant wanderings and the self-imposed, harsh deprivations that he endured, had a negligible effect on his innate extraordinary talent. His voice still exuded honey-like sweetness and his prayers had the impact of soothing balm on the heart.

The profound piety which had possessed him with ever-increasing dominance added still another dimension of spiritual fervor to his chants. The listeners could not help but instinctively feel that every word uttered by the inspired reader was bursting forth from the depth of a broken, suffering heart, and there was no resisting the sincere burning flame that consumed the praying messenger. His chants penetrated the hearts of the worshipers making them tremble and moving them to tears.

The tragic events in his life served to only deepen his sensitive feelings. When he stood at the pulpit and was praying in humility, in apparent pain, and in intense dedication, it was as though living souls or angels were flying around in the air of the sanctuary, heavenly messengers who had come down to carry the prayers of the purified great "Chazzon" to the throne of the Almighty. His chants seemed to be like a dream, unreal yet irresistible. The impression gained by the worshipers was that not a man of flesh and blood, but a ghost was standing in front of them and making heavenly music, that gripped their hearts with a supernatural magical magnetism.

Again, I am merely quoting the descriptions of those who witnessed these performances and who were so overwhelmed by the rare experience

that they were unable to get over it. The memory of that service stayed with them throughout their lifetime.

He was ambling around, a restless wanderer, aimlessly meandering over fields and roads, over hills and valleys, trotting from hamlet to village, from burg to city, wrapped in tattered garments, that were hanging from his emaciated, shriveled body in shreds. A faded old cap was pulled over his forehead — shoulders rounded and hunched so that he seemed smaller than he in fact was.

Hungry and thirsty he would keep on walking until total exhaustion would force him to pause, rest up and try to get some nourishment. Occasionally he would burst out in his melancholy gnawing tunes, that caused goosepimples to stand out on the skin of those who happened to hear them.

Peasants, having pity on the ravaged vagrant, would offer him food and clothes that would shield him from the biting cold, but he would accept nothing from them. How he managed to keep body and soul together and sustain life remained a mystery. On his Odyssey one Wednesday toward eventide he stumbled into Berditchev and as was always the first thing he would do upon hitting a town , he searched for the first house of worship that he could find.

On entering he found the old cantor holding a rehearsal session with his choir. When he saw a pale crusty almost barefoot hobo garbed in "shmates" (rags) planting himself in a corner, murmuring apparently his evening prayers, he naturally took him for a down-on-his-luck beggar. He went over, gave him "Shalom aleychem" and asked him who he was and where he came from. "I'm a poor man and a stranger in town" was the evasive answer he received.

"What can I do for you?" this from the cantor. The stranger did not reply to this query.

But there was really no need for him to give an answer. It was quite clear that the poor devil was hungry, thirsty, tired and sleepy, and what he most urgently was in need of was food, shelter and decent clothing, as well as shoes, shirts, etc.

The cantor immediately made the arrangements fo the vagrant mendicant to be fed and given lodging for the night in the "Hachnosas Orchim" (Home for The Indigent Wanderers).

On the following day he went to work soliciting help from among his friends to acquire some warm clothes, shirts and shoes for him. And while on his samaritan mission he also collected a few rubles for the apparently penniless hobo.

But to his surprise when he came to the lodging house for Wayfarers, intending, to hand over the donated items to the tramp, he refused to shed his rags and don the wardrobe, which the cantor had brought him. As for the money he resolutely insisted, that under no circumstance could he accept monetary contributions from anybody. It was anyhow of no use to him.

The puzzled cantor working on the vagabond for hours with his fath-

erly persuasive manner, finally succeeded at least in convincing him, that he must divest himself of the tattered shabby garments if he didn't want to freeze to death of contract pneumonia or another deadly disease.

Thursday evening at rehearsal time the stranger, decked out already in his new vestments, appeared again in the vestry and after listening for a while to the singing of the ensemble, he said addressing the cantor: "You were so kind to me, that as a reward for your compassion I will substitute for you tomorrow evening, by chanting in your place the 'Kabolas Shabos' Service".

"What?" The choir boys didn't believe their ears and broke out in a loud guffaw. "You mean to say, that you want to occupy the 'Omud'? Now we heard everything! . . . You must be joking. You surely cannot be serious! What do you know about Chazzonuth?"

"But I am quite serious and I do know something about 'Chazzonuth,' " insisted the poor "orach." The singers in a hilarious, spoofing mood scattered.

"Just look who wants to daven 'Kabolos Shabos'! Who does he think he is? What does this 'holedrige' [tramp] think our synagogue is, a 'shtib'l' where they allow any 'dilettante' to step up and lead in the prayers? The Chutzpah of a 'shnorrer'! He had better stop talking nonsense and instead stay put in the 'Hekdesh' [lodging for poor wayfarers]. Maybe there they'll let him lead in the prayer session."

The cantor was naturally not any less astonished at the unexpected turn of the conversation. But not wanting to hurt the feelings of his protege, he refrained from making a reply one way or another in the hope that the mysterious queer fellow won't press the point and realizing himself the utter foolishness of his thoughtless offer will not repeat it, thus sparing him the unpleasant task of having to decline it.

But far from giving up, the odd stranger adamantly remained standing through the long stoney silence of the cantor, waiting for an answer, and when it was not forthcoming, he finally with a sad grimace distorting his face he stubbornly repeated: "I want to daven at your 'Bimah' [elevation altar] 'Kabolas Shabbos' this coming Sabbath eve".

Taken aback by this resolute determination, the cantor, not resisting any longer, evasively replied, "for my part I'll have no objection. If the 'gabbay' [trustee of the ritual] will agree you will 'daven' ".

Greatly intrigued to find out what lay behind this strange request, the gabbay did give him the go ahead. It all still struck the singers as too comical to take seriously and it tickled their funnybone so much, that they were hardly able to restrain themselves and were still grinning when the Balebeysel (because as you might already have guessed it was none other than the cantor of Wilna) began intoning the introductory series of psalms beginning with "Lechoo Nerannenoh".

At the outset his voice was overlaid with a coating of slight hoarseness. But it didn't take long for him to overcome the temporary indisposition. Soon his real voice broke through and such heavenly sounds kept emanating from his throat, that they sent stirring electrical currents through

the hearts and souls of the worshipers.

People felt like fainting away from the enchanting sweetness of his marvellous voice. With bated breaths the whole congregation hung on every word of the wayfarer, the identity of whom nobody knew. Old men were so moved by his sincere outpouring of his prayers, that they wept like children. He lifted their spirits and they found themselves floating on cloud nine.

The nonplussed cantor in his stupefied admiration cried out; "What is happening here?" He impulsively ran over to the stranger and begged him, "For the love of God" (Um Gottes willen) "ich baschver eich [I swear], you must tell me, aren't you the Wilner Balebeysel? You couldn't possibly be anybody else to have worked such a magic on a whole assembly. Only that blessed select chosen one is capable of uttering such celestial sounds". The lips of the "Balebeysel" however remained sealed.

After such an extraordinary "Kabolas Shabos" there was pandemonium in the "shule". The maariv service had to be made short shrift of. Once more the cantor ran to the pulpit with the intent of inviting the enchanting cantor to his table for the Sabbath "Sudah" (festival meal), but before he looked around the mysterious stranger had somehow managed to disappear.

Immediately an intensive search was instituted for the elusive wayfarer, but he could not be found anywhere — It was weird. What happened? Why did he leave after having caused such a furor? Why didn't he exploit his success? How could he have disappeared so fast without a trace? No answers could be found to the puzzle. You might just as well try to find the wind — But the Jews of Berditchev who heard the greatest cantors of the world, could never forget nor get over that "Kabolas Shabos".

The Wilna Balebeysel once again reverted to form, the wandering penitent ghost hitting the road, trudging over fields and rivers, hills and valleys in an interminable search for peace of mind and absolution.

During all this time his ex-father-in-law remained interested in his welfare and he, as well as Yoel David's sister, followed his wanderings with anguished hearts and worried minds. They sent messengers with the mission to use every means possible to try to persuade the Balebeysel to give up the gypsy life that was ruining him physically, as well as mentally, and to return home.

It was a time when new discoveries in mental research had just been made by physicians. This raised high hopes. Indications were that a cure might be effected for the mental malady of the kind that Yoel David was suffering from, a method of treatment that involved the application of hot wine baths among others.

Strashun and his own sister made every effort to convince the itinerant cantor of the urgent necessity of giving up his mode of living, of returning to civilization, and particularly of giving himself a chance to recover by trying the doctors' new cure. But the Balebeysel remained adamant in his refusal to even consider for a moment returning to Wilna. The name of that city was anathema to him. The mere mention of the place

where he had begun his skyrocketing career and where he plummeted into an abyss of despair evoked too many painful memories and associations for his plagued mind to be able to cope with and endure. He vowed that he would never return to Wilna.

But after protracted negotiations, exchange of messages, and the employment of various devious tricks, they finally succeeded in transferring him to Warsaw where he was entered as a patient at the sanatorium for the mentally ill. He was treated by the biggest specialists, who tried various treatments that in their professional opinion, might prove effective, including drugs and the newly recommended wine baths.

When he sat in the bath tub and felt relaxed under the soothing effect of the administered medications, Yoel David used to sing. Raising his voice to its full volume, he would begin chanting a certain prayer, one of his own compositions, "Odedenu Betzedek Moshuy Mimayim" which means "Encourage and help us, O Lord for the sake of the prophet Moses, who was pulled out of the river." All of the patients in the hospital would get out of their beds and be drawn in the direction of the sweet sounds that tore at their heartstrings and brought bitter tears to their eyes. Similar scenes occurred each time that the Balebeysel felt a song coming on and could not restrain himself from giving vocal expression to his overflowing feelings.

The doctors felt that his occasional chants had an undesriable and even damaging effect on the other patients, inasmuch as they brought on emotional upheavals and disturbing uncontrollable sentimental excitement in their hearts and minds. They thought it, therefore, advisable and imperative to transfer Yoel David to a separate and remote wing of the medical institution, where his singing would not affect other inmates.

Since he was run down physically, complications set in, and far from having improved, his condition deteriorated gradually until it reached the point where it had become hopeless. He contracted an additional malady which doctors diagnosed as tuberculosis of the throat.

His body shrank and his mind became more and more a blank. Lucid moments were now a rarity. When on top of his malaise he contracted cholera to boot he was given up by the doctors. Shortly before his death, he had a slight respite from the coma into which he had sunk, and getting up from his death bed, he still managed to chant his own epitaph, "Odom doeyg al ibud domov, ve'eyn odom doeyg al ibud yomov." (How foolish is man! He worries about the loss of his money, but he doesn't worry about the loss of his days.) It was a necrology in which he expressed his deep regret and sorrow at the way he had squandered his youth in chasing rainbows and losing sight of the essentials of life. Well, whatever his regrets, it was too late for him to reverse matters. His life was ebbing away relentlessly and he had sung his swan song.

On the seventeenth day of the month Tamuz in the year 1850, the day on which Jews are fasting in commemoration of that sad day when the siege of Jerusalem began by the hordes of the Roman conquerors, the voice of Yoel David Strashunsky was stilled forever. He returned his ex-

purgated soul to his creator. A young tree that had hardly began to bloom was mercilessly cut down by the scythe of the cruel grim reaper. He was only thirty four years old. In that short span of time, he had so many different experiences with many momentous events. To his lot fell so much honor, joy and pleasure on the one hand and so many tragedies and boundless suffering on the other, that it could suffice for a whole century of living.

He died a Tzadik (saint) and a "Baal Tshoova" (penitent), his soul free of any vestige of blemish or stain. He was buried in the Warsaw cemetery. Practically the entire city turned out to pay their last respects to the beloved singer of Israel.

The engraving on his tombstone reads as follows, "Behashimiacho Bechiyo gam leyv even nomass Kamayim. L'Keytz hayomim toshuv Vetashmiya shirey Tziyon viyerusholayim" which in translation means: "When you allowed your prayer and supplication to be heard even a heart of stone melted like water. When the end of days will arrive and the Messiah will come, you will return and chant the songs of Zion and Jerusalem." (In Hebrew the word *Kamayim* rhymes with *Yerushalayim.*)

"The Jewish canary," is how the gentile world referred to him. It was generally conceded by musical experts, that his ingenious, extremely intricate melodies could not be translated into musical phrases, that could be put down on paper, as there were not available sufficient musical notes for them. No manuscript could adequately reproduce exactly his intricate chants.

According to the reliable accounts of his intimate friends, Yoel David did leave behind a great number of his compositions in manuscript. However, his wife in her jealous rage over her unrequited love, burned all his notebooks. She even sold his violin after she remarried, She did not want to leave anything around that would remind her of him.

Even though no manuscript of the Wilner Balebeysel's works has ever been located, a great number of his outstanding compositions were handed down by those who had the privilege and good fortune to hear him in person. Thus do still live on for the lovers of liturgical music such pearls of Yoel David's genius as "Vehaviyeynu l'sholom" (Bring Us In Peace); "Adoshem Elokey Yisroeil" (The Lord, the God of Israel); "Hodu" (Give Ye Thanks); from "Haley'l" (Praise); "Habeyt Mishomayim" (Look Down From Heaven); "Hadlokas Neyr Chanukah" (Lighting of the Chanukah Candles); "Kach Macheles Chado" (Take a Sharp Knife) from the "Yom Kippur" (Day of Atonement) "Avodah" (The account of the service ritual of the high priest in the Holy Temple of Jerusalem).

These are but a tiny fraction of the numerous extraordinary monumental works of a fertile musical giant. But these few samples reveal an orginial individualistic approach to liturgical art and a masterful treatment of the age-old traditional East European shteyger (style) of which he was the outstanding exponent.

And above all, over his unique tunes hovers the burning, penetrating suffering of the sensitive soul of an accomplished artist, who met an un-

timely tragic end at an age when he still had so much to give to his people, whom he left in endless deep mourning and eternal inconsolable grief.

CHAPTER 39

CANTOR CHAYIM LOMZER

Cantor Chayim Lomzer was not a native of Lomza — His real name was Wassertzug — A sincerely pious Jew, he was richly endowed vocally and a master of liturgical art — His struggle for the establishment of a four-voiced harmonized choir — He was one of the earliest and most famous cantors of Wilna — His life work of liturgical compositions.

The untimely demise of the unfortunate Wilna'er Balebeysel left behind a gaping vacuum, which seemingly could never be filled. Even under normal circumstances the cantorial post at the pulpit of the Wilna community synagogue was universally considered to be quite a hard nut to crack, even for the best talent in the field. How much more so then must it have indeed been a particularly large order to find a suitable individual, who could even approximately fill the shoes of the phenomenal Balebeysel.

For a number of years the post remained unfilled. The period of interregnum dragged on for an unusually long span, as a consequence of the general air of apathy and lethargy which hung like a depressing dark cloud over the Jews of Wilna, who could not forget their beloved Balebeysel.

Practically numbed by the grief at the loss of the idolized cantor under such tragic circumstances, the distressed trustees could not bring themselves to even give some thought to the matter of choosing a successor. The wound was still raw and hurting too much. It took a long time for it to heal.

There was also an understandable reluctance on the part of potential candidates to come forward and apply for the position. On the one hand it was naturally the highest ambition of every cantor to be named "Chief

Chazzan of Wilna''. But on the other hand the knowledge that he would be measured by the yardstick of the departed genius tended to scare off every aspirant. For to be compared to the Balebeysel undoubtedly meant to expose himself to certain defeat.

There was ample reason for their sober assessment of their chances versus the still vivid memory of the Balebeysel from whose magical lips so much sweetness was oozing that people could not listen to his voice for any length of time for fear that they might become diabetics and as the proverb goes ''Zakushesh Slodkovo Zachotchesh Gorkovo'' after you have tasted sweets you don't have any desire for the bitter.

The odds were prohibitive and so, it came about, that even after enough time had elapsed for Wilna to make peace with the reality of ''The King is dead, Long live the King'' and to become receptive to applications from well qualified members of the cantorial fraternity there was not exactly a torrent of candidates for the prestigious vacancy and the few that did dare give auditions had ample reason to rue their audacious attempt. For as could have been foreseen, they all fell on their faces.

Well, we have to qualify that somewhat. Not quite all struck out. There would seem, to have come to town a certain aspiring applicant who did make the grade and was appointed to the orphaned post.

Who he was and where he came from we were unable to find out. Neither could we discover his family name. All we know is that they called him ''Aartzek Der Chazzon'', which most likely was the diminutive of ''Aaron'' used by friends and intimates as rarely used in those days in the same manner

That he could not adequately fill the shoes of the Wilna Balebeysel, that's for sure. But he must've possessed some high degree of excellence that made him stand out among the other contestants for the very finicky and choosy bigwigs of the ''Stodtshule'' to have elected him to the cantorial post. After Mount Everest you don't settle for a sandpile.

The congregation could not forever mourn their great loss and function without a cantor so they had to appoint somebody to fill the vacancy and ''Aartzek'' landed the position for the apparent reason that he was the best of the lot.

But in 1860 he quit. We must presume that he resigned because Wilna had a point in its statutes, that a cantor once elected remains the occupant of the post for life. So the question arises why would a chief cantor of Wilna leave his lifelong job. Well it is quite understable in case he is lured away by a better one.

However the plot thickens and becomes puzzling when it is disclosed, that he left for Vitebsk. Now what irresistible advantage could've induced the worthy luminary ''Aartzek the Chazzon'' to exchange Wilna with of all places Vitebsk? Something must've been strong scented in Denmark. Congregational Brahmins have a way to make a cantor voluntarily get out even though he has a contract for life. They can make his lot so miserable that he gladly resigns rather than submit to their chicanery. Was this the case in this instance? Circumstantial evidence would point to some such

conclusion. Whatever the cause, Wilna was once more in the market for a Chazan.

This time the Parnassim were determined to put each and every applicant under a thorough scrutiny and look long and hard and listen with most attentive critical ears before they would commit themselves. Only topnotchers would be admitted to give an audition. Cantors came and went but none of them made the grade. Only one aspirant withstood the rigorous test and emerged from it with flying colors. He came, sang and conquered. After his audition there was no more doubt in the mind of the leaders of the congregation, but that their search for the right man for the exalted, hallowed post was at an end. The unanimous public opinion was: "Long live the King!"

Who was this knight in white armor, who dared storm the seemingly invincible bastion and proved so eminently victorious? His name was Chayim Wassertzug, better known in the musical world as "Chayim Lomzer". When he was appointed to the "Omud" of the great synagogue of Wilna in 1861 he was not quite 39 years old.

At that crucial juncture of his career Reb Chayim Lomzer had already managed to acquire a considerable store of invaluable musical knowledge. Having for years on end applied himself with persistent diligence to these studies he had grown quite familiar with the basic fundamentals of theory, harmony and composition. He also took instruction in voice culture from competent teachers.

As the lucky possessor of such multifaced erudition he stood out as the rare exception among his contemporary colleagues to whom they looked up and frequently would turn for expert advice and professional guidance.

These assets in addition to the fact that he was blessed with a beautiful sonorous voice and brilliant innate musical talent made him the eminently qualified natural choice for the prominent position at the pulpit of the great synagogue of Wilna, to which he was named in 1861.

Even though barely thirty-nine years old at the time, he was already a veteran chazzan with a very creditable track record highly regarded not only by the cantorial fraternity and musical circles in general, but equally by the lay masses, among whom he had already by his past accomplishments gained a well sounding name as a rising star on the liturgical horizon.

A native of Shieradzs, Gubernia of Kalish he was born in 1822 the son of the local cantor. His father, a very pious Jew, secured for his offspring the best available teachers, who gave the youngster a thorough religious education. The lad proved to be a very perceptive pupil, who easily mastered the complex lessons, that were calculated to indoctrinate him in the various branches of the sacred scriptures and the tenets of Judaic law, and included also an intensive course in the Hebrew language. As a result of his dedicated attentive study of the treasures of religious literature Chayim eventually became a Talmudic scholar of note.

The boy evinced very early a great interest in music. It also became

quite apparent, that the youth was very well endowed vocally to indulge himself in his favorite pastime singing. To the father's great joy the little fellow would frequently imitate him, displaying in the course of this aping of his singing style a soprano voice of fine quality and natural aptitude, skill and talent for phrasing. No sooner did the father make this discovery than he began imparting to the toddler the rudimentary knowhow of reading the musical notes. He took to it like a duck to water. The next step was to make the little warbler assist his father at the religious services. Gradually he was given a solo and having made good at this assignment the cantor allowed his Chayimke to chant a whole prayer all by himself. The congregants were enchanted and foresaw a bright future for the "wunder kind".

With the passing of the years the extraordinary latent potentialities of the by-now adolescent Chayim'ke Wassertzug in the field of his chosen mission in life blossomed forth into captivating mature traits. He made such rapid progress, that when he reached the ripe age of eighteen he was already a much sought after full-fledged cantor and he accepted a call from the Jewish community of Kanin to grace the pulpit of their synagogue. It didn't take the members of his congregation very long to realize that their new cantor, even though very young and a "novobranetz" (in his first try at plying his trade) to boot, was nonetheless by no means a "Chazzan" of the garden variety, but one who, to judge by all applicable criteria, was definitely headed for greatness in his field of endeavor.

The townspeople were overjoyed and considered themselves very lucky to have had the good fortune to hit upon such a gifted cantor and to have been able to secure his services for their community.

In gratitude they lionized, feted and showered him with presents. His popularity in town zoomed and he was held in high esteem not only by the members of the Jewish community but by the gentile populace as well.

This idyllic still-life in the happy town of Kanin was however not destined to endure for very long. After a tenure of two years Reb Chayim was ready to make a change. The Jewish community of Novidvar (Gubernia of Warsaw) appeared in the role of the spoiler. Having heard people sing the praises of the young cantor of Kanin, it extended an invitation to him to come for an audition.

He more than confirmed the good opinion that had preceded him. The cantorial post was on the spot proffered him and he accepted. When his constituents got wind that he was planning to leave them, there was consternation throughout the town. A hue and cry went up coupled with a demand that immediate steps be taken to avert the overhanging danger. A committee of the leading citizens of Kanin was forthwith dispatched to the cantor with the mission to plead with him not to forsake his devoted flock. They didn't come just with arguments but also carrying in their sack a tangible peace offering. In an effort to make him reverse his decision the board of directors had authorized the negotiators to inform the cantor, that a considerable raise in his salary has been voted him.

When however even this usually tempting fact proved in this instance

to be not much of an inducement having failed to produce the desired result and the committee, emerging from the pow-wow in a dejected mood was obliged to report that they had been unable to extract from Reb Chayim any commitment to cancel his planned defection or even a promise to reconsider, the disappointed rank and file, unable to reconcile themselves to the loss of their adored favorite, decided to take matters in their own hands.

When word spread through the town, that a moving van had been sighted in front of the cantor's residence and that porters were observed coming and going carrying trunks, suitcases and boxes presumably full of his personal belongings out of the house and loading them upon the vehicle, apparently getting ready to wisk him and his family out from under their noses, the populace poured out into the streets and a large crowd of aroused citizens gathered around the house determined to prevent its occupants from slipping away. They came armed with sticks.

They even went so far as to unharness the horses of the lorry and with balled fists threatening the driver, who protested their interference, with bodily harm and still more serious reprisals to follow, if he dared attempt to carry out his assignment of transporting their beloved cantor and his household out of town. There was great commotion and excitement and loud argumentation. For a while it even looked as if the inflamed passions would in no time degenerate into violence.

The potentially explosive impasse was luckily broken by the swift intervention of the hastily summoned squadron of police, who succeeded in dispersing the infuriated rioting throng, thus enabling the distressed besieged object of the hot wrangle to take off and make good his getaway.

All is well that ends well. For the winning community of course, but not so well for the deeply hurt and disappointed people, who thought they knew their cantor well enough and could not figure out how he could find it in his heart to so coldly turn down the emotional pleas of his sworn loyal followers.

What then was behind the puzzling, adamant attitude of the young cantor? What was the real reason that caused him to take such an unyielding stance in the face of the overwhelming public outpour and display of almost unprecedented deep veneration and boundless devotion that one would think was enough to move a heart of stone?

What was so special about Novidvor that made it so much more desirable in his estimation, than the post he held down up to that point, that made this otherwise gentle soul turn a deaf ear to all appeals of his flock?

In all fairness to Reb Chayim we can eliminate two obvious powerful inducements that usually influence people. Pecuniary considerations, money could not in this instance possibly have been a factor, since Kanin on its own initiative was prepared to match and if necessary even to top the compensation its sister community was offering their cantor. Nor could the matter of status or prestige have played a decisive role in weighing the pros and cons of the one town versus the other. For as far as that rather elusive and intangible asset (which anyhow is not something

that can be accurately measured by a precise yardstick) is concerned, there did not seem to have been any great discernable difference (in the estimation of the general public at any rate) between the two cantorial posts.

There was however to be sure, one great advantage to be gained by the change, that tipped the scale in favor of Novidvor, and that was its nearness to Warsaw. For a man as idealistic, as ambitious and as eagerly desirous of acquiring as much additional musical knowledge as possible, as was our fledgling cantor to reside next door to the capital city, the great seat of culture and institutions of higher education, meant the realization of a long cherished dream, a good chance to fill in the gaps in his musical armor and he meant to take full advantage of the opportunity.

No sooner did he settle in Novidvor, than he began to commute regularly twice a week to Warsaw, where he took courses in a number of curricula of music and religiously attended the lectures of the famous professors of the royal conservatory. It was all made possible by the unusual intelligence diligence and systematic orderliness, all characteristic traits of Chayim Wassertzug who had a methodical disciplined and highly efficient modus operandi of dividing his time and using it to best advantage.

It was during his tenure in Novidvor, that Reb Chayim made notable progress in his quest for musical knowledge. No small share of the credit for his accomplishments was due to the officers of his congregation, whose indulgent attitude in granting him all the leeway needed for the pursuit of his goal, enabled him to make such great strides in his courses.

In addition to these frequent leaves of absence, which they allowed him during the year, he was given three months vacation in the summer, which time he used for touring about the countryside with several helpers as was the custom in those days, making guest appearances in the town and villages of the vicinity on a Sabbath devotional service or a weekday concert.

Invariably the visitor made a big hit with his audiences and not only did these excursions yield the enterprising young cantor precious additional revenue which was nothing to sneeze at but at the same time he did in this way also gain valuable recognition in a much wider circle. As a result of the extensive exposure his fame spread and he grew in stature.

In 1856 he was appointed chief cantor of Lomza. It was there that his star began shining brightly on the firmament of the cantorial horizon. By then his name had already acquired a resonant ring, which resounded throughout the land. The Jewish community of that city surrounded their famous cantor with deep reverence, high regard and affectionate devotion. Fully cognizant of the fact that the dignitary gracing the pulpit of their house of worship was an exceptionally endowed master, whose eminent qualities earned for him the esteem and recognition of the professional musical circles as well as the unqualified well-founded admiration of the general public, they eagerly seized upon every opportunity to demonstrate their appreciation not only in words but also in deeds, by showering him with gifts and other tangible, substantive tokens of their gratitude.

The relationship between him and his community proved to be most harmonious mutually very agreeable and pleasing. The rapport between them waxed so intimate and his name became so closely associated and even identified with that of the locale of his activities that, pretty soon his family name having fallen into disuse, was almost relegated to the limbo and for all practical purposes replaced by that of the city, which prided itself with his presence in its midst and he was generally referred to as Reb Chayim Lomza'er. Henceforth this tag clung to him for good.

In this course of the years of steady advancement, as he kept gaining new and deeper insight into the mysteries and ramifications of the sequence of sound and song, there began forming in Reb Chayim's creative mind certain novel ideas. Gradually these vague thoughts ripened, taking on distinctive shapes and eventually crystal into clear cut new concepts and designs, which he was determined to put into practice at the first opportune moment.

In his new environment he sensed to have at last found the suitable conditions for the realization of his planned innovations. He had set as his specific ideal and goal the revamping of the outmoded antiquated musical form of the liturgical rite. In place of the unison or duet to vocal setting, which had been the prevailing fashion, a relic from the medieval times of King Sobiyeski, Chayim Lomza'er embarked on the revolutionary step of organizing a professional chorus with an up-to-date harmonious blend of voices. He was able to achieve this aim of his thanks to the wholehearted moral and material support of his congregation.

He was the pioneer who for the first time in Poland, introduced a four voiced choir. It was not an easy task. As is usually the case with pathbreakers, he too encountered his share of difficulties and handicaps.

His daring action had wide repercussions both favorable and antagonistic. He aroused enthusiasm but he also drew upon himself the wrath of the sanctimonious conservative circles, who described his break with traditional customs and denounced him as a dangerous reformer, who has the termerity of bringing "alien fire" into the sanctuary with the apparent heretical intent of "far-go-yishing" secularizing and profaning the religious litany.

How a man of his exemplary religious conduct could have been branded as a wild eyed reformer by even the most biased adversaries is hard to understand. Particularly incensed by what they considered brass effrontery to their religious sensitivity were the ultra pious chassidic camps, attacking in the most vitriolic terms the strange unconventional godless practices of the cantor of Lomza. Some of these followers of the holy men and wonder-rabbis went even as far as calling for the excommunication of the insolent upstart (putting him in "cherem" [isolation]). It is a well-known axiom that old ingrained habits die hard, there are always groups that frown on anything novel.

But undaunted by these fulminations and hostile reactions, Reb Chayim not only stuck by his guns, but he even took to propogating his ideas and agitating for their acceptance among his colleagues, exhorting

them to follow his example and take the same progressive measures toward bringing about the long overdue modification and modernization of the synagogue chants, to make them more attractive and appealing.

At the same time he also appealed to the trustees of the congregations to cooperate with their cantors in their efforts to elevate the niveau of the liturgical music, by acquiring for their choruses enough singers of different hues to form a harmoniously integrated ensemble.

Ignoring the angry snarls, stings and arrows and the vociferous protests, firmly convinced that he was on the right track, Chayim Lomzaer kept on preaching his thesis, that the old primitive pedestrian methods have outlived their usefulness and that there was no future for the music of the Polish synagogues, which was mired down in archaic stultifying straight-jackets, unless immediate steps were taken to root out the weed that had grown up through the centuries for the reinvigoration and renaissance of the divine service by placing the vocal interpretation of the prayers on a solid modern musical base. In the end his clarion call proved to be as unfailing as lehavdil,the Muezzin's call from the Minaret.

Such was the towering stature, high reputation, the unquestioned authority and competence of Reb Chayim, that his expressed opinions carried great weight and soon came to fruition not only with his colleagues but also with the great majority of the congregational officers and heeding his call they moved in a joint effort to mend their fences in according with his prescriptions. In short order there sprang up in a number of the larger communities of Poland newly-organized four-voiced choruses under the direction of conservatory graduate choirmasters.

There remained however one problem: the scarcity of compositions with four way arrangements suitable for presentation in the strictly orthodox synagogues. The dry church-like melodies that were reminiscent of the Gregorian chants created for the consumption of the liberal German temples could not possibly fill the bill.

In this emergency it was once more Reb Chayim who came to the rescue. Not content with having succeeded in awakening the interest of the cantorial fraternity to his pet project, he felt obliged to also fill the vacuum to the best of his ability. So he proceeded to follow up on the commitment, which he originated and initiated, determined to put at their dispostion enough material to replenish their repertoire which had been on a lean diet caused by the dearth of fitting, well constructed and arranged compositions. From under his pen emerged a whole line of brilliant works, which, while new and radical as far as musical form and modern trappings were concerned, retained in their contents the true values. The ever green traditonal modes, in spirit and flavor proved to have great appeal to the confirmed devotees of liturgical music.

The persistence of Reb Chayim paid off in that eventually his stand gained general acceptance and grudging approval was forthcoming even from the sources that had in the early stages fought him tooth and nail. It became clear to all concerned with the fate of liturgical music that Chayim Lomzaer's courageous valiant fight for his convictions was a notable feat

crowned by an accomplishment of momentous historical significance. By forging a felicitious synthesis of old-time hallowed basic values and new broader concepts as to forms and molds in which to cloth the traditional "Nusach" (modes) he succeeded in infusing fresh, puslating vitality into the stagnant, squalid waters of our fast drying out musical springwell. By being a step ahead of his time he gave the evolutionary process of sacred music a new direction inaugurating with his exploit an era of unprecedented flourishing growth.

With such an epochal achievement under his belt, Reb Chayim still was not content to rest on his laurels and to just go on practicing what he was preaching. Setting new goals for himself he now proceeded to devote his time and energy to teaching and demonstrating the practical techniques advocated and developed by him to the scores of students who flocked to his side from the remotest regions seeking instruction advice and guidance. Sparing no effort he conducted regular seminars which were attended by a great number of talented young men, to each of whom the master gave personal attention and individual useful pointers. He treated his pupils with fatherly consideration with the result that most of them after completion of the courses landed prominent positions and several of the disciples of Chayim Lomza'er not only made the grade as well-educated cantors, but left their marks themselves as outstanding creative personalities of the sacred craft. We need only mention Arnold Markshon, the renowned cantor of the Heidereiter Temple of Berlin the most prestigious house of worship of the German capital and the famous cantor of the Rue de la Victoire of Paris, Abraham Behr, who was one of the most able and proficient graduate of Reb Chayim's homegrown conservatory and made himself a great name in the world by his invaluable musical works. Another was the world reknowned Yisroel'ke Paris'er (Michalovsky) who having very early in life become an orphan when both his father and mother fell victims to pogromchiks, in his lonely wanderings reached Wilna and was accepted as a student in the communal Talmud Torah.

One day Reb Chayim in search of young boys with good voices for his choir was pleasantly surprised to have discovered a rare find in Yisroel'ke, who not only possessed a voice of unusually fine quality, but also a wonderful perceptive musical talent. The cantor took him in hand and it didn't take long for the young lad to be promoted as chief soloist with whose marvellous renditions all of Wilna was agog. He went out to become a truly great cantor. Still another of his disciples was Moshe Bass Rabinowich the famous cantor of Bialystock.

Chayim Lomzaer's election to the post of chief cantor of Wilna was of course the culmination of all his dreams. This supreme honor came to him as a natural outgrowth of his ever growing fame. Needless to say that Lomza was not exactly elated at the new turn of events. The prospect of losing their beloved cantor after a tenure of only five years, which seemed such a short time, was a great blow to the pride of the city which had enjoyed great prestige, thanks to the presence of the famous cantor in their midst.

But there was no getting away from the fact that Chayim Lomzaer had outgrown the town, whose name had become his monicker and that he deserved better and Wilna was just what the doctor ordered. It was a "gleicher shiduch" they were right for each other. Reb Chayim was at the zenith of his efficacy. With his beautiful, rich sweet tenor voice and his wonderfully expressive, artistic and colorful style of chanting the prayers he captivated even the sophisticated hard-to-please Wilna "Mevinim" and it did not take him long to become the favorite of the whole citizenry.

Whenever he mounted the "Omud", the spacious sanctuary became instantly overrun by a dense crowd, which not only filled it to the rafters, but the huge mass of humanity, pressed in like sardines, was barely able to breathe. Yet, they were willing to endure all the hardships for the sake of listening to the chants of their cantor. He was hailed as a worthy successor to the adored late Balebeysel and no greater tribute could be paid to anybody.

He was highly regarded by all of Wilna not alone for his outstanding cantorial talents, his original manner of intepretation of the liturgy and his ingenious improvisations, but also for his distinguished personality and his multifaceted erudition. He excelled also in his thorough familiarity with the scriptures and the "Talmud", as well as with the Hebrew literature.

His being an intellectual, interested in acquiring as much knowledge in every branch of science and literature, only tended to even more enhance his standing in his new community. Add to this his deeply religious nature and the fact, that he led an examplary life of high morality and dignity and you have the ready explanation of the high esteem and general admiration, in which the new chief cantor of Wilna was held by all.

Always on the lookout for new gambits, that would serve to advance the cause of liturgical music by popularizing it and attracting more people to the ranks of its stalwart supporters, he hit upon a novel promotional device. One of the first, among others, introduced by Chayim Lomza'er in Wilna was the welcoming the "Shabos Malchesa" the Queen Sabbath with vocal and instrumental music in the court of the great synagogue one hour prior to the time for lighting the Sabbath candles on the Friday afternoon preceeding the day of rest on which the "Parshe" (portion of the Bible) "Behaalosscho" was scheduled to be read.

Cantor and choir joined by a large orchestra stationed themselves under the open sky in the center of the huge "Shulehoif", which by then was filled with thousands of spectators, who had congregated from all sections of the city to listen to the open air concert. Beginning with "Lecho Neraneno" (Oh come let us exalt before the Lord), a number of other psalms taken from the Sabbath eve ritual, were presented by the combined ensemble to the enthusiastic response of the delighted audience, while stimultaneously scores of young lads lighted up the horizon with burning torches, whose blazing flames made the unusual performance even more impressive and served to underscore the opening sentence of the "Parshe

Behaalosscho'': ''When you kindle the lights''.

These public presentations were instrumental not only in heightening the interest in liturgical music among the Jewish populace, but in also attracting the attention of gentile circles to the synagogue. It was henceforth not a rare sight to observe high ranking city officials, noblemen, military brass and professional singers frequenting the religious services and listening intently to the beautiful chants of the Jewish cantor for whose unique artistry they had only words of the highest praise.

More and more secular musical circles took note of the gifted singer and as a consequence Reb Chayim, received several propositions not to waste his time at the pulpit but instead devote his talents to the much more lucrative field of opera, where he was sure to find fame and fortune. He was also offered a career on the stage as a singer of popular music and artist of secular productions. They assured him that with his voice and talent a great future was beckoning, if he would only grab the opportunity and the helping hand which these well wishers held out to him.

Particularly interested in him was the Italian opera company of St. Petersburg, the director of which courted him with great persistence.

But to all these entreaties the cantor of Wilna turned a deaf ear. All the glitter of gold could not tempt the sincerely pious Chayim Lomza'er. His first and last love was Chazzonuth.

Wilna was very proud of its outstanding cantor and showed their gratitude in every possible way. There was nothing that they would not gladly grant him if only it was humanly possible. They would bring down ''does Teler'l fune himmel'' (the plate from heaven) if they could, just to please their beloved Reb Chayim.

So, when he asked only for a six months leave of absence in order to be able to journey to Vienna for the purpose of taking in that musical centre a course in advanced musical instruction, there was no question whatever of it being graciously and unanimously approved.

The cantor in adddition made the best possible use of his regular summer vacation to from time to time betake himself to Warsaw and take in the conservatory a refreshing course in the various branches of musical knowledge from his professors of earlier years.

At long last he feels sufficiently progressed and competent to begin the composition of his life work ''Seyfer Shirey Mikdosh'' (the book of chants of the sanctuary) at which opus he kept laboring with great diligence without interruption for a quite a number of years. It was completed and published in 1878, when he already had been for quite a while a resident of London, England.

It contains old traditional as well as modern style chants in which the author's ingenious and masterful artistry in the various colors of the musical rainbow shines through.

The work evoked great interest in the general musical and particularly Jewish liturgical circles of the whole world and gained the warm recognition of such world famous authorities as Professor Zaremba, Director of the St. Petersburg Royal Conservatory, the renowned Professor P. Weber

of the Berlin musical institute and chief organist of the main German Church of London and the director of the London Musical Academy De Wilde. Certainly an enormous achievement for a composer, who thereby produced a profound musical textbook, a feat which proved to be a great enduring significance for the cantorial vocal art.

CHAPTER 40

ROTHSCHILD BECAME AN ADMIRER OF CHAYIM LOMZER

He was not the first Polish cantor to get a position in London — How the British Jews received their new cantor — The Jewish life of London — Wilna is anxious to bring him back there.

We have left the hero of our discourse, Reb Chayim Lomzer, sitting on his gold-trimmed chair of the dignified cantorate of Wilna. The entire community was of the unanimous opinion that he was the right man in the right place. They considered themselves very lucky to have found such a capable "Shliach Tziboor" (messenger of the congregation) to fill the post.

And as for the manner in which his members conducted themselves toward him, he surely had no cause for complaint. Many a cantor could wish that he be accorded no better treatment than Reb Chayim's. He was held in highest regard and given great honor, and anything his heart desired was for the asking, presented to him on a silver platter.

Yet it cannot be said that he was completely contented. For such an intellectual, erudite man, the culturally deprived, primitive, provincial surroundings could not offer enough spiritual stimulation. Another factor which contributed considerably toward his disenchantment and toward the feeling of unfulfilled, marred happiness was the prevailing hostile attitude of the ruling authorities toward the Jewish population, which kept them in a precarious and oppressing political position.

This circumstance often made him think about the advisability of pulling out from under the hate saturated, unhealthy climate and betaking himself to some place where one can, in unimpeded freedom, inhale the

pure air of human dignity.

His relatives, who had emigrated to England and had pretty well established themselves there, played a great part in evoking and nurturing these somber thoughts in the mind of the chief cantor of Wilna. In their missives, they painted the state of affairs in their adopted new homeland in rosy colors. They coupled these descriptions of their new surroundings with their advice that he too might profitably begin to give some consideration to whether or not it would be in his best interest to follow their example and change his residence as soon as a suitable opportunity would present itself.

It so happened that just then the North London synagogue of John Str. W. Barnsbury N. Tornhill Rd. of the English capital was looking for a cantor. After having received the green light from him, Reb Chayim's relatives went to work and succeeded in inducing the trustees of the congregation to consider seriously the candidacy of the chief cantor of Wilna for the vacant position. They extolled his great virtues and rare talents in such glowing terms that they aroused the curiosity and interest of the communal leaders, who thereupon sent an official invitation to Chayim Lomzer to come for a Sabbath trial.

His appointment as cantor of the North London synagogue was a singular achievement, for it was the first instance in a long time that a Polish cantor was elected in the metropolis of Great Britain. It was a tradition of long standing of the English Jews to choose their cantors from among aspirants of German origin or those from The Netherlands. To import congregational dignitaries from uncivilized lands like Poland, Russia or Lithuania was not considered fashionable and suitable for the "Englishmen of the Mosaic persuasion" who prided themselves on their high standard of culture.

To be sure the appointment of Chayim Lomzer was not without precedent. The first Polish cantor who landed a position in London was Isaac Polak and he was elected not just to a position but to the highest chief cantorial post at the Duke's place synagogue called "The Great Synagogue." It happened coincidentally with the beginning of the influx of Jewish immigrants from Russia and Poland. The newly appointed cantor Polak, better known in his native Poland as "Reb Itzik Chazzon" occupied his preeminent status in the English capital for 56 years, from 1746 until his death in 1802. In the assimilationistic atmosphere of London the orthodox Chazzon quickly discarded caftan, beard and curly sidelocks, donned powered wig and modish English vestments with a white cravat as a proper church-of-England touch.

But the selection of the Reverend Isaac Polak remained the only case of a Polish cantor having been chosen to pontificate at the altar of a British House of Prayer. It was an isolated instance, the sole exception to the rule of discrimination against East Europeans which prevailed for a long time.

But the success of the visitor from Lithuania was so decisive, his Sabbath service so inspiring, and his manysided, thorough knowledge and intelligence so evident, that the congregation felt impelled to overlook his

Polish origin, and giving in to the general demand of the membership, they took the unprecedented step of electing an East European cantor for life.

It is not very difficult to imagine what kind of impression the news that their beloved cantor was about to desert them in favor of a faraway land made on Reb Chayim's devotees in Wilna. The trustees moved heaven and earth to make him change his mind and stay on at his post. But even though he was ever so grateful for the love, honor and devotion with which they and the whole community of Wilna had surrounded him through the years which he spent in their midst, the above-cited weighty reasons, which had in the first place triggered the chain of events, made it impossible for him to yield to their entreaties and to cancel his already firmly made decision.

Arriving in London, he learned to his joyful surprise that his new congregation had in the interval prepared for him a beautiful, completely furnished free residence. On the occasion of the festive housewarming celebration, the members of the congregation kept coming and going, wishing their new cantor good luck and handing him together with their good wishes, expensive presents, as though it were Purim, the festival which is noted for the usage of carrying "Shlach Monos" (figs and oranges) to friends and neighbors.

It did not take him long to conquer the city. He became very popular and beloved, not only in the narrow circles of his immediate membership but throughout London. He was highly esteemed, not solely for his great liturgical musical qualities which were far superior to anyone heard previously in Great Britain, but also for his human virtues, his fine personality, his noble manners and for the distinguished way in which he conducted himself. In time his fame spread all over the British Isles. His name became a byword in all corners of the Commonwealth and Jews everywhere in the land spoke of him with reverence and admiration.

And now that we have come so far, having accompanied our worthy cantor on his long journey, let us take advantage of the rare opportunity to get acquainted with the great world metropolis into which we have by chance strayed. Let us leave Reb Chayim to rest in his comfortable house and let's go out on the town. After all, it is not every day that you have a chance to take a leisurely walk in metropolitan England, and wander around and gather impressions to store for later reference.

Jews immigrated into the British Isles already in the early centuries of the Middle Ages but as a rule their lot in the new habitat was not very enviable. They were often harassed and even persecuted.

In the old historic city of Norwich Jews lived as early as the end of the twelfth century. But in 1291, they were driven out by a banning ordinance of the authorities.

There was also a Jewish colony located in the narrow streets of the old section of Lincoln around the same era. The Jewish inhabitants of that city had even a blood libel pinned on them. Irresponsible elements of the Christian populace, who owed big sums to Jewish merchants, brought li-

belous criminal charges against the lenders in order to be relieved of the unpalatable obligation to pay them back their debts. In 1240 the 25th anniversary of the reign of Henry the third was celebrated by summoning the "Parlamentum Judaicum". The most prominent and wealthiest Jews of the realm were called in to deliberate and decide how to implement the order of the King, that they contribute 20,000 marks to the royal treasury.

Six of the assembled Jewish communal leaders were appointed to devise ways and means for raising the demanded sum, which was to be remitted by a specified date.

When these chosen collectors were unable to meet the deadline, they were thrown into prision, where they were kept incarcerated until the ransom was paid in full.

But since then a lot of water has flown down the river bed of the Thames. Under Cromwell (1599-1658) a change for the better occurred, a new era dawned.

So let us skip over the travails of the dim past and instead try to find out something about the Jewish life at the time of the advent of Reb Chayim. The year is 1868, when the Jewish population in the entire country numbered about fifty thousand, of which nearly forty thousand resided in London.

If the visitor inquires about the leading Jewish personalities there is of course one name that is revered and almost idolized not only in London, which is the headquarters of his humanitarian activities, but all over the world. For his noble deeds are not confined to his adopted homeland England or even to any other country or countries in addition to his own. His great warm Jewish heart was deeply concerned with the lot of his brethren all over the globe.

Baronet Moses Montefiore (1784-1885) a native of Livorno, Italy, was during the 19th century the dominant factor in the Jewish community of London. He was married to Judith Cohen, sister of the wife of Nathan Meyer Rothschild (1784-1862) head of the London banking dynasty.

He was so highly regarded by Queen Victoria and by the political leaders of Great Britain that at one time he held down the cabinet portfolio of Minister of Finance. At another the post of Sheriff of London and Middlesex.

He lived in a palace in Ramsgate, a suburb of London, where he built for himself and his Jewish neighbors a beautiful little synagogue complete with a permanent Sephardic rabbi, cantor and sexton of his own.

He journeyed to Russia in 1846 to confer with Tzar Nicolay the first and again in 1872 to plead with Alexander the second to relieve the plight of the Russian Jews. His tireless efforts bore little fruit with the former. His intervention with the latter however had a more salutary effect. Sir Moses was credited with the rescue of condemned Jews in Damascus. He visited the Holy Land seven times giving on each occasion from his bounty for different projects. His generosity in philanthrophy was legendary. He was a strictly observant Jew with a warm big heart for every Jewish cause.

The communal life was centered around the Duke Place Synagogue,

which served the British Jews and catered to their spiritual needs faithfully throughout the two hundred and fity years of its existence, until it was destroyed by the bombs of the German "Luftwaffe blitz" on the 11th of May in 1941.

At the time of Chayim Lomzer's arrival in London, the spiritual leader and cantor at the pulpit of the Duke Place Synagogue was Dr. Simon Asher, who was elected to the post in 1832. He came to London from Groningen in The Netherlands. In the governing body of this central religious institution, the Rothschilds wielded the main influence and power and had the decisive voice in policy making. Customarily they held the office of "senior warden", which corresponded to the status of chief gabbay (trustee) in the East European synagogues. Honor was hereditary and the post went from one member of the famous banker family to another. Anthony Rothschild, brother of Lionel and second son of the founder held the post until his death in 1876. His baronetcy together with the warden's office descended upon Nathaniel, who held it until his demise in 1915.

There is an interesting story told concerning Baron Lionel Rothschild who in June of 1847 was elected liberal member Alderman for the city of London. He bought the Suez Canal from the Egyptian Khedive and presented it with his compliments to the Crown. When his daughter Evelena married a cousin of the Vienna branch of the family in 1865, one of the guests at the wedding was the premier of Great Britain, Benjamin, son of Yitzchok Disraeli, who was a converted Jew by the apostasy of his father. The wedding was celebrated in the old traditional manner of Frankfurt-au-Main, the cradle of the Rothschild family. A "Badchen" (punster) spun rhymes and sang to the bride, making her laugh and cry alternately. A pious "Bobe" (grandmother) danced a "Mitzwa tentzel" (ritual dance).

The cantor, too, decked out in his "Ornaat" (cantorial robe) and his pointed ceremonial headgear, was ready to intone at a given signal from the "Mechotonim" (in-laws) the prescribed rituals for the wedding ceremony, the "Mi Adir" (Who is Mightiest) and the "Sheva Brochos" (seven blessings) in the best possible and most artistic and eloquently beautiful style, which his cantorial talent and ability would allow.

Everything was ready for the great moment. Only the father of the bride was uneasy and felt uncomfortable. He could not decide whether or not he ought to in the presence of his prominent high and mighty guests, let his cantor conduct the ceremony under the canopy with all the usual frills and chants in the old-fashioned way. Finally, he got up his courage and turning to his close friend, Lord Beaconsfield, he addressed him in the hearing of all the assembled guests, "Ben, being that I have the honor and privilege of having present at this festive occasion a great number of Christians, our cantor would like to know whether he should recite the traditional prayers or sing them, as is the custom in the synagogue. Disraeli was not without reason considered one of the greatest diplomats. Tactfully and graciously, trying to spare his host any embarrassment in the delicate

situation, he resolutely replied, "I beg of you, Lionel, ask the cantor to by all means chant the prayers of the wedding ceremony exactly the way he does at the synagogue. I love very much to hear the old traditional Jewish melodies."

Disraeli, a descendant of Sephardic stock was proud of his Jewish heritage. His father became an apostate and embraced the Christian faith not because of his conviction, but in a fit of pique at the leaders of the "Kehillah" (religious organization) of London with whom he had a serious quarrel. Going through the process of "Shmad" (Baptism) was his way of getting even with his adversaries.

Lionel Rothschild used to send his cantor every year for the Day of Atonement a bottle of eau de cologne with his best wishes, that he may get over the fast well. The idea was that the refreshing effect of the contents of the bottle would be of help in easing the strain of the service and the ordeal of the fasting. But the cantor most likely was much more interested in the multicolored crisp paper imprinted with a three digit number in which the bottle was wrapped. This enclosure was of no particular help to the cantor on Yom Kippur, but it had the great merit of making it possible for him to eat better after the fast and for quite some time after that. This was the generous yearly token of appreciation for his faithful service from the nobleman.

At the "great synagogue," the chief cantor alternated with the second (assistant) cantor in conducting the daily services, mornings and evenings, all year round. Even on weekdays, when the services were mostly attended only by the "Asoro Batlonim," the ten idlers who were hired for that purpose, both cantors (even the one who was not officiating) were garbed in their ceremonial robes and hats and the sextons in their Prince Alberts and silk hats. This formality persisted through the years, and I myself had occasion to witness this strange custom when I dropped in one Wednesday evening at the Duke Place Synagogue only a couple years before the age-old sanctuary went up in flames. Clad in their cantorial vestments in walked the Chief cantor Jacob Rivliss and the Assistant Cantor Meirowich. Rivliss recited the mincha and Meirowich the maariv ritual.

It was considered improper for a cantor to take payment for chanting the services on the Sabbath and on the festivals for that would have meant that he does business on the Holy Days. It was, therefore, his duty to serve also on weekdays in the same capacity. His entire salary was considered to be compensation for the work done by him on the days when it is permitted to earn money, and his services on the Sabbath and on the holidays were counted as having been rendered free of charge, as it behooves a religious functionary to do.

In olden days, it was one of the additional duties of the cantor to examine the holy scroll during the week, from which they would have to read the portion of the week on the following Sabbath. If it ever occurred that in the course of the reading of the Torah, they would find a misspelled or rubbed out word, which disqualified the scroll and made it unfit to be used at the service, the careless cantor was fined a penalty of half a kroner.

The choral groups were organized by Eliezer J.L. Mombach, whom Cantor Eliash brought along with him from Darmshtadt, German, as a boy soloist when he came to London. Mombach functioned for fifty-two years as composer and chief conductor with great competence and thanks to his activities and tireless efforts the liturgical chants of the English Jewry where put on a solid base.

Cantor Lomzer had his trouble though and was hardly enamored of the strict Rabbi Salomon Hirshel. This dry disciplinarian forbade the use of music books and concert-pitch in the synagogue. He also would not allow the repetition of the word "Hallelujah." If it was inevitable for the choir to sing it several times, then they were obliged to repeat "hallelu", whereas to repeat the second half of the word, which means "God" was taboo. This presented quite a problem to the harassed choir leader.

Neither was the cantor himself exempt from criticism and from the close scrutiny of the eagle-eyed spiritual leader. When he on one occasion happened to weave into his chants a melody from "Don Juan" and one of the worshipers mentioned the fact to the rabbi, complaining that "the cantor brought Don Juan into the service," the naive Rabbi Hirshel, taking it to mean that it was some Gentile singer who had become a member of the choir, summoned the cantor and the conductor and greeted them with a barrage of invectives, which made them wince even before they were able to get in a word edgewise. When they finally succeeded in calming down the horrified Rabbi and explained to him, that it was only an innocent case of having smuggled in a musical phrase from a secular opus, he was still not pacified, insisting that this was just as much against Jewish tradition, as if a Christian had participated in the service and that it must not ever happen again.

When Nathaniel Rothschild, the first Jewish lord, took over the office of "senior warden," he issued an ordinance to all the cantors under his jurisdiction that they should see to it that all the liturgical melodies to be sung at their synagogues conform to the following specifications: (1) They shall be short. (2) They shall be simple enough for the lay worshipers to be able to join in and sing them along with the cantor and choir. (3) They must not be changed too often, so as to insure as much as possible the stationary character of the standard religious services.

Up to the year 1895 when at last, in spite of the strong opposition of the conservative faction, electricity was installed in the great synagogue, old-fashioned candelabras were used and the heat from the wax candles of the several dozen lamps made the air, especially on the Day of Atonement, so foul and stifling, that it became almost unbearable. There was the additional hazard of the drops of the hot wax dripping and trickling down from the suspended candelabras onto the heads of the unsuspecting worshipers and making a shambles of the silk hats and expensive garments of the noblemen and magnates, who came to the synagogue garbed in their Sunday best.

It was also around the turn of the nineteenth century that at long last the wooden gate, which partitioned off the upper half of the synagogue

reserved for the elite, high-toned aristocracy from the lower, proletarian section, was removed and the common folk was also granted free entrance to all corners of the house of God. This gave them an opportunity to rub shoulders with members of the upper stratum of society, at least in the house of worship.

In London there was a pretty large colony of German Jews, who had hired a building on New Broad Street from the "City Corporation", which they used as a temporary synagogue. When the landlords unceremoniously notified them that their rent would be considerably increased, the congregation decided to build a regular synagogue.

The relationship between the British Jewish community and the German Jewish colony was not overly friendly. On the contrary there existed a certain antagonism between the two camps, which was due mainly to the fact that a great majority of the English Jews were of the traditional, conservative, religious persuasion, whereas the German immigrants were of the most part more liberal minded and tended to a rather free-thinking interpretation of the tenets of Judaic religious law.

After they decided that it was high time to build a tabernacle for the growing German community, the leaders of the group, headed by their president, Berliner, undertook an intensive drive to collect subscriptions for the holy cause. Among others, they also mailed a subscription blank to Lord Nathaniel Rothschild with a request for a contribution to the building fund. They also enclosed an invitation for him to take part in the festive ceremony of laying the cornerstone of the synagogue to be erected.

But the honorable knight flatly refused to accept the proffered honor and with equal resoluteness rejected the request for financial help. His reason for refusing was that he did not recognize such separatist designations as "German Jews" versus "English Jews." In his book, a Jew was a Jew irrespective of where he originated from. It was the policy of the board of governors that Jews of any country were quite welcome to come and pray in any synagogue of the city they chose to and there were enough houses of worship spread all over London to accommodate all who wished to attend services.

The example of Lord Rothschild set the pattern, which was followed by all the British Jews who were approached. Their application for assistance, which they addressed to the German Kaiser, Wilhelm, produced a similar result. Count Herzfeld, the adjutant of the emperor, in his letter regretted the inability of the monarch to answer their appeal for funds on general principles. What these were was not stated explicitly but the meaning was clear enough.

Left to their own devices, the energetic Germans, in spite of the disappointing responses from all quarters, still managed to collect among themselves enough money with which to erect a beautiful, impressive sanctuary on Hospital Square. Even though Lord Rothschild, true to his original resolve, kept away from the festivities, there was present at the laying of the cornerstone another dignitary who was given the honor of performing the ceremonial act. Chosen as a substitute for the unwilling

Rothschild was the new elected member of Parliament from the Whitechapel district, Samuel Montague, a candidate of the radical socialist party, and whose triumph at the polls was due largely to the votes which he received from the German Jews. In 1907 he was knighted and named Lord Svytling. He founded the federation of synagogues. The Religious Ass'n of the Oldtimers was the United Synagogue. Lord Svytling favored the merger of both organizations but Rothschild was opposed to it. The Chief Rabbi of the British Isles, Dr. Nathan Adler, presided over the "Chanookas Habayis," the dedication of the new synagogue, and this gesture was interpreted by the German colony as a sign of a reconciliation and a willingness to draw nearer to them on the part of the communal authorities of the English Jews and the inauguration of a new era of cooperation between them.

But the prejudice of both the english as well as the German "Yahoodim" toward the East European Jews remained unabated. In the ninth decade of the 19th century about 100,000 refugees from pogrom infested Russia sought asylum in England. The oldtimers did every thing in their power to stem the tide of the unwanted element. The official Kehillah gladly provided the cost of tickets from England to America just so to get rid of the immigrants. They even sent money to Hamburg and Bremen for the emigrees with the advice that they return to Russia. However not many were persuaded.

After our brief digression and excursion into the discussion of Kehillah (congregational) politics, let us resume where we left off. A new precedent having thus been created by the grudging acceptance of Chayim Lomzer into the distinguished fold of English Jewry, the way was opened for a further influx of Poland-based cantors. Following the example set by the North Synagogue, even the holy sanctum and strongest entrenched fortress of unadulterated dominating English influence, the great synagogue of Duke's Place, elected a Polish cantor. The enlightened viewpoint which preached tolerance prevailed and emerged victorious over the reactionaries, but it was not easy. The old guard, the confirmed reactionaries, seeing their isolationist castles crumble, redoubled their efforts and stiffened their resistance to the growing tendency of letting down the bars. But they fought a losing battle. Times had changed. In spite of their determined stand for the election of a candidate from Groningen, a city which had repeatedly furnished religious functionaries for congregations of the English capital, the members voted overwhelmingly for Marcus Hast, who was a native of Praga, a suburb of Warsaw, Poland where he was born in 1841.

The newly appointed chief cantor of the venerated holy place of Britain's Jewish population was indeed a rare specimen. It was not surprising that he attracted such solid public support, which was able to overcome the stubborn opposition. He was a great Talmudic scholar. In his youth, he was known as the "Praga'er Ilooy" (genius). He was the possessor of a very beautiful sonorous voice, and after having served his apprenticeship under the tutelage of several well known cantors, he became the precentor of the Yanoosh Synagogue of Warsaw.

In the year which he spent in the Polish metropolis, he was busy using his spare time to good advantage. He keenly felt the urgent need for more education in his craft and determinedly he set about reinforcing the weak spots in his cultural armor. He took courses in music theory, harmony, composition and counterpoint, studying with intense diligence and devotional ardor. He also took lessons in voice production and placement. His persistent efforts bore rich fruits and in time he became a first class musician and a fine pianist. From Warsaw he went on to Germany, were he held cantorial positions first in Thorn and later in Breslau.

When Dr. Asher passed away and the position at the Dukes Place Synagogue became vacant, Rabbi Titkin of Breslau sent a letter of recommendation at the request of his cantor to the Chief Rabbi of England, on the basis of which he was invited to officiate on trial. With his well-trained well modulated and very pleasant ringing voice and with his refreshing and impressive style of chanting the prayers, which gave proof and bore unmistaken genuine stamp of a highly competent, well educated, worthy representative of the cantorial fraternity, he evoked the general admiration and the enthusiastic approval of the congregants. When after the conclusion of the service, Nathaniel Rothschild turned to Dr. Adler and asked for his opinion of the guest cantor, the Chief Rabbi's comment was, "His knowledge of Hebrew and his pronounciation of the text is better than good."

The singular honor of being elected to the post of chief cantor of London came to Hast at the relatively tender age of thirty one. Immediately after assuming his office in 1872 he began to initiate plans for broad and extensive musical and social cultural activities.

He also authored an important liturgical musical "Sidoor" (codex). When Baron Nathan Meyer Rothschild passed away in 1874, he composed a requiem in his honor. He published with the cooperation of Professor Michael Bergson a work named "Seyder Hoavodah" (order of the service) which was an anthology of traditional, devotional chants of the synagogue, which were in general usage and officially adopted by the Jewish congregations of Great Britain, including his own compositions that had become standard fare of the repertoire. Hast also composed two oratorios and a cantata, which were received very warmly by the audiences when publicly presented and which drew very favorable comments from the music critics. The consensus was that in these opuses of his the composer revealed considerable musical talent, skill and a flair for fine phrasing and interpretation. His works possess substance and form. He served his congregation with great competence for 39 years, until he passed away in 1911.

Marcus Hast was an attractive, charming personality. With his imposing, majestic figure and proud, dignified bearing, he invariably drew the attention of passersby. His carriage, conduct and public image were those of a born aristocrat. His home was the gathering place of the cream of society. He often entertained at his residence such guest as Lord Rothschild, Moses Montefiore and Israel Zangwill, and the same holds

true for Chayim Lomzer.

The two Polish cantors dominated the cantorial and, in general, the Jewish musical and cultural life in the vast central city of the British empire. They were ideal examples of the very best which Polish Jewry was able to produce. Hast represented the more modern, refined, somewhat assimilationist school. Reb Chayim, on the other hand, the more conservative, traditional line of "Chazzanuth."

In 1893 another Polish cantor came to London. He was Cantor Edward Darevsky of Lemberg who was elected to fill the cantorial post at the German synagogue of Hospital Square.

After the departure of Chayim Lomzer from Wilna, Yehoshooa Finesinger was chosen as his successor. Although a very young man, he soon showed his mettle. It became clear to all, that the newcomer was fully capable and amply equipped to fill the oversized shoes of his great predecessor. Thanks to his ingenious talent, which shone brightly and promised to light up the horizon even more, the "Shtodt Shool" (city synagogue) received a new lease on life. Things began humming again. The people were jubilant. But their joy was shortlived. Fate had decreed otherwise. The "second Wilner Balebeysel," as Yehoshooa'ke was lovingly called, did not live long enough to realize his immense potential. The angel of death caught up with him somewhere in Germany, where he had gone to visit his brother. His life went out suddenly, like a candle, and Wilna once more remained orphaned and in mourning.

After they had overcome their shock and boundless grief, the Jews of Wilna, once more began thinking about Chayim Lomzer, whose prayers still echoed in their hearts. Maybe there was still a possibility of persuading him to return to them. Somebody brought the news that their former cantor was on vacation taking the cure at Ems, the famous water resort in Germany. To pinpoint the date, it was 1876. Taking advantage of the favorable opportunity of Reb Chayim taking it easy and resting in the not too distant beach colony, they at once dispatched to him a delegation, consisting of prominent representatives of the community, to invite him to come over and pay a visit to the host of his admirers, who could not forget him.

He readily accepted the call and when the sensational news, that Reb Chayim Lomzer was on his way to the city, became known, there was great rejoicing all over town and public excitement reached a high pitch. A special committee had been sent ahead to await the arrival of the great guest at the station of the German border and from there to escort him to Wilna.

When the train pulled in to Wilna the depot was jammed with well-wishers who came to meet and greet Reb Chayim. He was carried into town in triumph amid the continuous drumbeating and playing of a band of Klezmer (Jewish instrumentalists) and the "Kozioner" (official government) Rabbi Rabinovitch greeted him festively with a Hebrew poem specially composed for the occasion and entitled "Shir Lechayim" (Ode to Reb Chayim).

He was prevailed upon to ascend his former pulpit and his prayers on

the following two Sabbath services brought back sweet memories of the happy years, when he resided among them and graced that pulpit for years with his matchless artistry.

It was a real holiday for the Jews of Wilna. Their Reb Chayim was again with them, and it was so good to hear once more his voice which thrilled them to the depths of their hearts and also his expert interpretations of the prayers, which were so sublimely elevating and exhilarating. Oh, if it would only last! Strenuous efforts were made toward that end. The officers of the Kehillah were ready for any sacrifices to achieve this goal. There was nothing in the world they would not do for him, if only he would consent to remain with them and take over again his post at the great synagogue.

The trustees put before him a signed and sealed lifelong contract, embodying the obligations the community took upon itself, which went beyond anything offered a cantor until then and which they could hardly afford. They were also ready to buy him a house, furnish it completely, and present it to him as a gift of the community. They were ready to fulfill his every wish.

Rey Chayim's heart was overflowing with sentiment. His feelings drew him to his beloved people of Wilna. But after weighing the facts dispassionately, he found that the way back was difficult and thorny. He was convinced that it would not work. He and his family had already become accustomed to the comfortable, tranquil life and the democratic freedom and security of a civilized and enlightened land, and the prospect of returning to an environment, which was filled with hatred and violence and where persecution and outlawry was the daily bread of the Jewish population could not have a great attraction for him.

Reb Chayim Wassertzug was not yet sixty years old, when one day after he returned home from a visit to the residence of the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Dr. Nathan Adler, where he had sung several hyms for the assembled guests he fell ill. He did not regain consciousness and died several hours later. His pure soul departed this earth on the 24th of August 1882. He was a great man, who possessed great virtues and rare talents, and he left a valuable and lasting heritage in his liturgical compendium. Chayim Lomzer was one of the most prominent, fertile and proficient representatives of the cantorial world, the pride of his colleagues in the sacred calling, whose great influence was far-reaching and made itself felt for many generations.

CHAPTER 41

YOSHOOAH FINESINGER

Yoshooah Finesinger the second Wilna Balebeysel — How he managed to land the post of cantor of the central Wilna synagogue — Women fainted under the impact of his fervent prayers — He passed away at the age of 33.

One of the greatest names among cantors and one of the most remarkable personalities, who stirred the hearts of the Wilna Jews to the highest pitch of religious exaltation, was Yoshooah Finesinger. They called him the second Wilna Balebeysel. This name stuck to him because the people found a close resemblance between many aspects of his life and that of the unfortunate original Balebeysel. Indeed they had much in common, both professionally and as far as their personal lives were concerned. Like Yoel David Strashunsky before him, he, too lit up the cantorial horizon with brilliant, almost blinding rays, and just as the Wilna Balebeysel's star was extinguished all too soon, so was his.

Finesinger burst upon the arena suddenly out of the anonymity of an unknown provincial town. In no time at all, he blossomed forth, and while an astonished world looked on he rose to unexpected heights and universal importance. Suddenly, people all over Europe became aware that emerging from obscurity from out of nowhere, coming out from under the cover of the clouds, a new star had arisen. He shone brilliantly for a while, with a luster almost equalling that of the Wilno Balebeysel. And then just as was the case with the latter, he, too, flashed through the sky with the breath-taking speed of a comet, and before people had a chance to get warmed up and benefit from the healing effect of his fiery blissful rays, he disappeared and disintegrated somewhere into eternity.

His life tree was cut and came to an unexpected end at an even young-

er age than Yoel David. There is a Talmudic expression eulogizing the passing of great scholars and pious sages, "Woe, that such a "shoofro" (beauty) should be swallowed up by dust," usually meaning the beauty of spirit and mind. It could be quite fittingly applied to Yoshooah who not only was a "shoofro", an outstanding cantorial personality with extraordinary talent and ability, but he was also literally a "shoofro," a very handsome young man with a round babyface, good physique, and a very sympathic, charming personality, strongly reminiscent of the great Wilner Balebeysel.

In talent too, Finesinger was not far behind the Wilner Balebeysel. In the opinion of some competent critics, he even surpassed him in some respects. His name, Finesinger, fitted him perfectly. He was indeed a very fine singer, an ingenious artist. He possessed such outstanding qualities and inborn natural talent in such generous measure that he would have without any doubt reached the highest rung on the ladder of prominence and world renown, if only cruel fate had not cut him down in his very prime, before he even had a chance to develop all his potentialities. He began his musical activities very early in life, as if deep in his heart he had a premonition and instinctively felt, that he did not have much time and that he must get going and hurry, if he wanted to accomplish something in his field of endeavors.

He was born in Ploonigian in the year 1839, the son of Reb Leizer, the cantor of the town. His father was considered one of the better practitioners of the profession who, in addition to his considerable natural inclination and ability, also possessed some musical education. From his earliest youth, his father taught him sight reading and made him join his choir. He took to it like a duck to water. Occasionally, the cantor gave his son some solos to sing, which impressed the worshipers favorably.

Public acclaim induced the proud father to enlarge gradually the youngster's role in the service. He let him improvise a melody as a prologue to a prayer, and the boy gave in these exercises evidence of such rich phantasy that the cantor sometimes even ceded him the pulpit and Yoshooahke was given an opportunity to conduct the religious service, with the boys of the chorus assisting him.

Now he had free reign and the opportunity to really show what he was able to do. The people were enchanted by the remarkable inventiveness, the brilliant musical ideas and the extraordinary sweetness that poured from the mouth of their cantor's son, and the Rabbi in his sermon applied to him the dictum of the wisest of all men: "Ben chochom yesamach ov" (a bright son giveth joy to his father).

Reb Leizer had indeed every reason to be proud and happy with the progress made by his gifted son. He received a strict religious upbringing, a thorough Talmudic education and a complete basic indoctrination in the intricacies of the various traditional melodies for the different holidays. He also acquired a pretty extensive knowledge in the field of cantorial liturgical literature as well as in secular musical opuses. When after the protracted siege of mutation (change of voice of puberty), he received in

exchange for his alto a beautiful tenor voice, it found him well prepared and ready for his mission in life, a brilliant cantorial career.

In 1858, he was appointed to his first position. He was still a teenager when he occupied the pulpit in Lentchitz. He filled the post with distinction for two years and then moved on to Kalo in the Gubernia of Kalish. From there he was called to Wlotzlavek. By now he had grown in stature and in experience, and had begun to attract the attention of the musical circles of not only his immediate vicinity, but of Poland in general. People became aware that the young cantor of Wlotzlavek was an unusually talented, individualistic interpreter of the religious Hebrew chants, who was destined to go far in his chosen field.

When Chayim Lomzer left his post in the central synagogue of Wilna and moved to London, there was a lively competition for the vacancy. Cantors from all over Europe vied for the great prize. Among the flood of applications, which poured in from the various contestants, there was also one from Finesinger. But who would pay attention to the missive of some fledgling cantor from a modest country town? The chief interest was centered on the big stars, whose names had become well-known and who were already holding down prominent positions.

Yoshooah was not well-known. His fame had not yet had time to spread sufficiently to be counted among the outstanding elite of the fraternity. But he felt that this was his big chance to break out from obscurity into the limelight and to be discovered by the world. He waited impatiently for an invitation but when weeks went by without the postman having delivered one to his address, he boldly decided on an unprecedented audacious step. He left for Wilna and began an intensive campaign there to promote his own candidacy.

But the "Chniokish (impractical fanatic dreamer)" Chassidic young man with the long curly sidelocks and white socks, garbed in his typical Polish long kaftan, rabbinic velvet hat and "gartel" silk sash, with his custom of dunking himself in the ritual bath before proceeding to pray and his delving in the Kabalistic mysteries, did hardly give the impression of a great cantor to the Lithuanian "Misnagdim" (opponents of Chassidism). Nobody could visualize him as chief cantor of Wilna. He did not look the part at all. It seemed quite unlikely that this frail, delicate person could properly officiate in such a giant sanctuary, as the great synagogue.

The uninvited visitor kept blowing his own horn, but nobody was listening. His propaganda mill was stalled. His campaign had not caught on. It had not even gotten off the ground. The competent authorities did not take him seriously and put him off with all kinds of trumped up excuses and patently spurious, evasive protestations and explanations, designed to get rid of him. They could not imagine that the Polish Shtetl (provincial town) could produce material equal to the task. From Wlotzlavek to Wilna was too big a jump for anybody to comtemplate being able to bridge. They were after a big fish and he looked like small fry in their estimation.

But Finesinger knew his own worth and he was not one to become

easily discouraged. Determined not to be denied his one chance for which he had undertaken the trip, and having already exhausted all the softening up methods in his arsenal on the hard-boiled trustees without result, he now sought out the "More Horooeh" (head of the religious court) in the hope of succeeding in enlisting his assistance for his cause. He showed the vernerable Rabbi his documents and volunteered to sing for him. The spiritual leader of the community engaged him in biblical and Talmudic discussions and was surprised at the breadth of his erudition and knowledge of the sacred scriptures. He was equally impressed with the beauty of his voice and the brilliant manner of his chanting of the prayers.

Upon the warm recommendation of the influential sage, the skeptical and reluctant trustees too began to take an interest in the obtrusive and insistent applicant and to pay attention to his request. They at long last agreed to give him a hearing, and when the examination, contrary to their expectations, turned up an astonishing result, they had to admit that it merited further consideration. Yoshooahke obtained the coveted approval for an audition. He was then invited to officiate at the following Sabbath service, and when he had finished it was all over but the shouting. The people wanted to hear no more candidates. The issue was decided there and then. They had found the right man. He was installed as "Chazzon d'moso" (chief cantor) in 1805.

It was related that when he chanted "Av horachamin shocheyn meromim" (merciful father who dwellest on high), he touched the hearts of the worshipers to such an extent that they were moved to tears and general audible wailing broke out all over the synagogue and women fainted. The impact of the lament was so extraordinary that the Rabbi felt obliged to beg the cantor to cease and not to continue, for it had reached the proportions of endangering the lives of the listeners, and was breaking their hearts.

Finesinger possessed an almost hypnotic power to stir up the worshipers by his chants. In his voice lay some magical sweetness which invariably found its way into the hearts of his listeners and once having penetrated, played on the heart strings with devastating effect, completely conquering them. The young cantor had a tear in his voice which acted like a charm, moving his audience and shaking them like leaves in a storm. Hearing him pray, the tears came flowing from their eyes in uncontrollable streams.

When he stood at the pulpit praying for his community, he was so deeply immersed in his sacred task, that he appeared to have shaken off the gravitational pull of the earth and to have been elevated into a totally spiritual world of pure holiness. His whole being was fired by the awareness of the immensity and the great crucial importance of the mission which he was given.

His services consequently were so full of sincere piety and honest devotion and flowed with such fervor from the depth of his heart, that according to the legend even the sainted souls of the heaven-dwelling departed came down to listen to the prayers of the cantor of Wilna.

On one occasion on the night of "Kol Nidre" on Yom Kippur, they came in such great numbers that there was no air left in the synagogue with which to breathe. The stuffiness was unbearable. Sensing the great danger that threatened the worshipers, the Rabbi called for attention and appealed, "In order to prevent a catastrophe on the holy day of judgment, I request that the visiting souls be kind enough to the living and that they leave the synagogue." Soon after this announcement, the choking congregants felt a strange relief. They were suddenly able to breathe again.

One biographer, Aaron Friedman, writes about Finesinger: "Over his recitations lay a unique spell and a fascinating, miraculous quality. His audiences often gained the impression that they were witnessing the revelation of an ancient prophet and listening to an inspired vision of the Lord's messenger." A higher accolade than that is hardly conceivable.

There was one specific prayer in which he shone in particularly bright splendor. It was hailed as one of his most brilliant interpretations. The prayer "Shchoolo ashoolo" of the supplemental liturgic poetry which is recited on the Sabbaths of the sefira (counting of the Omer) period, occuring between Passover and the feast of Pentecost. When Mordechay Hershman came to America, he brought with him from Wilna this celebrated composition of the late lamented Cantor Finesinger and he sang it at his concert apperances with singular effect. However, when the well-known chorus master and composer, Meyer Machtenberg, visited Wilna, he heard the authentic version of the chant sung by his father who had heard Finesinger perform it. The American tourist wrote it down and upon returning to New York he handed it to Hershman, who henceforth also sang and adopted the corrected version as it was annotated by Machtenberg. Another highly regarded composition from the pen of the great Wilna cantor is "Rachamono idkar lon" from the "Yom Kippur Kuton" service.

Reb Abrohom Machtenberg, who was the cantor of the Wilno Chevra Kadisha (holy society) and the superintendent of the cemetery, sang in the choir of Yehoshooah Finesinger, together with two friends, who later became world-famous singers: Michaylov and Winogradov, and also Abe Kahan, who was for many years the editor of the *Jewish Forward* of New York. Michaylov, (Moshe Zilberstein) was born in Wilna in 1858, the son of a poor housepainter. One of the greatest stars of the Russian Imperial Opera, the favorite of the Tzar and the Royal Court, became a convert to the Russian Pravoslavna Church assuming the name Michail Ivanowitsch Michaylov. Winogradov, born in 1868, on the other hand, remained a staunch Jew and in later years he also functioned as a cantor.

After the Russian Revolution during the Kerensky regime, Michaylov changed his religion again and returned to the fold of his ancestors and made a pilgrimage to the town where he was born to visit the graves of his parents. He did not recognize Avreymele, the alto, who by that time had a long gray beard, but when Machtenberg made himself known to the visitor, Michaylov broke down and wept. He had by that time fallen from grace. Abandoned by his former patrons, his career in opera over, he open-

ed a music studio. He was moved to tears by the memories that crowded upon him as he recalled the years of their youth when they both used to reap occasionally pretty fiery slaps in the face from the morose choir leader when they would fail to dance exactly to the beats of his music. The opera star requested his old pal to keep secret his presence in the city. It seems he was ashamed of his opportunistic actions of the past and was loath to meet former acquaintances who despised him for having deserted the faith of his ancestors.

When Abe Kahan came on a visit to his hometown, he also did not fail to look up the final resting place of his dear ones. He was warmly greeted and welcomed by his fellow chorister of his childhood days, Avrohom Machtenberg. They celebrated their overdue reunion by exchanging nostalgic episodes and memories from the legendary life of their adored cantor and upon returning home, the editor of the *Forward* brought back regards to his son in New York.

The last act, the ultimate chapter of the life of the great Wilna cantor, took place in a foreign country. While he was on a visit to his brother in Volovin,the Rabbi of that city requested of Finesinger to do him the favor of going with him to the cemetery and to recite there the memorial prayer for his sainted father, being that it happened to be the anniversary date of his death. While fulfilling the Rabbi's wish and performing the ritual of this sacred act of reverence and loving kindness, he caught a severe cold. His illness became aggravated and gradually so critical, that he had to be transferred to Berlin, where he was taken to the Jewish Hospital. Every effort was made to save his life. But there was no holding back the bony hand of the Angel of Death. After a short, fatal illness, Yoshooah Finesinger succumbed. His pure soul ascended to heaven and his earthly remains were interred on the field of the Shoenhauser Abbey Cemetery. The sad date was the 19th of May in the year 1872.

He had lived for only thirty-three years. All the Jewish communities of Poland and Lithuania, and particularly the Jews of Wilna were stricken as if by lightning when the tidings of the great tragedy reached them and became enveloped in a dark veil of deep mourning over the untimely passing of one of the most illustrious precious stones in the crown of the Wilna Chazzanuth. His life span was pitifully short but full of fruitful activities and eminent accomplishments.

It would seem that fate compensates human beings, whose destiny it is to have their existence on earth cut short by the scythe of the Maloch Hamoves with the ability to make every minute of their alloted time count. To live intensively and cram into the brief term granted them on this vale of tears more condensed content and meaningful achievement than is contained in the lives of most individuals blessed with longevity. If measured not by the yardstick of its duration but the quantity and quality of his achievements Yoshooah Finesinger's life cast a long and lasting shadow.

CHAPTER 42

ISRAEL COOPER

Israel Cooper, the first of the world famous cantors in America — The indignities which he suffered in Wilna — His individual way of praying — Chants with Rumanian flavor — He was friendly with actors — He is brought to New York — Originated Chanukah concerts in New York — His tragic end.

In contrast to Finesinger, whose name (fine singer) fitted him perfectly and was complimentary in character, his successor in the post of chief cantor of Wilna did not derive much pleasure from his given name. It was the name of a metal, but not of the precious and rare kind such as gold or silver to which the cantor would have liked to have people compare his voice. It was on the contrary a rather common and base one, which circumstance gave his opponents an opportunity and material for bad jokes and humorous remarks, albeit in bad taste, at his expense.

His name was Israel Kupfer, which means copper (in Yiddish it is pronounced cooper), but his voice had a silvery sound. It had a wide range, (almost three octaves) a beautiful, fine-texured, crystal clear, mighty, heroic tenor, which extended to the height of "do-re" in the uppermost register and was admired by the public and experts. His voice was frequently compared to that of Sirota, and there were even some who were of the opinion that his voice surpassed Sirota's in some respects.

Cooper, one of the most illustrious and renowned cantors of his time, belonged to the category of cantors, whose greatness lies in the main in their God-given wonderful instrument in their throat, the blessed present which they received at birth, the strong healthy vocal chords. By this, however, we do not mean to imply that that was all he possessed and that

he had nothing else of value. This could not have been the case with Cooper, if only for the reason that after all he graduated from a reputable school, and had served as an apprentice, student and helper in the very best of the private conservatories. He sang in the choir of Nisi Belzer, under whose tutelage even the greatest drong (one who had no musical ear, whose thick cranium cannot grasp and absorb knowledge) was bound to become a capable, competent musician and cultured singer eventually.

In that choir, the singers, in addition, had to possess considerable ability in coloratura, for complicated coloratura passages written for the whole choir frequently occurred in Nisi's compositions, which they were obliged to execute, with such strictly disciplined and exact punctuality to make it produce a sound, as if it had been sung by one single soloist. From that school, the greatest cantors of the world graduated. Israel Cooper was one of them.

Yehoshooah'ke Finesinger stood at the zenith of his promising career when the thread of his life line was suddenly cut by the angel of death. It happened away from home in a strange land. His untimely, tragic passing plunged Wilna into a state of deep shock and sorrow. His congregation mourned him for a long time. They were so disturbed by the great loss which they had suffered that nobody could even give a thought to the question of filling his place. It took years before the Jews of Wilna were in a state of mind to be able to make peace with the inevitable, to get used to the fact that their beloved cantor was gone and that they must look for a successor.

In the intervening years, if they even did give the matter some thought, they could think of only one person who could at all come under consideration as a cantor, and who would be able to fill the vacancy to everybody's satisfaction. It was a former cantor of theirs, Chayim Lomzer who held the post before Finesinger and who went away somewhere to the other end of the world - England. It seemed inconceivable that he would be content with his new post and be able to stand it for very long, after having once tasted the sincere and warm devotion which the Wilna Jews used to shower upon a cantor, whom they loved and admired. They were almost sure that Chayim Lomzer, who left them in favor of seemingly greener pastures, would by this time have realized that he made a mistake and would be only too glad to return to them.

When the hopes which they entertained concerning the cantor who lived in London proved to be illusions which were dampened by his outright refusal, there was nothing left for them to do but to look around for a suitable man to fill the vacant post. That there were more than enough candidates to choose from goes without saying. Wilna always possessed some kind of magical attraction for cantors. The winner of the grand prize this time was Israel Cooper, who took over the position in 1878, six years after Finesinger's death.

In contrast to his predecessor, Cooper was not a relatively unknown cantor when he came to Wilna. He had held a very prominent position for years in Bucharest, the capital of Rumania, where he had already gained

recognition, prominence and high stature in his field of endeavors. Wilna had thus acquired a cantor of renown reputation.

Why Cooper quit Bucharest is an interesting story in itself. It was not of his own volition that he left town but he was, to put it mildly induced by the heads of his Rumanian congregation to resign his post. What was the crime which he committed that brought down the ire of his superiors upon his head and made them fire him? The long and short of it was that Abraham Goldfaden, the father of the Yiddish theatre, which was then in its infancy, came to Bucharest in the spring of 1877 to pitch his tent in that fun-loving Rumanian capital.

After giving some performances in the primitive "Zeignitze" Hall with the assistance of only three amateur actors, he transferred to a regular theatre with a standard stage that was located on "Strada Calleya Vacaresht" and whose owner was a patron of Goldfaden by the name of Lazar Kafedshaw. Having thus expanded his show business, he needed additional personnel. He was especially interested in young men with good voices and where else could he find such material but in the chorus of the central synagogue. He approached several singers of the ensemble and they proved to be amenable to his proposition to join his troupe and earn thereby a few leys on the side. But the moonlighting of the members of the synagogue choir on the stage was like the red cloth to the bull in the arena in the eyes of the religous Jews of Bucharest. A storm of protest broke out over the scandalous behavior of the singers, who dared to take on the roles of actors in the unholy atmosphere of the theatre while continuing to assist the cantor in the religious services in the sanctuary.

There was a general outcry against the insolent two-timing of the choristers and a demand that the violators of the commonly accepted code of ethics be summarily dismissed from the choir. But Cantor Cooper was in no position to sack the culprits. He would not have been able to do without them, for there were no suitable replacements to be recruited. His ensemble would have been irreparably weakened without their vocal contribution and liturgical knowledge. Beside he could not see the great evil in their performing in the Yiddish theatre. From his viewpoint, this could not be considered a flaw or blemish. So he stood his ground and did not prohibit their participation in Goldfaden's enterprise, which he himself considered worthy and commendable. The pioneer showman, he thought, ought to be encouraged instead of condemned and handicapped. Far from hiding his feelings, he even went so far as to attend occasionally the performances himself.

His attitude enraged the board of directors who held a stormy meeting at which fiery attacks were leveled at the strange actions of the out-of-line religious functionary. The result was that a resolution was rammed through, declaring it to be the opinion of the board that the congregation could dispense with the services of the non-conforming cantor. Not only was Israel Cooper shorn of his post, but it was in addition duly recorded in the official "Pinkas" (book) of the great synagogue of Bucharest why Cooper was stripped of his office. But his disciplining by the Bucharest com-

munity evidently did not influence Wilna in choosing him to represent them in the synagogue ritual as they were eager to obtain his services. But as we shall see, history eventually repeated itself in Wilna too.

As a postscript we might record that the singers of Cooper's choir were not at all upset by the abuse heaped on them by the ultra-fanatics. They remained with the theatre director who found favor with the general public which kept flocking in droves to the performances.

Goldfaden was on his way to success and one of his acquisitions from Cooper's chorus made good in a big way. He became one of the most famous artists of the Yiddish stage. His name was Zelig Mogulesco, the greatest character comic the Jewish theatre has ever been able to boast of.

The Jews of Wilna enthusiastically acclaimed their new cantor. They were highly impressed with his unusual voice which rang out with rare power and brilliant sound, penetrating into the furthest corner of the large synagogue.

What especially found favor with Cooper's congregants and made him beloved, particularly by the plain, simple folk, was his frequent use of the unique Rumanian thrills and fascinating roulades; and the inclusion into his chants of the peculiar Bessarabian (volach) so called Doynes, which highly pleased the worshipers. It was something novel, a very welcome pleasant surprise, which soon became very popular because it had great and strong appeal to "Amcho," the general public, to the masses. They accepted happily the newly imported cantor, greeted him with warm interest, and were so taken by the new melodies that they picked them up in no time and sang them with great delight at work.

However, the same thing cannot be said about the attitude displayed toward the new cantor by the intelligentsia (the experts in matters musical, and the circles boasting of a higher level of culture and more refined taste). They were quite critical of his peculiar Rumanian pronounciation of the Hebrew texts, which sounded strange and funny to the ears of these staunch, confirmed and uncompromising Lithuanians. That he did not possess Jewish knowledge and Talmudic erudition in a measure that Wilna was accustomed to find in the cantor of their great synagogue further added to their disillusionment with him.

The cantor was supposed to sit at the table of study among the scholars and participate in the discussion. But Cooper used to look in utter bewilderment at the unfamiliar pages of the Talmudic folios like the cock into "Beney Odom" (the prayer said on the day before Yom Kippur while turning around the cock over the head). He seldom uttered a word, as if he were an entirely different person from the one who at the pulpit could burst forth with thunderous tones that were able to split the heavens.

As if his embarrassing plight was not bad enough, some practical jokers perpetrated yet a cynically humorous trick on him. They mailed him a large Wilna edition of a "Korban Mincha" (evening sacrifice), a Siddur (prayer book) with a Yiddish translation. The gesture was meant to be a subtle hint, as if to say, "Inasmuch as you are struggling quite a bit in the right pronunciation of the 'Ivreh' [text], not to mention your lack of un-

derstanding of the 'Peyroosh Hamilos' [the meaning of the words], you surely could use this volume profitably, and you ought to study the Yiddish translation."

But instead of evoking the expected reaction from the cantor — that he would be offended at the implied insult — the episode had a contrary and quite salutary effect. Far from ignoring the gentle hint and implied advice, Cooper instead took it very much to heart. Being fully aware and conscious of the undeniable fact, that he lacked the knowledge expected of him by his congregation, he began studying diligently in a concentrated effort to make up for lost time. He spent most of his spare time in the Beis Hamedrosh. He never missed a session of learning, whether it was Ayin Yaakov, Bible or Talmud. He listened attentively, trying desperately to absorb the words of wisdom of the many great scholars Wilna could justly take pride in. If one perseveres with enough will-power and endurance, there can be no doubt as to what the result will be. In this instance too, it could have been easily predicted that Cooper would eventually become a fine scholar in all branches of Jewish knowledge and culture.

It is doubtful whether anybody trying to take the place of a genius like the late Finesinger would have been able to perform the miracle of succeeding in acquiring the unanimous recognition and complete loyalty of all the Jews of Wilna. It is most likely that it was from the beginning an impossible task, and it is, therefore, not surprising that Cooper, too, was unable to achieve it. The deck was stacked against him. He had, to be sure, a great number of devoted followers, who were ready to defend him at all costs, but he also did not lack determined, stubborn opponents, detractors and enemies who took advantage of every opportunity to harass, badger and vilify him and do everything in their power to make his life miserable. Some of these went even so far as to employ a crude word play to give expression to their sinister "good" wishes for the cantor of their congregation. His opponents cracked the silly joke that "Wilna" will have a chance to get a suitable cantor only when Cooper (copper) will turn into a mesh (Brass)." The Lithuanians pronounced "mesh" like "mess" which means a dead body. It is abhorrent to even repeat such a remark and hard to believe that God-fearing Jews were capable of making it.

To say the Cooper was not overly happy in Wilna is putting it mildly. Petty annoyances directed against him never ceased. Disgruntled groups criticized him constantly, finding fault with everything he did. Without any valid reason, they were against him and were determined to bring about his ouster or resignation. He was not on very good terms with the trustees of the congregation either. They looked askance at his habit of frequently attending the rehearsals and performances of the Yiddish theatre, which had only recently been established in the city. He was given to understand that according to the prevailing custom and the generally held opinion of the membership, it was not at all fitting and proper for the chief cantor of Wilna to associate with a group of bohemians with allegedly loose morals and to show himself publicly at their performances in a theatre. They complained, in addition, that due to his preoccupation with

the activities of the actors, he was neglecting his duties to the congregation. They suggested that instead of taking such a great interest in the theatre, he would do well to pay more attention and to devote a little more time and effort to his choir, which was far from perfect or even competent but had rather fallen into a disgraceful rut.

Cooper swallowed all these insults and upbraidings, but he vowed to take revenge on his tormentors as soon as a favorable opportunity would present itself. By now, he was sick and tired of the unceasing criticisms and of continuing to serve as a convenient target for all manner of poisonous arrows and he conceived a plan of appropriate action to put an end to the untenable situation by eventually making a change.

Soon he had an opportunity to do something about his situation. Due to the unsettled conditions then prevailing and as a direct result of the reign of terror and the frequent outbreaks of pogroms on Jewish inhabitants in the lands under Russian domination, the latter part of the nineteenth century saw the beginning of a mass emigration which gravitated in an endless stream toward America. The new movement, the turn of events and the gradual deterioration of conditions in general caused Cooper to realize that it might be advisable for him too to join the ranks of the wanderers, who were setting out to make their way to the golden land of promise.

For quite some time he had been corresponding with some of his "landsleit" and friends who kept him informed of conditions in the New World. Now he received word that the newly erected Kalvarier Synagogue, situated on Pike Street in downtown New York, was scouring the world in search of a cantor with a great famous name, so as to be able to compete with the Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol of Norfolk Street, which in those years played the role of the Temple Emanuel of downtown, due principally to their excellent Cantor Moore, who drew the crowds away from the other synagogues of the largely Jewish section.

Cooper gave his cronies the green light, and when these friends and representatives of his told the trustees of the congregation that the chief cantor of Wilna was available, they were overjoyed. They seized the opportunity to import this well known cantorial personality unseen and unheard. They were glad to engage him purely on this reputation and fame, and without delay they dispatched to him a signed contract stipulating his yearly salary as two thousand dollars, with a provision obligating the congregation to appropriate an additional one thousand dollars for a choir. The contract was made out for a period of four years. As soon as Cooper received it, he left Wilna like a scared rabbit, without saying a word to anyone.

According to the version, as related in their books by Eliyahoo Zaludkowsky and Nathan Stolnitz, the city preacher of Wilna, Reb Yakov Yoseph (or Yoozpo), who was called to New York to occupy the rabbinical post of the Kalvarier Synagogue and to become the chief rabbi of New York City, did supposedly bring his former cantor, Cooper, to America. In this statement of theirs they are apparently in error, for at the

time of Cooper's arrival in the Kalvarier Synagogue in 1886, the rabbi of the congregation was Reb Yitzchok Margolies, who passed away a year later in August of 1887 at the age of 46, leaving his family unprovided for. Furthermore, on the eve of the new moon of the month Elul, Cooper arranged a "Yom Kippur Koton" service with admission by tickets only, for the benefit of the widow and orphans of the husband and father who died tragically in the prime of his life.

Only five months after the Kalvarier Synagogue lost their spiritual leader, did they give any thought to the question of looking for a successor. The matter was under discussion at a meeting of the association of congregations, which was held at the Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol of Norfolk Street on the seventh day of December 1887. They decided to engage the chief rabbi of Wilna, Reb Yaakov Yossef, or, as he was generally called, Reb Yaakov Charif (sharp, clever), as chief rabbi of New York with the understanding that his actual rabbinical seat was to be at the Pike Street Synagogue of the Kalvarier congregation. The date of arrival of the newly elected chief rabbi was in July in 1888, and a few days after landing in American he gave his first sermon on Shabos Nachmoo (the Sabbath of consolation) at the Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol. This was two years after Cantor Cooper arrived in New York.

The two distinguished colleagues of Wilna reversed the order of the Yotzros (supplementary prayers), the sequence of events as they actually occurred. Not the chief rabbi was instrumental in bringing the cantor to New York; it was Cooper who recommended Reb Yaakov Yossef to the Kalvarier Synagogue, and this is the inside story of how it happened. After eight years in office, when Cooper left his post in Wilna, Pinye Minkowsky, who had succeeded Abrass at the grand synagogue of Odessa, and who like his predecessor was not exactly handled with kid gloves, was eager to leave the "hot seat" and came to Wilna to apply for the vacant position. When Pinye paid a visit to Rabbi Yaakov Jossef, he complained to him that he was unable to make ends meet. His meager income did not begin to cover his expenses. He was obliged to keep on borrowing money in order to provide the bare necessities of life for his family and he was now head over heels hopelessly in debt. He, therefore, asked Pinye confidentially to do him a favor by taking an interest in his plight and to look around and see whether he could get for him a more suitable, better paying position in his hometown, Odessa.

The audition of the candidate from Odessa at the great synagogue of Wilna turned out to be not very auspicious. To be blunt, it was a failure. He had, to be sure, some quite vociferous spokesmen, admiring followers and well wishers, who carried on an intensive campaign to promote and further the chances of his candidacy. They used for their propaganda the slogan, "Tachas Hanechoshes Heyviyoo Zahov" (a quotation from the Bible: "instead of copper [Cantor Cooper] we bring you gold" [Minkowsky means gold]). But even this was of no great help. It was not in the cards for Pinye to win the cantorial post and to be awarded the grand prize. When Minkowsky's hopes of being chosen as chief cantor of Wilna

were dashed, he, too, following the example set by Cooper, turned his eyes toward the western horizon.

The building boom of houses of God in the New World continued unabated. A new synagogue arose on Eldridge Street, and seeing what a land office business the Pike Street Synagogue was doing with the famous cantor, whom they had imported from Wilna, the officers of the newly erected Eldridge Street Synagogue became envious of the success of the sister congregation. They decided to try the same method, which seemed to be a foolproof panacea for all the ills, that are liable to befall the treasury of a congregation. They proceeded to bring their plan to fruition and contacted Minkowsky. After quite some negotiations between Odessa and New York, Minkowsky was engaged. After having settled down in New York, he remembered the promise, which he had made to the Wilna Rabbi in response to the latter's request.

When he heard of a movement, which had as its goal the appointment of a chief rabbi in the city, he saw a favorable opportunity to do some useful spadework and promotional persuasion in influential communal circles on behalf of the great scholar and outstanding personality, who was highly regarded in rabbinical circles and was undoubtedly the right and best man available for the post. He discussed the matter with and solicited the help and cooperation of his colleague Cooper who, too, had a hand in bringing about the desired result. It was largely through the unceasing efforts of the two prominent cantors that the matter culminated in favor of the Wilna rabbi. It was not the fault of the well-meaning cantors that it later turned out to be an unfortunate move for Rabbi Jacob Yoseph. His lot in America was not a very enviable one, but that is another matter, into the discussion of which we cannot delve now.

To relate briefly the events that are relevant, at the urging of the cantors, the association of the congregations sent immediately five thousand rubles for travel expenses to Reb Yaakov. The cantors did so being well aware of Reb Yaakov's precarious financial position. But the maggid of Wilna used the greater part of that sum to pay up some of his debts which he had incurred. In addition, as soon as it was in his power to do so, which was shortly after he landed in New York and had received his first paychecks, he transferred two thousand rubles to the reputable banker of Wilna, Aranovsky, who together with the Moreh Tzedek (judge of the religious court) Reb Eliezer, formed a committee that called in and liquidated the rest of the outstanding notes.

But to continue with Cooper, he was the talk of New York. For weeks the propaganda machines were kept busy saturating the news media with the exciting sensation, heralding the greatness of the expected celebrity who was on his way over. When he finally arrived and made his American debut, officiating for the first time at the Pike Street Synagogue, New York was in the grip of such a heat wave, that it almost melted the thermometer. This circumstance, however, did not keep the people away. On the contrary, it seemed as if the whole city had converged upon the synagogue, in which a mammoth crowd stood pressed together like sardines.

Cooper conducted the services, assisted by a choir of fourteen singers, and the service continued for six and a half consecutive hours. The correspondent of *The Jewish Messenger* commented on the exceptional length of the service in an orthodox house of worship by contrasting it with that of the reform temples, where the progressive Jews arrive at ten o'clock after having consumed an elaborate breakfast, and then complain that the Rabbi is keeping them for all of two hours.

From the same report, we also learn that the reading of the Torah seemed to go on and on endlessly. Among those called up to the pulpit to read three verses, which is the required minimum, were the eminent prosperous guests and visitors. The "Mi Shebeyrachs" (He Who Blessed) were as numerous as the sands of the shores of the ocean; and the "Shenodars" (pledges) as the stars in the sky. The first Sabbath thus netted a sizeable sum toward the expenses incurred by the congregation and the cantor proved his mettle. The public was for him and the whole affair was an unqualified success.

The Kalvarier Synagogue, which until then had suffered from the competition of the more popular "Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol" of Norfolk Street, was put on its feet by the cantor, whom they had the good sense to import. The wheel of fortune had turned and Cantor Moore of the Norfolk Street Synagogue, who possessed a powerful baritone voice and who used to be such a drawing card that people flocked to him from all directions, thus emptying all the neighboring synagogues, lost his superior standing. He was dethroned and henceforth ceased to be an important factor in the cantorial world. Cooper made him seem very ordinary and he eventually lost his position.

From now on, the activity around the synagogues of New York increased and the whole downtown area came alive. Big events were in the offing. Cantors were on everybody's mind. They dominated the scene and agitated the communal life of the Jewish section. One congregation tried to outdo the other.

The "Yahoodim" (German Jews) sounded the alarm and criticized the spread of the "epidemic of cantors" as they called it. "Whoever heard," they thundered, "of obliging people to buy a ticket of admission to a religious service on a Shabos Mevorchim (Sabbath of the blessing of the moon) to hear the cantor officiate?" In their estimation, the cantorial plague was even worse than the danger from Nihilism, and from socialism, which they feared like the very devil himself.

But the Jewish immigrants paid scant heed to the condemnatory outcries of the Germans. It did not prevent them from keeping up their habit of running to hear the great, outstanding masters, Cooper and Minkowsky, who for several years occupied the "driver's seat" at the head of the cantorial fraternity of New York.

But when Minkowsky, after three years in America, was called back to Odessa to take over the cantorial post at the Broder Synagogue as successor to the retired Nisi Blumental, Cooper remained the generally recognized leader of the cantors in the United States.

Cooper's biggest success was "Shema Yisroel" (Hear O Israel) from the Mussaf (supplemental) Kedoosha (sanctification) and "Mi Shebeyrach" (He Who Blessed), in which prayers he was able to weave in with greatest effect the Moldavian "Doynes and Honga's" and the characteristic Rumanian trills and coloraturas, with which he was so thoroughly familiar and so expertly adept. Even though he had grown old, his big, sonorous voice retained its beauty, power and flexibility, and still served him well at the pulpit. The Jews of New York flocked to hear him and the devout drew inspiration from his prayers.

He was the first cantor to arrange Chanukah festival concerts with orchestral accompaniment in America. On such an occasion, he used to employ an enlarged ensemble of eighteen singers and a band of twelve instrumentalists. His choir conductor was Yaakov Koppel Sandler, the one who composed the music to the so popular "Eli, Eli" and one of his choristers was the well-known actor Mogoolevsky. In later years Jacob Margoliyes who came to the United States in 1902 became the choir leader of Cooper.

Cooper had very talented children, who very soon became acclimatized and Americanized. His sons sang on Broadway and were known as "The Cooper Brothers." Later on, they organized a very successful vaudeville attraction and called themselves "The Empire City Quartet," which played a prominent role in the entertainment world at the turn of the century. A daughter of his practiced law, and another son made a name for himself as a talented writer.

So it would seem that the father had ample reason to take pride, joy and pleasure in his well-educated children and that he apparently was destined to have only "Nachas" (contentment) and satisfaction from them. But it was not so. Instead of joy and pleasure, they caused him misery, heartaches, and shame. He also had a lot of vexations and unpleasantness in his last years from his congregation. He took it to heart very much. The blows coming at him from all directions were too much for him to bear. Finally, he lost his equilibrium and in his despair he decided to end it all, and he took his own life.

The years during which Cooper reigned in America can naturally not be compared with the era following the conclusion of World War I, which marked the beginning of the golden epoch of Chazzanuth. But in the sense of the explanation given by Rashi, the great commentator, of the sentence "Noach ish tzadik, tomim hoyo bedorosov. Lefi doro hoyo tzadik." (Noah was not so great, but in comparison with the people of his generation, he was a tzadik [righteous man]), we may also place a similar epitaph on the monument to the memory of Cooper: In his time and place, in the generation in which he lived, he was outstanding, and he played one of the top roles among the cantors. "Yiftach Bedoro K'Shmuel Bedoro."

Hillel Rogoff, the late editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward* used to often mention to me the name of Cooper and ask me whether I was going to write about him. He remembered him fondly from his youth.

CHAPTER 43

JOSEPH ZWI KAHAN

The tragic end of Joseph Zwi Kahan. In his forties he was driven from his post - One of his disciples was the opera star, Michaelov.

The subject of our discussion today happens to be an artist with high standing in the profession, learned in Jewish studies and in secular knowledge, an individual who in all the years of his life was religiously inclined. He was a person who due to his rare ability and talent, his intelligence and his genteel conduct, earned the admiration and highest respect of all the people — until the day when something unfortunate happened. But let us not put the cart before the horse. But begin at the beginning and proceed in orderly fashion.

We are referring to the famous chief cantor of Wilna, Joseph Zwi Kahan.

Kahan's first position was at the Kozatske (soldier's) choir synagogue of Rostov on the Don. He was still an unknown young cantor when he was audacious enough to try to conquer the great synagogue of Wilna. When the news broke in 1886 that Israel Cooper flew the coop and left for America Kahan somehow managed to get permission to officiate on trial at the revered pulpit, and vanquishing such greats among the candidates as Yoshe Slonimer and other stars, he took by storm the great fortress of the Lithuanian cantorate. If he was capable of accomplishing such a feat, he surely must have been an unusual person.

In addition to his great cantorial talents, his rich tenor voice which according to Joseph Rumshinsky, who conducted the choir for him in Yelisovetgrad resembled in its super quality that of the great Italian tenor Tamania and his sweet, artistic style of interpretation, which captured the

hearts of the worshipers. He was also blessed with attractive physical attributes. He was a very handsome tall man with beautifully formed features and a masculine well proportioned figure. With his imposing bearing, his long blond curly hair and the elegant outfit which he always wore, he attracted attention wherever and whenever he appeared. The peasants used to bow down before him and kiss his hand whenever they encountered him in the streets, just as they did their priests. He was also fortunate to have had a very capable choir leader in Isaac Schlossberg, son of the famous Cantor Aryeh Leyb Aluckster. It was indeed a very harmonious combo. Still and all, to follow Cooper was no cinch and after every service hot debates took place between Cooperites and Kahanites, each camp maintaining that it's idol was superior.

This wrangle and difference of opinion did however not last long. Even the most stalvart confirmed staunch Cooperites soon became convert Kahanites, won over decisively by the new cantor's unquestionably superb vocal endowment. his brilliant interpretive ability and his magnetic personality.

His rapidly growing popularity was evidenced by the ever increasing number of people who were laying siege to the synagogue whenever Kahan was scheduled to officiate. The men swarmed to listen to his sweet chants, the women to catch a glimpse of him.

What a great drawing card he was, can be gleaned from the story related by Joseph Rumshinsky who was a youngster at the time. He used to beg of his father, to take him along to the services. However his dad refused, giving as his reason his fear that his son might be trampled to death in the scuffle that invariably broke out among the throng that crowded into the sanctuary.

Cantor Isaiah Bloomin quotes an opinion about Cantor Kahan, which he heard from the famous opera singer of the St. Petersburg Imperial OperaHouse, Michael Ivanovich Michaelov. The famous singer, whose original name was Moshe Zilberstein, a son of a poor painter of Wilna served in his youth as a choirboy of the great synagogue under Cantor Kahan. Michaelov was the possessor of a sensational tenor voice of exceptional power, and after having graduated from the Moscow Conservatory with honors, he was engaged as a member of the St. Petersburg Royal Opera Company. For his debut in St. Petersburg, he chose the opera "Zhizin Za-Tzarya" (The Life of the Tzar) by Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka (1804-1857), which was a favorite of the public. In this opera, there is an aria, where the singer has to reach the high D twice, one after another, and which is written in a very difficult high register. Inasmuch as there could rarely be found a tenor, who could do justice to this acrobatic aria, it usually was left out whenever this opera was performed.

But when the debut of Michaelov was announced, it was especially underscored that this time the opera would be presented in its entirety, including the famous aria. This caused such a great interest among music lovers, that even Tzar Alexander III came to the performance to witness the unusual feat and to hear the guest, who had the courage to try to ac-

complish this feat.

Bloomin, who at that time was a student at the conservatory of St. Petersburg, would of course also not miss such a rare opportunity and somehow managed to acquire a ticket to the performance. When the great moment arrived and the visiting singer proved equal to the task, giving the music lovers a rare treat by singing the double high notes with remarkable ease, the audience went wild, showering the hero of the evening with deafening applause and there were insistent "encore" calls from all sides of the theatre. Michaelov responded to the wishes of the audience, repeating the whole aria which this time was even stronger and better due to a kind of cantorial twist and roulade which he employed. The enthusiasm of the excited public was boundless. The Tzar summoned the singer to his loge, where he expressed his pleasure at his remarkable performance and as a token of his appreciation gave him his own golden watch as a gift. He inquired at what salary the new member of the opera company was engaged, and when he learned that his yearly compensation was stipulated at 6000 rubles, he ordered that Michaelov be given the maximum salary of eighteen thousand rubles, the same amount which was paid to the leading singer of the Imperial Opera House, Figner. From then on, Michaelov became the favorite of the ruling Romanovs, a protege of the Tzar.

But to return to that evening of the sensational singer's auspicious debut. While all those who witnessed the historic performance applauded wildly, a fellow student at the conservatory sat near Bloomin with an expression of boredom and indifference on his face. He seemed not at all impressed by what he heard. When Bloomin reproached him, wondering how he could be so cold and impassive before such virtuosity and amidst the tumultous adoration shown by the crowd around him for the visiting artist, his student pal replied, "So what? My father, Cantor Kahan, in whose choir this singer once served, can top any opera singer in voice and artistry any time."

When Bloomin sometime later had an opportunity to discuss the matter with Michaelov, he confirmed everything that Ilyusha Kahan said, adding his conviction that what he had learned from Cantor Kahan was of greater importance to him than everything all his other teachers had taught him. He also voiced his opinion, that if Kahan would have chosen a career in opera instead of in the cantorial profession, he most likely would have gone farther than he himself had.

For nearly a decade, Cantor Kahan occupied the pulpit of the Wilna cantorate with honor, competence and dignity when the troublesome and regrettable incident occurred which had far-reaching consequences and blighted the cantor's promising career. What happened was that a blot was found on Kahan's religious conduct. On the Day of Atonement just before the cantor was scheduled to ascend the pulpit for the "Mussaf" service, the trustee, Munye Shultz, (Solts) observed him putting a candy in his mouth. To eat or drink anything on this holiest day of the year is, as is well known, strictly forbidden. How much more serious is the transgression if committed by the cantor, the representative of the congregation be-

fore God, and especially if it occurs at the synagogue, when the emissary of the community is about to appeal to the Almighty on behalf of his flock?

Naturally, the trustee became enraged at the sight of the commission of a sin and reacted immediately by reproaching him and openly voicing his protest and shock. A tumult and scandal resulted. Shultz declared that under the circumstances it was inconceivable to allow the cantor to conduct the services. The cantor denied the accusation and insisted on going on with the service. Some of the worshipers took his part, but the trustee stood by his decision that the cantor had disqualified himself. Finally someone else was delegated to lead the "Mussaf" service. The cantor was disgraced.

The real fight began after Yom Kippur. Several meetings were held at which there were heated arguments pro and con, bordering on violent fights. The congregation was divided on the matter. Some were of the opinion, that inasmuch as the cantor categorically denied having done anything improper, he ought to be given the benefit of the doubt. The general rule is that in case there is a reasonable doubt, you must decide in favor of the accused. And in this case, they argued you cannot convict a man who has always conducted himself in strict accordance with the laws of the Torah and has lived an unblemished life on the sole strength of the word of one witness. It is possible that the gabbay's accusation was caused by a desire for revenge for some imagined slight or what he claimed to have seen may perhaps have been only a figment of his imagination due to his faulty eyesight.

There was in fact some talk in the city that Reb Munye had a grudge against the cantor that stemmed from what occurred on a certain festive family party, when he asked Kahan to make a "Mi Sheberach" (blessing) and he made short shrift of it, murmuring it indistinguishably, while on the same occasion reciting the "Mi Sheberach" ordered by another trustee ostentatiously with all the embellishments at his command. This implied slight, many opined, must have rankled and could have caused Reb Munye to seek a way to get even with the offender.

For quite a while the community grappled with the vexatious problem without being able to come to any conclusion. It was a bone of contention lodged in their throats. They could not swallow it and neither were they able to throw it up. In an effort to break the stalemate and to dispose of the matter, Shultz finally made the following proposal at the last meeting which took place at the home of the Chief Rabbi. He would agree to withdraw his accusation and everything would be forgiven and forgotten on condition, that the cantor there and then prove to the satisfaction of all present that he wore a "Talis Koton" (ritually prescribed undergarment).

The meeting at the Chief Rabbi's home was called for a Friday afternoon and the on short notice summoned cantor came to the meeting directly from the community bathhouse where he used to go for his ritual bath before the Sabbath. It was alleged subsequently that during the time that Kahan was bathing his body in the waters of the "Mikveh" some bought roguish creature, who was dispatched there by his enemies for that

purpose, managed to sneak up to his abandoned clothes and steal his "Talis Kuton," consequently Shultz in making his proposition knew in advance, that the condition which he had set for exonerating the cantor could not possibly be fulfilled by him at that time. When the cantor was confronted with the trustee's demand, he was thunderstruck, his face became waxen and he fainted. His enemies had triumphed.

Was the cantor indeed guilty of the misdemeanor with which he was charged, or was he the innocent victim of a conspiracy? Who can tell which of the different versions that were circulated was based on the actual facts? At any rate one thing is certain, Kahan's career suffered a fatal blow, from which he never recovered. Never again did he ascend the pulpit of the great synagogue. A morally broken man, he left Wilna in 1896 for Yelisovetgrad, where he accepted the post of cantor of the "Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol" Congregation. But even there he did not find the desired peace. All of Russia was agog with the sensational story and the more pious members of his new congregation were opposed to him on the grounds that after what happened in Wilna, he was not fit to conduct religious services anywhere. These zealots made life miserable for him at his new post. In the "Shtodtshule" (community synagogue) the cantor at that juncture was Meyer Pisack. Both houses of worship were located in the synagogue compound. During the "Kriah" the reading of the portion of the Torah prescribed for the respective week, the not particularly pious congregants used to pour out into the court (Shulehoif) to air their views about the cantors.

There followed unending hot debates between the Pisack fans and the admirers of Kahan. Quite often the fiery arguments between the opposing factions degenerated into fisticuff hassles and the synagogue courtyard became a veritable battle ground and the "Pozsarno Commando," the Fire Brigade had to be called.

When Rumshinsky, who as a little boy sang in the choir of the Wilna Choralna synagogue, arrived in Yelisovetgrad together with Kahan's two sons, who while performing as guest artists in Dwinsk, persuaded Joseph Rumshinsky to leave Yudel Rabinowich and come to Yelisovetgrad to conduct the choif for Cantor Kahan, on arriving at the home of their father, he could not believe his own eyes. He saw before him a disillusioned man, broken down physically and spiritually, skin and bone, shrunk and shriveled who was only a shadow of the handsome, attractive cantor, whom he remembered from Wilna. Kahan had lost interest in life. He was still a young man in his late forties and his voice had retained its old beauty, lustre and power, but he was morose, perturbed and melancholy. His clothes dating still from the old good days hung on his spare frame, like borrowed ill-fitting garb.

Rumshinsky conducted the choir for him on the High Holidays. But the cantor's health gradually deteriorated to such an extent that his sons felt obliged to cancel their plans to return to St. Petersburg after the High Holidays in order to continue their studies at the conservatory. This unexpected turn of events adversely affected also the ambition of their father's

newly aquired choirmaster. The inducement that made him agree to the proposition of the Kahan brothers was their promise to take him along to the conservatory after the Holy Days.

It was simply not safe to leave their depressed ailing father alone in the house with their mother who was also in failing health. And so Rumshinsky's desire to get admitted to the conservatory was thwarted and he joined the actors' troupe of the famous Esther Rachel Kaminska.

The last position of Cantor Kahan was in Charkov, where he fell seriously ill shortly after his arrival. The doctors decided to operate on him but they could not save his life. He died under the surgeon's knife.

In the prime of his life he left this world, a great talent, who had a promising brilliant future before him. But these expectations remained unfulfilled for the sole reason that a stumbling block was placed in his path "ad astra." It lamentably not only effectively impeded his ascension to the pinnacle but plunged him, in the prime of his life, into the limbo of fallen stars.

CHAPTER 44

SHLOMO KASHTAN

The founder of Chazzanuth in Lithuania — A sheriff of Kamenetz-Podolsk wishes to send him to a music school at his own expense — The Rabbi of Shepetovka removes the curse and gives him instead a blessing — The confrontation and contest with Reb Aryeh Wilkomirer — His first cantorial positions were in Zamoshtsh, Titkin and Brisk — A salesman loses twelve ducats in a bet.

Our series of articles about cantors and cantorate in Wilna has now gone on for quite a while. In spite of the fact that we have already tarried in this city longer than we had planned, we have still by far not exhausted the theme. To do full justice to it, we would have to add quite a few more chapters about a number of her cantors who deserve comprehensive treatment.

It is difficult to tear ourselves away from the wonderful Jewish musical atmosphere, which reigned in the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" and to turn away our gaze from the rich "Pleiades" of the great cantors, who have stood at the sacred altar of her central community synagogue, we must conclude our visit and be on our way to other interesting places worthy of attention.

But before we leave we must acquaint you with a great cantor who, even though his stay in Wilna was of short duration, the "fein schmeckers of the city placed him at the very top of Wilna's famous cantors.

In our dissertations so far, we have managed to get acquainted with the great Jewish centers of Eastern Europe — Berditchev, Odessa, Kishinev, and Wilna, which were fortresses of the "Chazzanuth Haregesh," the foremost liturgy of feeling. The reason for our having chosen these cit-

ies was simply because the great cantors gravitated toward the most important Jewish centers, where they were well paid and where they had large assemblages of worshipers, for whom to chant their prayers.

The Jews of the large cities had the greatest selection of cantors from which to choose. The best ones of the crop were anxious to obtain a position with their congregations. When they finally chose one from among the plethora of talented cantors that gave auditions, he unquestionably had to be outstanding. It therefore follows, that if you wanted to find the great cantors, you had to look for them in the large cities.

But there are exceptions to every rule. There were quite a few instances where brilliant, immensely gifted cantors by accident, or due to certain circumstances, strayed into smaller provincial cities and got stuck there. For these cantors to become well known in the world was much more difficult than for their colleagues in the large Jewish centers, who enjoyed the great advantage of being where the interest of the world was directed and concentrated, where they had the benefit of standing in the limelight where they could easily be seen, observed and discovered.

If the cantor of the out-of-the-way smaller town, in spite of the handicaps for gaining recognition implicit in his unfavorable, obscure location, still managed to draw upon himself the attention of the musical world and to stand out as a shining beacon in the night, then it was clear that he was not a run-of-the-mill, garden variety cantor, but someone very special, gifted and blessed with unique abilities. He did not have the benefit of the reflected glory of a prominent position, the prestige that automatically flows from being connected with a large congregation in the center of Jewish life. He raised himself up by his own bootstraps. He must have possessed "Yichus atzmo" (own personal nobleness). He was a self-made man, who gained his prestige because of the innate greatness which he possessed, even though he was tucked away in an outlying, inconspicuous corner.

To these kind of geniuses, it matters very little where they are put by fate. The world will notice them no matter where they are located. It will seek them out and beat a path to their door. Where they sit down, that is the head of the table. This is the highest grade of eminence, and it is worthwhile that we too seek them out in their lairs and find out the secret of their success.

Our first stop is Dubno. There lived one of the greatest cantors of all times, that is, if it was at all possible to single out any one city and point to it as his residence. For strictly speaking, he had no permanent domicile anywhere. His living quarters was the whole world. For a brief stitnt it happened also to be Wilna. So he is in fact not out of place in the Wilna section of our narrative.

Shlomo Kashtan is the subject of our story. His real name was Weintraub; he was called Kashtan for the reason that his thick mop of hair had the reddish-brown color of chestnuts (in Yiddish "Kashtanen"). He was born in the year 1871, the son of Shimshon, the "Baal Tfiloh" (reader) of Old Constantin. His father was a great "Tzadik" (righteous, pious Jew) who used to get up in the middle of the night to pray "Tikun Chatzos"

(midnight ritual), and he performed his devotions garbed in a "Kitt'l", a white cotton gown such as the dead are buried in.

The ultrapious Jews were in the habit of donning these clothes as a reminder that they were but flesh and blood, transitory, perishable, mortal human beings and that it was time to repent, in accordance with the dictum of our sages, "Repent one day before you die." And since nobody knows when his end will come, it follows that he must repent on each and every day of his life, because for all he knows he may die the very next day.

When the wife of Reb Shimshon passed away in the prime of her blooming youth, the distraught father entrusted his two young sons, Shlomo and Nochum Leyb, to the care of the cantor of Mohilev, "Kalmen the Lomer" (Kalmen, the limper), who notwithstanding his physical defect, used to, in the customary manner of that period, meander and scamper about the countryside and wander around with his helpers from town to village, rendering at every stop a religious service or a sacred concert performance.

In the course of their travels, they got to Kamenetz Podolsk, where they stopped and presented a concert. The presence in the audience on such occasions of music-loving gentile listeners was not an uncommon sight. Among those who attended, there happened to be Rishkin, the local sheriff. He evinced great interest in the hebrew chants which he seemed to enjoy immensely. Particularly was he impressed by the youngster who sang the solos and who was none other than "Shloymele". After the conclusion of the concert, he sought him out and offered him his help, both moral and material. He counseled him to leave the cantor and place himself under his guardianship, volunteering to provide for all his physical and spiritual needs and to bear all the expenses of his musical education, and any other course which might be required to fully prepare him for a career in opera. The sheriff was convinced that the boy possessed unusual inborn talent and precious raw material worthy of cultivation, and that he was wasting his time and energy with the traveling troubadour, when he had such great potentialities to become a famous singer. But the plan of the well meaning sheriff was nipped in the bud. For when the father got wind of the proposition, he immediately vetoed it in no uncertain terms. Music school? Opera? What a wild idea. Certainly not for his son. God forbid. One day, the roaming band of straggling vagabonds landed in a certain village shortly before the holy Sabbath was about to make its entrance. By coincidence the town happened to be honored by the visit of another distinguished guest, the Shepetovker grand rabbi.

Friday night, as was the custom, the rabbi presided over the Sabbath table around which were seated his devoted followers, listening intently to the saintly man's wise dissertations and vying with each other in catching the "Shiraayim," the uneaten scraps of food on the Tzadik's plate. (The rabbi eats only a few bites of any of the dishes and then he hands the remainder down the table where it goes from hand to hand as everybody in sight fights for a taste of the food, which is considered to have been sanctified by the holy man's touch.)

In the course of the session, the rabbi signaled to his son to intone some "Zmiros" (table chants). The assembled diners apparently enjoyed the familiar tunes and occasionally even chimed in. But to Shloymele's sensitive ear, his dissonant notes were both annoying and funny. As he was inclined to be impulsive, jolly and prankish, it tickled his funny bone and made him giggle. In vain did he try to contain his merriment and to suppress his laughter. Unable to control himself any longer, he suddenly burst out laughing out loud, which interrupted the singing of the rabbi's son, who thereupon remained standing there shamefaced and humiliated.

The embarrassing silence that followed was broken by the scornful remark of the enraged rabbi to the ill-behaved youngster, "Hey, thou whippersnapper, mischievous prankster. Don't be impudent, a wise guy and a Chutzpahnik. If you don't behave I can take away thy voice." But boys will be boys. The carefree, uninhibited little soloist paid scant heed to the reproof administered to him by the Rabbi and continued to show off before his pals, cracking disparaging, merry jokes about the sour, crowing notes of the amateur singer.

On the following morning at the service, when the choir sang the first composition of the Sabbath morning prayers and the time came for Shloymele to render his solo, the cantor was dumbfounded and appalled. The boy was unable to bring out a decent-sounding tone from his throat, as if he had suddenly lost his voice. His puzzling hoarseness continued to plague him for six weeks, and there was no discernible improvement in sight. It was as if his vocal chords had become paralyzed or at least greatly enfeebled.

Recalling now the ominous words of the Shepetovker rabbi, he asked his cantor to revamp his route so as to include that city in their itinerary, which would give him the chance to express his regrets and repentance to the rabbi and to implore him to forgive him, to remove the curse and to pray for him, that his health be restored.

When the rabbi, after listening to his plea, became convinced that the boy was sincerely repentant, he relented, assured him of his forgiveness, and added, "My child, if thou wilt be sincerely God fearing, observe washing thy hands and reciting the blessing of 'Hamotzey' before and 'Birchas Hamazon' grace after every meal with deep devotional fervor, I trust that the Lord will give thee back thy voice and thou wilt 'Im Yertze Hashem' [God willing] become a great chazzon, famous all over the world."

In this way, our Shloymele profited yet from the unpleasant incident. Not only did he feel at once a great relief in his throat, as if a heavy depressing load had been lifted from his larynx, and he would immediately regain the former sheen and color of his voice, but there was noticeable a new, added brilliance and power. Furthermore, he received a blessing from the saintly rabbi, which eventually was fulfilled literally. The promise that his fame would spread to all corners of the globe indeed came true.

During his wandering around for nine long years with the choir of the Mohilever cantor from whom he learned a great deal and whose style of

chanting the prayers he adopted, he had reached the age of puberty. As is usually the case in the process of becoming an adult, he was no longer able to sing. So his father came for him and took him home. A short time later, he became engaged to a cousin of his, a niece of his father, the daughter of the cantor of Yarmilinitza. As part of the dowry, her father had pledged the young couple "Kest" — free room and board for a whole year — and they went to live with him.

However, the restless young husband did not relish very much his enforced idleness. When at last the long awaited and hoped-for moment arrived and he found to his boundless joy that the voice which he received in exchange for the one he had lost was a mighty bell-like tenor, he proceeded at once to organize his own chorus, including also his younger brother, Nochum Leyb, as basso. He set out, as was then fashionable, on a journey to bring music to the outlying communities and incidentally to earn also a few rubles in the process. The young cantor, traveling with his assistants, was an immediate success. Wherever he pitched his tent, his audience was enchanted by his remarkable voice, his highly developed musical intuition and his original style of liturgical interpretation.

Arriving in Zamoshtsh, he was invited to officiate at the Sabbath services. To allow a young man of such tender age to lead a religious devotion at the pulpit of such a respectable, venerable community was a rarely granted concession. But this young fellow had a way with him, an approach that got results. As it turned out, the trustees had no reason to regret that they yielded to the young cantor's persuasive insistence. For the entire congregation fell under the charm of his chants and there was general clamor in town to detain him and to turn over to him the pulpit permanently. This then really was a most unexpected development.

Now that they had heard him, the roles were reversed. The leaders of the congregation whom only two days ago he had to beg for permission to let him pray just on one Sabbath now were begging him to stay on and to accept the appointment as the official, permanent chief cantor of Zamoshtsh. It was an attractive offer, especially for a young man not yet eighteen years of age. So he let them persuade him to settle down in their midst and he thus became the youngest cantor who ever held such an important and honorable post in that city.

But the traveling bug was in his blood and he still managed to make occasional excursions to some neighboring cities. In the summer he used to take off and make extended concert tours, in the course of which he even crossed over into other countries with the choir naturally always trailing him. His guest appearances were invariably crowned with great success and his name became known and admired in ever widening circles.

In Zamoshtsh he stayed on for only one year. He was of a restless nature and could not remain in the same place for very long. His second position was in Titkin.

One day, a famous traveling cantor by the name of Aryeh Wilkomirer came into his bailiwick and asked permission from Kashtan to let him officiate at his pulpit on the following Sabbath. Usually he was very

hospitable and graciously yielded his pulpit to visiting colleagues. But on that particular Sabbath, the son of a prominent member of the congregation was scheduled to be called up to the reading of the Torah on the occasion of his becoming a bridegroom. There was to be a big party, for which the entire community was expected to turn out en masse. In this instance, therefore, Kashtan could not possibly let a stranger substitute for him in leading the service and so he was compelled to refuse the request of the itinerant cantor.

Reb Aryeh was miffed by the disappointing reply and in remarking about it to his friends, he stated that the reason for Kashtan's refusal to yield him his pulpit was that he was afraid his guest might be better than he was. When Kashtan heard about it, he suggested that both he and Reb Aryeh appear in a contest before a large assemblage. If, at its conclusion, Reb Aryeh would not be moved to admit that Kashtan had soundly beaten him, he would let him officiate at his synagogue as often as he wanted to.

The visitor agreed to the proposition and a tremendous mob gathered to witness the interesting sparring match, which was held in a large concert hall. When it was over, Aryeh Wilkomirer got up and professed openly, that he could never hope to even approach the stature of Kashtan, whereupon the latter surprised his colleague by issuing publicly a cordial invitation to him to be his guest and lead the religious services in his synagogue on the following Sabbath.

As could have been expected, Kashtan did not last very long in Titkin either. He was constantly itching for a change of scenery. In his search for greener pastures and in his burning ambition to conquer new worlds, it was implicit that he could not stay put and was always on pins and needles. After having served the community of Titkin for three years, he accepted a call from Brisk (Brest-Litovsk) where he broke his own record by holding the cantorial post in that city for all of six years, which for him was an eternity.

It goes, of course, without saying that he did not by any means give up his roaming about not only to localities in the immediate vicinity, but frequently also to faraway places. On one such occasion, he was held over for several weeks in Warsaw, a city where it was rare to get any kind of recognition, let alone to reap such a measure of success, that there was a popular demand for repeat performances.

And Kashtan was not to be had for small change. Rather was he pretty expensive. He commanded a minimum fee of one hundred rubles for a Sabbath service. During the week he made no public concert appearances. However, he would accept invitations to perform at the homes of wealthy, prominent public potentates and would present a varied program of chants for the assembled guests of his host, among whom were usually the elite of Jewish society.

On one such occasion, one of the invited guests, after having imbibed several rounds of the proposed toasts and being in a hilarious frame of mind, hurled a challenge at the cantor. Plunking down twelve glittering golden ducats on the table, he addressed him in an unsteady voice, "Reb

Shlomo, if you can make me cry, they are yours. But I must caution you, that not since I was a small child has anybody been able to move me to tears and I haven't set a foot in a synagogue for as long as I can remember."

Kashtan was not overly impressed by the boast of this show-off. Far from flinching from the test of his powers, he readily took him up on his offer. He at once began chanting the prayer "Elokaay ad shelo notzarti" (My Lord, Before I Was Created) from the High Holy-day devotional ritual. When he came to the passage, "Ofor ani bechayay, Kal vochomer bemisosi" (Dust Am I While Living, Let Alone When I Die), the so confident and allegedly stone-hearted hero had been conquered and had melted down like butter under the impact of the stirring vocal bombardments, and a stream of tears rolled down his cheeks. For Reb Shlomo these were precious, profitable tears.

Kashtan was not only the unchallenged favorite of the common folk and the general public, but he was also held in high esteem by the great lights of the clergy. He enjoyed the goodwill, the intimate friendship, the helpful interest, regard and patronage of many prominent rabbinical authorities, and also of a number of venerated "Rabbayim" (Chassidic saintly men), all of whom thought the world of him because they were greatly impressed by the deep-rooted piety, the sincerity of feeling and purpose evinced by the young cantor in the practice of his sacred calling, upon which he looked as a providential mission entrusted to him.

The holy wonder rabbi, known as the "Kozsenitzer maggid," said about him on one occasion that "if all those who hankered to listen to his heavenly prayers would only possess pure souls and if there would not be among them so many individuals who were constantly embroiled in quarreling among themselves, Reb Shlomo Kashtan would be able to get a sympathetic hearing in heaven and bring about the coming of the Messiah with the aid of his immaculately holy, sweet and heartrending chants." A greater compliment than that can hardly be paid to a cantor by anybody. And when we consider the source, we cannot help but be awed by its implications. Like a flare lighting up the horizon it gives us some idea of the greatness and towering stature of Kashtan.

CHAPTER 45

SHLOMO KASHTAN — THE CANTOR OVER WHOM CITIES FOUGHT WITH EACH OTHER

Shlomo Kashtan was one of the most popular cantors of world Jewry — He was very independent and unconventional but his devoted fans overlooked his capriciousness — Cities brought lawsuits before religious courts to enforce their claim to his services.

If there ever was a cantor who could be crowned rightly with the title of "Chazzon Hamedinah" lands-cantor, it surely was none other than Shlomo Kashtan and it may even be more correct to name him "Chazzon Hamedinoth," using the plural, "cantor of many lands."

We could also properly associate with him the words borrowed from the High Holiday prayer "Veal Hamedinoth bow Yeomeyr," which applied to him, would have to be read and translated as: "In all the countries the talk was only about him" and this would not be an exaggeration.

The impression which his chants made was so profound, colossal and enduring that wherever he made even only one appearance, people could never forget him and where in the world was there a place left, where he had not been at least once?

One can get exhausted just tracing his travels from town to town and from land to land. Even during the time when he was connected with a congregation, he used to make frequent journeys not only to the towns in the vicinity but to faraway regions and even to foreign countries. His tours often lasted for months and he only returned for the High Holidays to his

family and to his congregants.

The trustees of his congregation had to be made of iron and possessed of the patience of angels if they could put up with his whims. They seldom got to see him at his pulpit. He always did what he wanted to without ever bothering to ask their permission. Only an extraordinarily talented man like Kashtan could act thus and get away with it. He repeatedly gave free reign to his whims and neglected his assumed duties to the members of his own community, but their deep-rooted devotion to him made them gloss over his faults.

In spite of the fact that the worshipers only rarely had the opportunity to listen to his liturgical chants, congregations nevertheless used to fight over him. When he accepted the cantorial post offered him by the Jewish community of Titkin, Zamoshtsh brought a lawsuit before a "Torah court" against her sister city, but the decision of the religious judges was in favor of Titkin. This also was the case when Kashtan left Titkin for Brisk. Titkin could not bear the loss of their beloved great cantor and moved heaven and earth to get him back. When all their efforts failed, they, too, went to court but it availed them nothing. The decision went against them.

The only community that succeeded again and again in luring back their wandering prodigal son was Dubno. After each defection, they succeeded in bringing him home again and hold him for a while until the wanderlust overpowered him once more. He came to Dubno from Brisk and except for several temporary estrangements, he was connected with the congregation of Dubno until the last day of his life.

Hardly had he arrived at a new post, when he would be off on a concert tour. He made guest appearances in nearly every town and village between Riga and Odessa and invariably with great success. In Odessa Kashtan was held over for seven weeks. His minimum fee for a Sabbath service was one hundred rubles and he had a strict rule that the money had to be paid him in advance. He was so successful that the community of Odessa offered him the unusual sum of two thousand rubles for the oncoming High Holidays. But he was obliged to decline, since he was bound by contract to his congregation in Dubno, which he was determined to honor.

In the smaller communities which, no matter how much they would have liked to, could not possibly raise the required sum on which he insisted, Kashtan would send the basso to the pulpit to officiate with the assistance of the choir. Often his substitute was his own brother, Nochum Leyb, who became quite an accomplished cantorial artist in his own right. On other occasions, he turned over this task to the famous basso Yitzchak Leyb who, in addition to being the mainstay of Kashtan's choir, also studied intensively under him the art of cantorial interpretation. He made considerable progress and eventually became a full-fledged "chazzon."

Reb Shlomo was a man of great dignity. He never offered his services to a president or trustee. It was not necessary for him to take the initiative.

As soon as Kashtan arrived in a town with his caravan of assistants and the Jewish population learned of the presence in their midst of the great master, the heads of the community would immediately betake themselves

to the inn, where the famous guest had taken up his lodging and would tender him an invitation to honor them with his chanting of the religious ritual on the holy Sabbath.

However, on one occasion upon his arrival in Wilna, he waited in vain for the trustees of the community synagogue to come to him. They were as snobbish as the Germans, which they were not, and, stingy as the "Litvaks", which they in fact were. Since Kashtan was too proud to make any kind of a move himself, the impasse continued, with the result that the Sabbath came and went with nothing having happened. This was the only time that Kashtan was obliged to sit out a Sabbath without conducting the religious Service.

But the story did not end there. For when the Jews of the city, who regularly frequented the synagogue and appreciated liturgical art, found out that the famous Kashtan was in town and that the stubborn and penurious trustees overlooked such a rare opportunity to have as a guest in the great synagogue the celebrated visitor, there was a great general outcry by the public. They revolted against the trustees for having in their self-righteous snobbish stand on protocol deprived the public of a rare spiritual treat. Public pressure mounted to such an explosive degree that the big-shots were forced to swallow their pride and to make the pilgrimage to the temporary home of Kashtan in the city with the mission of getting him to officiate on the following Sabbath.

When they entered his hotel room, the cantor received them very cordially. He conversed with them about many topics. There was small talk about the weather, matters of world politics, but no mention of the question which was uppermost in the minds of the members of the delegation which still waited for the cantor to be the first to broach the subject, but he evaded it like the pest. They talked for quite a while until the committee finally realized, that they would have to begin talking business and tender him the invitation, which they finally did. But can you imagine their surprise when Kashtan gladly yielding to their request, quoted them the sum of two hundred rubles as his fee?

The baffled trustees wanted to know what made him demand such a fortune, when, as they were reliably informed, his regular fee was 100 rubles. The cantor gave them the following reply: "It is quite true that I charge only 100 rubles for a Sabbath service. But the members of my chorus have to get paid for each and every Sabbath. Consequently, I cannot afford to sit idly through any Sabbath, and since I did not officiate last week due to your failure to invite me, you will have to pay me now for both Saturdays."

This blunt explanation further infuriated the trustees. They tried to bargain with the cantor, but it was useless. Kashtan stood his ground and would not budge. The trustees, seeing that they can not move him an inch, hardened their stand too. They left empty handed, visibly unhappy about the stalemate, but their pigheaded obstinacy got the better of them. They could not possibly have given in to such outrageous demands.

Despite this impasse, there was no second sterile Sabbath for Kashtan in Wilna. He was invited to officiate on that Sabbath in Zavel's Kloiz (in-

formal house of prayer). Tickets of admission were sold and the proceeds amounted to three hundred rubles. So that in the last analysis, Kashtan was ahead one hundred rubles, and if he had so desired, he could have taken it easy on the third Sabbath without any loss to his purse.

But it was not to be. By coincidence, the cantor of the city of Mir, Reb Sender, who at one time was a member of Kashtan's choir, happened to be in Wilna at that juncture. He naturally paid a visit to his teacher, and when he heard about the controversy, he decided to become the intermediary. He succeeded in bringing the parties together for another round of talks. He finally brought about a reconciliation and the conclusion of an agreement between the trustees of the great synagogue and the cantor, under whom he had served his apprenticeship.

And who do you think prevailed and had his way? As true as I am a Jew, none other than our "eternal wanderer" (Nave nadnik). The leaders of the community had to capitulate and Kashtan, assisted by his "Kapelye" (chorus) finally ascended the hallowed pulpit of the great synagogue on the "Shabbos Shkolim" (the Sabbath when they read from the holy scrolls about the compulsory tax payment that each Jew had to contribute). It was symbolic, in that the trustees were obliged, too, to pay Kashtan a great deal of "Shkolim."

But in the end not only did they not begrudge him that, but he made such a big success on that Sabbath, that, yielding to the public clamor for a repeat performance, they were obliged to hold him over for several weeks so as to enable him to also officiate during the Passover holidays.

* * *

Dubno was not a large city and the members of its synagogue were far from affluent. The salary of the cantor and the other congregational employees came from various taxes leveled on the community, such as for slaughtering of fowi, for yeast and for candles. There were also voluntary offerings, donations at the reading of the sacred scroll, Kriyas hatorah. But even with all these sources of revenue, the treasury of the congregation seldom could keep up with its obligations, not to speak of amassing any reserves.

As a rule when pay day rolled around, the treasury was short, and it usually took all the ingenuity of the treasurer to somehow come up with sufficient, hastily acquired, usually borrowed, additional sums to cover the payments due. Often the sources of income of the congregation dried up, the deficit became chronic and the "Kehillah" could not meet its payroll in time or even with a reasonable delay.

Kashtan finally became disgusted with the constant failure of his congregation to meet its financial obligations to him. Honor and high regard which he received from his congregants in abundant measure could not compensate him forever. The back payments in salary owed him had already mounted to such proportions, that it was doubtful whether he would ever be able to collect them. To let this debt increase further was unthinkable. He, therefore, decided to leave his post and entered into an

agreement with a congregation in Lemberg to officiate there on the following High Holy Days.

It was the custom in Lemberg that on Rosh Hashono (New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), the chief cantor, who as a rule is scheduled to conduct the Mussaf (concluding) service, goes up to the pulpit also at one point during the "Shacharis" (morning) devotion and recites one prayer of his own choosing while the "Baal Shacharis" (the assistant cantor, the reader of the morning service) stands by silently. The origin of this strange custom goes back allegedly to an incident that occurred many years before in that very house of worship. It happened on one of the High Holy Days. The reading of the Torah from the sacred scrolls was over. It was time to begin the concluding service. The chief cantor ascended the pulpit to begin the prayer of "Hineni", (Here I am, the one poor in good deeds), and to his distress he was unable to open his mouth, as if Satan himself had paralyzed him. At the last moment, no one could be found who was capable of taking the place of the disabled cantor and the congregation of the great synagogue of Lemberg was greatly embarrassed. Finally, the sexton came to the rescue and somehow managed to finish the service.

To forestall any recurrence of a similar mishap, the rule was adopted that while the morning service was still in progress the cantor, who was slated to read the service of Mussaf that followed, would chant one of the prayers so as to assure the worshipers that he would be able to fulfill his task. And in the event that it turned out that he was indisposed, and it seemed unlikely that he would be able to do justice to his assignment, then at least there would be sufficient time to find a more or less competent substitute reader. It was also a helpful device for the chief cantor, designed to give him an opportunity to do some vocalizing, so that by the time his turn came to officiate his voice would be in good shape for the big task ahead of him.

Kashtan, apprised of the custom, chose to render the piyut (supplementary poem) "Zochrey Zmiros yezamruh b'kol" (The ones that remember the sacred chants will sing aloud), and he did it with such power and sweetness that it sounded like a heavenly manifestation. The reader of the morning service, who was standing at his side, became so confused and overwhelmed by Kashtan's leonine voice, that he became speechless and unable to continue the service. It took him quite a while to get his bearing and recover from the effect of the great master's forceful chants and to go on with the ritual.

If this small sample had such an impact on the seasoned reader of the morning devotion, it is not difficult to imagine what the effect of the whole "Mussaf" service must have been on the congregation. They were electrified and intoxicated by the unbelievable artistry that found expression in the masterful interpretation of the guest cantor of the age-old prayers. The whole city of Lemberg was under the profound influence and impact of the magnetic personality and the irresistable charm of Kashtan's extraordinary virtuosity.

There was no question in anyone's mind that after such a successful debut by the visitor, the Jewish community would surely exert every effort toward having this eminent cantor make Lemberg his permanent home. Kashtan was also amenable to the suggestion that he should accept the post of chief cantor of the central community synagogue of the Galician metropolis.

However, it was not in the cards for the Jews of Lemberg to succeed in acquiring the services of the outstanding cantor of his time on a permanent basis. What prevented the consummation of the union was curiously enough the proclamation of a royal decree, that was meant as a benevolent concession to the Jewish population, among whom were a great many immigrants from Russia and other foreign countries.

The decree that was issued just about that time permitted foreigners also to serve in the armed forces with privileges equal to those of citizens. Kashtan was then over thirty years old and he did not relish the prospect of donning a uniform. He thought that he could do without this doubtful honor. That was the main reason why he turned a deaf ear to all entreaties about taking a steady position, and after the conclusion of the "Succoth" (tents) holidays he left.

Which way was he headed this time? I could safely bet that you would not be able to guess, no matter how hard you tried. He left for, of all places, Prussia. What had a genuinely Jewish, old traditional "Chazzon" in common with the modern assimilationist "Yahoodim" of Germany? Could these stiff, unemotional, dry "Yeke's" ever understand or have any feeling and appreciation for the moving, heartfelt, imploring and complaining (Skorbove) chants which he dispensed? It is said that east is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet. Kashtan and Prussia — certainly two opposite poles?

But apparently this saying does not always hold true and there are exceptions to the rule, and if there ever was an exception, Kashtan was it. There is also a saying that you can never appraise or assess a Jewish soul. And no matter how hardened and seemingly insensitive the heart and soul of some Jews may be, it may melt under intensive shock treatments, and Kashtan was in this instance just the one who was able to apply it.

His success in Prussia was not any smaller by even as much as a hair's breadth than in the towns and villages of Russia, Poland and Galicia. The most plausible reason probably is that true art has a universal appeal and that our Reb Shlomo knew how to use his talents effectively in any environment. Contrary to all expectations the Germans were completely won over by Kashtan.

The first city in Prussia which he visited was Kempen. When he demanded from the temple officials one hundred marks for a Sabbath Service, they laughed at him. They would not even give it a second thought. So he left for the neighboring town of Schwerzentz. The Jewish community of that city was more responsive and generous to the itinerant cantor. They agreed to pay him his stipulated fee and they had no reason to regret it. Kashtan turned the city upside down. The German Jews were so enthral-

led, that they carried him on their shoulders in triumph throughout the streets.

When the Jews of Kempen learned of the strange doings that occurred in Schwerzentz in the wake of the Russian cantor's appearance, the officials of the congregation, in a quick reversal of their attitude, rushed to the sister city with 100 marks. They implored Kashtan not to shame their community, to accept their apology for having rebuffed him and to honor them too by conducting the service on the following Sabbath in their synagogue.

Kashtan relented and accompanied the committee back to Kempen. He officiated on the following Sabbath and made such a deep impression on the worshipers that the trustees asked him to accept the permanent post of cantor with their congregation. Kashtan was not in the mood of considering such a step for the present, but when pressed for a favorable answer he fended off their insistent pleadings by telling them that they must give him more time to think about it.

Meanwhile, he journeyed to Breslau, where he was held over for several weeks, earning, in addition to laurels, praise and admiration, a considerable amount of German valuta. The town of Lissa was fortunate enough to be able to enlist his services for the Passover holidays, at the conclusion of which he accepted an invitation from Pozen, where he spent several weeks. Not only were the Jews of that city overjoyed with the guest appearances of the celebrated cantor in their midst, but Kashtan himself also had very reason to be highly gratified by his sojourn in Pozen. For in that city resided the great "Gaon" (Talmudic scholar) Reb Akiva Eyger, who showed the visiting cantor great kindness, assisted him in every way and gave him his blessing.

Ever since he left Kempen, the trustees of that community had pursued him with their protestations of love, regard and homage. They would not give up their hope that some day he would make up his mind to accept their offer, which they handed him on a silver platter. It was a generous offer, and in order to make it even more palatable, when he seemed unimpressed and hesitant, they kept increasing it. They kept bombarding him until they succeeded in breaking down his resistance. Finally he gave in to their entreaties and accepted the cantorial position at the pulpit of the synagogue of Kempen.

Who would have believed that such a "Shiduch" (marriage union) was in the realm of possibility? That the outstanding representative of Lithuanian cantorial style, Shlomo Kashtan, would become a cantor of "Yeke" German Prussian congregation! Incredible, but still a fact.

Strange are the ways of fate. It seems that it was destined that the German Jews should also experience the inspiration chants of a genuine great "Chazzon." Only a man like Kashtan could have accomplished this feat. He was the right person to make them like it.

CHAPTER 46

THE JEWS OF WILNA WERE DANCING AROUND SHLOME'LE KASHTAN

The restless cantor wanders from Prussia to Hungary and from Hungary to Wilna — What went on in that city when he arrived there was pandemonium.

Prussia with her modern Teutonic customs, that must have seemed alien to a strictly pious East European Jew, who was accustomed to an entirely different mode of life, could not have appealed very much to our Reb Shlomo. Additionally, he was also a gypsy wanderer by nature, who did not have the patience to remain very long in any one place. Consequently it was not surprising at all that it did not take long before he began studying the map to see whether or not there was still a suitable country left, which he had not as yet visited.

And if one looks and searches hard enough, one is bound to find what he is after and so Kashtan, too, discovered a likely spot still unexplored by him and that was Hungary. After scarcely one year of staying put in Kempen, he packed his bags and was off in the direction of the land of the Magyars.

Alt-ofen (O Buda) was the foremost community of the Janus-faced, by the Danube River into two halves (Buda and Pest) split Hungarian metropolis in that era. His fame had preceded him, and when the Jews heard Kashtan, they immediately offered him the cantorial post at their synagogue. It was one of the most prominent positions and this time Kashtan did not hesitate, but at once agreed to serve. But for how long? He ran true to form here, too, and the status quo was of short duration.

This time Wilna was the mischief maker that caused the unhappiness of the Hungarian Jews at having lost their beloved cantor.

The Jews of Wilna could not forget the wonderful services of Kashtan on that memorable Passover holiday at the conclusion of which he left them. Since then they had bombarded him with letters, imploring him to return to them and to occupy the pulpit of the great city synagogue permanently.

There was something about the hallowed pulpit of the central synagogue of that great Jewish center of Lithuania that had a certain irresistible, magnetic drawing power for all cantors. To chant the services in that ancient sanctuary was the coveted goal of the greatest masters of liturgy. Therefore it is not surprising that Reb Shlomo also could not withstand the siren call that lured him to the great seat of learning and the home of great chazzonim. To exchange it for Alt-ofen was surely a great advancement.

When the Jews of Wilna learned that Kashtan was coming, they prepared a regal welcome for him. Never before and never since was a cantor received with such pomp and ceremony, with such public outpouring of love and admiration, with such tokens of highest regard and adulation. In a frenzy of boundless joy, thousands of people danced in the streets around their idolized Kashtan, as did the wandering Jews around the golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai.

But if the music lovers of Wilna had any idea that now that they had the great cantor in their midst, they had finally taken sole possession of him and could henceforth enjoy his unique, stirring melodic voice and his unmatched artistry in peace, they were sadly mistaken.

There was hardly a day when controversies did not rage around Shlomo Kashtan. If it was not one Jewish community that laid claim to him, it was another. This time the troublemaker was Dubno. Just as Wilna could not forget him and did everything in their power to lure him away from Alt-ofen, the Dubno Jewish community, too, could not reconcile themselves to the loss of their beloved cantor and now that he was back in their country they instituted a court action to challenge the right of Wilna to his services.

They brought a suit against their competitor before the rabbinical court. Concurrently, they also tried to sway Reb Shlomo to their side. They promised him golden mountains, the stars from heaven, if only he would come back to them. They offered to give him a contract for six years with a considerable hike in salary, a burden they could ill afford. They also vowed to give him ironclad guarantees that would under any and all circumstances insure for him the punctual remittance of all payments, as soon as they fell due. The suit dragged on for years. In the meantime, Kashtan officiated in the great synagogue of Wilna to the immense delight of the masses that flocked to his services. But pending the legal proceedings, he could not sign a contract with the congregation.

A number of great rabbinical authorities had the matter under advisement for quite a while, without being able to make a decision. The pros

and cons of the controversy were too complex to lend themselves readily to a clear-cut opinion. But finally the matter was disposed of. Particularly was Rabbi Ephrayim Margolies instrumental in cutting asunder what resembled the famed Gordian knot, and after long trial sessions and private negotiations with the party concerned, the verdict arrived at finally was that Kashtan should return to Dubno.

Having no other alternative, Wilna had to release the cantor, who during the time that he acted in a provisional capacity as their chief cantor, had given them so much pleasure. They parted from him in tears and said good-bye with a heavy heart. As his successor, they appointed the cantor from Libau, Herschel Bochur Loewenstein, the father of the Wilner Balebeysel.

It seems that just as Dubno could not get along without him, Kashtan could not stay away for any length of time from Dubno. For some reason or other, he had a soft spot in his heart for the Jews of that town. Notwithstanding his great name in the world, his unusual voice and glittering ingenious mastery in the interpretation of the liturgical prayers, thanks to which he could have the biggest and best paid positions, still he time and again returned to the pulpit of Dubno. It seems that it was his own preference that tilted the scale in favor of Dubno as against Wilna.

True enough he was always better off when he was connected with the Dubno congregation. For a man who hated any kind of shackles, disliked very much to be confined and above everything longed to be as free as a bird, the pretty loose association which he formed with this community was perfect. They appreciated him so much and wanted him so badly, that he was able to have his own way. They allowed him all the freedom that he desired. He traveled as much as suited his fancy and as far away from his base as he wanted to, without a word of protest or recrimination from the officials of his congregation.

If he hardly ever officiated at the so much neglected pulpit, it was all right with them. It was enough for them that they had the great honor of the world calling their beloved Kashtan "The Dubner Chazzon." The greatest cantor of his time bore the name of their city. He was theirs and that compensated for everything, just as they took immense pride in the fact that the great rabbi and maggid (orator and storyteller) of their town was universally known as the "Dubner Maggid." (He too traveled most of the time.)

If he occasionally returned home from his wanderings and deigned to honor them with the chanting of a Sabbath or holiday service, they were in seventh heaven. A single occasion was sufficient to keep them happy and joyful for months afterward. Their idolized cantor's songs lingered on during the following stale period of his absence and the memory of his masterful renditions warmed their hearts and kept alive the heavenly spark which he had lit in the souls of the worshipers.

The devotion and faithful adoration that Dubno was capable of showing their cantor, coupled with the unselfish consideration, stoic resignation and the extent of the neglect that they were willing to endure

from him, is probably unparalleled in cantorial history. This circumstance was most likely the magnet that drew him back repeatedly to them.

When one considers closely the life route traveled by Kashtan, there unwittingly comes to mind what Rashi the great commentator of the Bible remarks in his interpretation of the chapter "Lech lecho (go forth)" namely, that wandering causes three kinds of handicaps: one, reduction in and loss of funds, two, reduction in and loss of good name and fame, and three, reduction in births of children.

According to Rashi, it was for that reason that when the Lord commanded Abraham to leave the home of his fathers and to set out for a foreign land, that he, intent on calming the fears of his favorite son lest he might suffer the usual losses as a consequence of his wanderings, did simultaneously assure him that in his case just the opposite would happen: He would become even richer, his fame would increase and he would be blessed with a son, the thing which had been denied him and his beloved wife Sarah during his permanent stay in his homeland.

Kashtan, who was a God-fearing, pious, strictly observant Jew, was also blessed by God Almighty, and the blessing conferred upon him when he was a youngster by the Shepetovker Grand Rabbi did not hurt him either. Not only did his long concert tours not make a hole in his pocket, but, on the contrary, he earned considerable sums of money for his professional appearances. That his name and fame also grew by leaps and bounds as a result of his travels and that in the course of his visiting Jewish communities in many countries, he garnered new laurels, is undisputed. He was also blessed with children who showed great promise and who proved in time to have inherited the musical and vocal talents of their father.

That his extensive forays all over the map made him a pretty wealthy man, there can be no doubt. He was well paid for all his appearances and he was also a pretty shrewd businessman who took no chances. He made it a strict rule that the compensation for any concert or religious service be paid him in advance.

But the ability to make money is not as important as the capacity to retain it. How many of the greatest cantors who earned fortunes in their lifetimes died penniless and were buried in Potter's Field? Their number is considerably larger than that of the ones who succeeded in keeping some of the greenbacks that a generous public showered on them, for a rainy day.

As a matter of fact, it is rare to find a singer or actor who in the waning years of his career has beside his newspaper clippings also something to show for all the affluence and the large fees that rolled in during his seven fat years. Somehow saving his money is not compatible with the nature of a performer. The fantastic sums they earn invariably seem to slip through their fingers.

In this respect, too, Reb Shlomo was the exception to the rule. He did not squander his money. He used to bring home intact the entire proceeds of his periodic excursions, and turn them over to an intimate friend of his, a very wealthy resident of Dubno, who invested the money for him in his

various lucrative businesses.

Having thus assured himself of a steady income for the rest of his life from his investments, in addition to his salary from his congregation, Kashtan decided to turn over a new leaf. He had had his fill of wandering around. There was no point in continuing any longer this vagabond life. The time had come for him to enjoy the serene life in God's beautiful world. He bought an apartment house and began to enjoy life. The tenants in his house were the most prominent people of Dubno, great scholars, esteemed learned businessmen and leading religious authorities. This was the kind of congenial environment that he had always longed for. He spent a great deal of his time in their company in discussion of the Talmud, spiritual themes and world affairs.

Needless to say, the Jews of Dubno were deeply gratified by the new turn of events. At long last they would have their beloved cantor permanently and exclusively and they would not have to share him with the whole world. At first they were skeptical. It seemed too good to be true. Could the confirmed eternal wanderer suddenly change? But with the passing of time, they became convinced that Reb Shlomo really meant what he said. He was as good as his word. A definite change had come over him. He made no move to resume his former mode of life. He now officiated regularly at his pulpit. High government officials, as well as military officers stationed in the city, were often seen in the syngagogue during his services. They were enthralled by the extraordinary beautiful quality of his voice, as well as by his consummate skill and artistic, highly polished presentation of the liturgical chants. They became his friends and intimates. The glow on the faces of his congregants on such occasions almost exceeded the brightness of the sun at high noon. They seemed hypnotized.

He became the most prominent and most popular resident of Dubno, highly regarded by all the citizens, Jews and gentiles alike. When he passed through the streets, the folks of every strata of the population took off their hats, paying him princely homage by bowing before the honorable religious functionary, who commanded the love and respect of everyone.

But it seems that peace and tranquility were not his fate. Without warning, the roof suddenly crashed over his head. The whole edifice of insurance for his future which he thought he had built up on such a firm and solid foundation for himself and his family collapsed.

There was a current saying that when Kashtan intoned on the High Holidays the introductory prayer "Hineni heoni" (I, the poor in good deeds), the walls of the sanctuary used to tremble. But that was nothing in comparison to what happened when the supposedly richest businessman of the town, in whose care Kashtan had left his whole savings, suddenly declared "Hinein heoni" (I am broke). Every one in Dubno trembled, for half of the city's Jews had entrusted their hard-earned rubles to this industrialist, in whose hands the monies were considered as safe as in the Bank of England.

The news spread like wild fire throughout the city, that the eminent

magnate had suspended payments and left for Kiev. Kashtan followed him there at once but his hurried trip availed him nothing. The man was bankrupt and up to his neck in debt. Whatever assets he still had left had already been attached by certain manufacturers, his biggest creditors, who held chattel mortgages on the merchandise left in his warehouses.

The sums that Kashtan and the gullible hard working fellow Jews had given him to hold in trust for them were lost forever, as if they had been buried in a grave, from which nobody ever returns. No matter how much he tried, the naively trusting cantor was unable to get back as much as one solitary kopek. His world had collapsed. All his hopes and great expectations were lying buried in ashes.

When the Jews of Kiev found out that Kashtan was in town, he was prevailed upon to officiate in their main synagogue. The gentile chief of police, who was present at the Sabbath service, became so enthused and impressed with the guest cantor's virtuosity, that he offered to give him a letter of recommendation to the governor of Moscow, with whose assistance, he assured Kashtan, he would in a few weeks be able to amass a small fortune. But the cruel blow which he had suffered had so affected him and had thrown him into such deep despair and melancholy, that he could think of nothing else and was not in the mood to make any plans. Besides, the High Holidays were drawing near and it was time for him to return home.

After the conclusion of the High Holiday season, he was obliged to take stock again and reassess the condition he was in. He had had time to think about it. How radically things had changed. How content he had been to sit at home and discourse with friends on matters of common interest. He had thought that he would never again have to take up the staff of the wandering Jew. But he still had two daughters to marry off. Under the circumstances, he had to forget about his former vow and determination to remain in one place. A new tour was mapped out and Yarmilinetz, Kamenetz, Podolsk, Mohilev and Odessa were some of the cities he visited.

The High Holidays again found him with his congregation in Dubno. But shortly after their conclusion, he was off again. He was determined to recoup at least part of his losses. This time the Jews of Brisk, Bialystok, Grodno, Wilna, Zagoot, Riga, Mir and Minsk were the lucky ones that had the good fortune to hear the great master.

In Minsk his success was so overwhelming, that he was held over for several weeks. The Jewish population of that large center could not get enough of Kashtan's liturgical art. They importuned him to accept the steady cantorial post of the pulpit of their central synagogue. To shake off the insistent pleadings of the trustees of the Minsk community, he quoted them his conditions for an affirmative answer, which were that they should pay him six golden ducats a week and pay him a whole year's salary in advance. Such conditions were of course unacceptable to the leaders of the congregation and it is most likely that Kashtan himself never expected them to agree to his demands. So with the conclusion of his tour, which netted

him enough for his immediate needs, he returned to Dubno and conducted the religious rites on the High Holidays once more in his beloved city.

He married off his two daughters. His two sons also found mates. The dark clouds that had hovered over him for quite a spell and did not let the rays of the sun break through had now lifted to some extent. The acquisition of money had never really been his main preoccupation. It was only a necessary means to an end. Now that he had reached that goal and he saw his children happily married, Reb Shlomo was at peace with himself and with the world.

Although there was no pressing need now for him to travel to distant places, he felt that he could not ignore the requests that poured in from his admirers in Hungary and Germany that pleaded with him not to forget them, just as they surely could not forget him, and they would do anything and make the greatest sacrifices to make it worthwhile for him to come to them for a visit. Well, how can one be so heartless as not to be moved by such letters? So he made plans to make one more trip to his devoted patriots in Alt-ofen, Kempen, and points in between, but this plan never materialized. Fate intervened and cancelled it, without the possibility of appealing its decision to a higher court.

Suddenly, he became very ill. At first, he ignored it. He attributed it to the fearful concern and shock induced by the recently promulgated new edict that Jews, too, would have to serve in the armed forces. Many years ago a similar order issued by the Austro-Hungarian government made him decide to refuse an offer to accept a much coveted cantorial post in Lemberg and now he was confronted with the same plague in his own bailiwick. He was worried about his sons and sons-in-law, who might be affected by the provisions of the new directive. He felt very badly about it, and went about as if in a trance. He stayed in the synagogue for hours, reading from the psalms of David, together with the assembled congregation, in a fervent plea to heaven to somehow avert the threatening danger.

He continued on with his duties as long as he could, claiming that even though indisposed, there was nothing of any serious nature wrong with him. After a thorough examination, the doctors who were called to his bedside diagnosed his illness as a cirrhosis of the liver and they prescribed a strict diet. They also forbade him to ascend the pulpit any more. However, being that the Days of Awe were near he disregarded their advice and deathly sick as he was, he insisted on officiating on the High Holidays. He managed somehow to get through the Rosh Hashonah services, but this ultimate heroic effort had the effect of draining him of every ounce of his strength and he became so weak that he could not officiate any longer on Yom Kippur, let alone on the Succoth holidays.

Since his condition had worsened progressively, it was decided to take him to Lemberg, where he was to consult the famous liver and gall bladder specialist, Dr. Rappaport. His older son, Altoony accompanied him. On the way they stopped off in Brody, where they had relatives and intimate friends. These well-wishers advised and persuaded Kashtan to consult the reputable local doctor, who was recognized as an expert in these maladies,

before continuing on their journey to Lemberg.

Dr. Friedlander, the doctor of Brody, gave him a thorough examination, after which he told him that the doctors of Dubno, who said that he was suffering from a liver ailment, made a mistake. "Nothing is the matter with your liver," he insisted, "you were treated for the wrong illness. Your trouble is not serious at all. Stay with me for a few weeks and I will cure you. You will feel like a newborn baby."

Dr. Friedlander gave him some medication, but instead of getting better, the patient became weaker. After two weeks of treatment, the doctor, realizing that something was wrong, changed his diagnosis, and came to the conclusion that it was not the doctors in Dubno who had erred, but he himself. But by that time it was too late to do anything about it.

The patient was now too debilitated to undertake the trip to Lemberg. For four more agonizing weeks, Altoony sat helplessly by watching his dear father suffer in the lethal grip of an incurable illness. He was plagued additionally by his conscience. He could not forgive himself for having let his father be influenced by their friends, who meant well but unwittingly brought about the tragedy.

Shlomo Kashtan's life was slowly ebbing away and his pure soul ascended to heaven on foreign soil, away from home, in the prime of life. When he passed away, he was only 49 years old.

The sixth day of the month of Kislev of the year 1829 is one of the saddest days in the history of Chazzonuth. It is the black day on which one of the greatest cantors the Jewish people ever had was cut down by the grim reaper with the scythe before his time to the deep sorrow of music lovers all over the world.

CHAPTER 47

SHLOMO KASHTAN — THE CANTOR AND THE PERSON

His voice and coloratura were phenomenal, and he was praying with fiery pathos — His conduct in the everyday life was akin to that of a "Land's Rov" (Chief Rabbi of the country) — His ascetic way of living — He was a great Talmudic scholar — His liturgical heritage — His famous disciples.

By right we should have bestowed the honor of the first "Aliyoh" (to be called up to the reading of the Torah) of "Cohen" (lekeyl Elyon) priest (to the Almighty on High) to Reb Shlomo Kashtan and we should have begun the chronicling of the renowned cantors of the yesteryears with the description of his interesting life story.

This would've been no more than his due in view of the fact that he more than anyone else was perhaps the very first representative of the "pleyade" (roster) of great artists of the Omud (cantorial stand) to whose name could with full justification be attached the now-a-days so much misused adjective: "World famous", and he preceded all the great cantors of Wilna.

About Kashtan it can verily be said, that he was world famous in the fullest sense of the word, and he achieved this singular world wide acclaim without any help from press agents or propaganda advertisements in the news media and most certainly not through radio and television by means of which it is in our time already possible to acquire a well-sounding name in the world in a hurry and in some cases even become famous overnight, but about which new instruments of publicity people could in his era not even dream as yet.

If any individual was able under the primitive circumstances that existed in that epoch of evolution, to bring forth the almost impossible feat of working himself up to the stature of celebrity of world-fame dimension he must really and truly have possessed extraordinary talent and outstanding ability.

Kashtan achieved this seemingly unreachable goal and this came about thanks to the fact that he undoubtedly was a spiritual giant, who towered 10 feet tall over his contemporaries, standing out from among his surroundings by virtue of his ingenious artistic endowment. He is one of the very few of his generation, whose name endured, surrounded by a halo of legendary fame and adulation to Jews everywhere to this very day, and virtually the only one of that glorious era whose inspirational compositions came down intact to our time and are in constant use by discriminating cantors all over the globe.

Whenever and wherever there is a discussion of the high-ranking representatives of the sacred calling of the bygone epochs his name must of necessity without question be placed in the very forefront, for he was the "father of Chazzonuth in Lithuania" the founder of the modes of liturgical art, who was the originator in that part of the densely populated Jewish settlement of the school of the so-called "Chazzonuth Haregesh" (the feelingful chant of the synagogue.

About his voice and the impact of his fervid manner of praying legendary stories are in circulation. He is said to have been blessed with a mighty wonderful resonant, glitteringly brilliant, high-reaching tenor. He was able to hit the high "E" above high "C" with unbelievable playful ease.

Seasoned craftsmen got the surprise of their lives, when hearing him for the first time. They would gape in open-mouthed astonishment, utter bafflement and unbelieving awe, fascinated and overwhelmed by the beauty, extraordinary caliber and power of his golden tones. These experts would usually give expression to their admiration by stating, that never in their lives have they heard such a heroic, colossal and at the same time sweet-like-honey voice. His coloratura was like the sharp edge of a sword, spiraling with lightspeed rapidity, but at the same time not muffling, let alone skipping a single note.

His son who was always standing at his father's side writes that when Kashtan on the days of Awe (Yomim Noroim) in the course of chanting the introductory prayer to the Mussaf (supplementary) service got to the words "Shaday Oyom Venoroh" and let loose the full force of his highest and most thunderous tones he was unable to any longer restrain his overflowing emotions and under the tremendous impact of the moving, heart-rending sounds that reverberated in the tense atmosphere of the full packed sanctuary, he would break out in an uncontrollable sobbing and for several minutes could not get hold of himself and recover his equilibrium even to the extent of being in a fit condition to resume his singing along with the choir.

But this was immaterial, since even if he would've been able to hold his

own in the singing ensemble his contribution would've been of little value, being that the other chorists too remained dumbfounded, awestruck and speechless just as he was.

Seeing how deeply the cantor's assistants were affected and moved by their master's pyrotechnical outcry most of the worshipers too became infected with the irresistible emotion — evoking magnetism that filled the air, and they too were unable to hold back the flow of tears and this outbreak of mass hysteria would continue through Kashtan's recitation of the "Hineni".

Hirsh Weintraub writes further that his sainted father possessed the ability to execute the most complex, intricate, long-winded coloratura passages in one breath with such unbelievable pearly perfection that the listener would become dizzy from sheer wonderment how on earth a human vocal organ could manage to bring forth such a marvelous feat. These spiraling runs often were of such complex interwoven and double-jointed nature, that it was impossible to write them down in the form of notes. If there could have been found a pianist or violinist who would have been able to even only approximately reproduce Kashtan's trills and roulades he would deserve for this single accomplishment by itself to be regarded and stamped as a musical wizard of the first order.

However not in his rare and generous endowment by mother nature alone lay his immense power. Not the extraordinary voice by itself and not even it, together with his razorsharp — with the blinding rapidity of a flying arrow winding coloratura can adequately account for the depth and severity of the emotional shake-up, which his chanting of the prayers evoked in the hearts of worshipers.

A brilliant voice can surprise, thrill and exhilarate. Artistic coloratura acrobatics may enchant an audience and draw its admiration, but to move the hearts of the listeners and to penetrate into the depths of their soul it takes more than that. The extra dimension that can make the heart flutter and melt is sincerity of feeling and conviction of principle. Only if the words of the conductor of the prayer session are streaming from a well of deep religious conviction and spring spontaneously from a fiery innermost temperament which is overflowing and flooding his whole being and seeking an outlet in vocal expression can the impact on the listeners be deep-felt and lasting — as Zeidel Rovner so succinctly summed it up: "only one who is really and truly deeply religious can be a worthy and effective Chazzan."

This was the secret of the overwhelming tremendous effect which Kashtan was able to exert on whoever happened to find himself within the reach of his voice. He lived through every word that issued from his mouth. They were "Dvorim Hayotzim min haleyv" true sentiments of his pious, staunch believing and godfearing heart. No wonder therefore that they found their way into the susceptible hearts of those, for whom they were intended. The words came out from his lips "bikdoshoh uvtaharoh" in holiness and purity. He put his whole heart and soul into his dynamic chants. There was no pretense. He poured out in his songs what he felt and

sincerely believed in and it was principally this element of truth which so electrified the congregants and evoked in them thoughts of repentance and of mending their ways.

If one was to judge by the mode of life which he was following in his everyday conduct he could surely much rather have been taken for a "guten Yid" (literally translated "a good Jew", but actually meaning a "wonder Rabbi") or for the grand Rabbi of the whole realm than for a cantor. He led an exemplary life and comported himself in the manner of a "Nozir" a consecrated abstainer, a confirmed ascetic, who is careful not to indulge himself, God forbid, excessively in the enjoyments and comforts of this world, but would rather do his utmost to deserve and assure for himself a well-earned place in the paradise of the world-to-come by acquiring during his temporary stay in this valley of tears the good habits and worthy characteristics advocated by our sages and by practicing at all times only good deeds, mercy and justice.

He ate but one regular meal a day, but not like that certain New York cantor who kept on complaining, that in-as-much as he was suffering from stomach trouble he was unable to eat more than one meal a day. As it turned out it was true enough, but that one repast was begun by the poor soul in the morning and without any interruption he was sitting all day at the table consuming goodies until late in the evening. The only regular meal of Reb Shlomo was not a very sumptuous repast. He ate it at noontime and it consisted of some meat and bread, washed down by a glass of tea. Not a gourmet's delight by any standard. What he consumed in addition to that in the course of a twentyfour hour day was not much more than what a flea could have carried away in its beak.

In the morning he would drink a cup of tea with nothing but his own tongue to go with it. At eventide he usually would also drink something, and occasionally even treat himself to a bite, perhaps an egg with a roll and that was the extent of his gorging himself with food. How he got by with such a lean diet remained his own closely guarded secret. One thing however can be said for a regimen of that kind. Whoever adheres to it most certainly cannot get indigestion from it.

If his food intake was on the spare side, he compensated for its scarcity by making sure that his hunger for knowledge and enlightenment would be satiated in a most generous measure. The study of the Torah was the uppermost activity on the timetable of his days.

He habitually arose at an early hour so as to have a chance to go over a whole chapter of "Mishnayos" or take up a passage in another folio of the sacred scriptures in the "Beys Hamedrash", the study room of the Synagogue compound, before the time for the morning devotion would be at hand.

After having finished his "big" meal at midday, he would usually take a nap for about an hour. When he woke up rested and refreshed he again could be found glued to his beloved books with renewed gusto poring over the age-old words of wisdom, first in the privacy of his home and later toward evening in the halls of study, where he joined the other learn-

ed men of the community, members of the "Chevrah Shass" (association for the study of the Talmud) who used to assemble for the daily study session, at which a noted scholar was holding forth with a lecture (Shiyur) in a "Sugyeh" (problem) of the "Gemoro" (the Aramaic portion of the Talmud), illuminating it with some excerpts from the "Meforshim" (the commentators).

This was his regular daily fare, but there were extra-curricular chores to be performed and besides fulfilled on special occasions. Before the festival of Purim, for instance he would buckle down to traverse the length and breadth of the "Tractate of Megillah" from beginning to end. By the time the joyous holiday rolled around he would be finished with it without fail.

Equally would he never allow himself to be caught by the advent of the festival of freedom without having under his belt the whole of the "M'sechta" (tractate) "Psochim" of Passover.

Difficult and time-consuming as these selfimposed assignments were, they were like child's play and picayune in comparison with the yeoman task he invariably squared off for and just as surely always managed to successfully carry out, when the season of the days of awe approached. No less than four tractates of the Talmud, "Rosh Hashono", "Yomah", "Sukkah", and "Moed Katon" are concerned with the rituals and laws that are applicable on the string of holidays, that occur in the months of the Indian summer, when the autumn leaves begin to fall.

Year in year out our Reb Shlomo would take on the thorough mastering of these "Pilpul" (argumentation) filled folios one after another. He had his work cut out for him, but with stoical stamina and determined persistence he would stick it out, not giving himself any respite until the job was completed and with time to spare. It was quite a feat. With a diet of such respectable portions of the sacred Judaic literature his great appetite for spiritual nourishment had been more than amply appeased, making him forget any physical cravings for more mundane physical necessities.

In view of his reputation for such diligence in the pursuit of learning, is it then any wonder that Rabbis and scholars had the highest regard for Kashtan. He was able to carry on a discussion and debate in any aspect of religious tenets with the greatest Gaon (Rabbinic title of excellence) and authoritative scholar, and hold his own and support his opinion with an abundance of quotations from the "yam" (sea) of the Talmud.

His home was wide open to all who needed and sought a helping hand. Nobody who stretched out a requesting palm was turned away. The poor, distressed and disadvantaged were at all times received by him with a kind word and an understanding heart and with a generous response to their pressing need.

One of the outstanding disciples of Kashtan was Betzalel Odessa'er, who as a youth served as a "Belfer" an assistant to a "Melamed" (haymish Hebrew teacher). One of his duties was to pick up the young pupils at their homes, herd them together and bring them to the "Chey-

der" (private school, usually a room in the home of the Melamed).

Leading the children to the home of his master, he would occasionally halt at the house where Shlomo Kashtan resided. The windows of the celebrated cantor's study usually were open and often he would make vocal exercises in the morning or be trying out a new composition.

Being a great admirer and unbeknownst to the object of his adulation a fervent fan of Reb Shlomo, he would station himself under the open window of the ingenious singer's home and with bated breath listen to the caressing sounds escaping from that hallowed interior. It made his day brighter if and when he was lucky enough to catch the great liturgical artist at work on a musical enterprise. He would, like a thirsty wanderer in the desert stumbling on a fresh well, drink in the sweet melodies with great relish, and store them with tender care in his memory.

One bright morning as he once again was standing at the head of the group of his wards under the familiar window from which issued the cherished sounds of a particularly pleasant melodious sequence, the youthful teacher apprentice inadvertantly forgetting himself began humming along with the rehearsing cantor the tune, unwittingly raising somewhat his voice in the process.

The sensitive ear of Kashtan caught the strains coming to him from the street below. His curiosity aroused he leaned out of his window to see who it was that was loitering there and joining him in the singing.

When to his great surprise he found that it was the "belfer", he invited the embarrassed young man into his study and asked him to sing something for him. Tzalel was more than willing to show off before his idolized master of liturgical chants.

Reb Shlomo found that this devoted fan of his had in him excellent innate talent for synagogue music, a fine voice and a knack for the ingenious interpretation of the prayers. He therefore counseled him to change course, quit his job and give serious thought to preparing himself instead for the service of the Lord in song, for a career in the "M'lecheth Hakodesh" the sacred craft of cantorial calling.

From that fortunate (for him) incident on Tzalel became attached to his patron and teacher Reb Shlomo with heart and soul — at his feet did he sit listening to the advice, the teachings and the valuable pointers related to him in generous benevolence by the voice of experience of the wizard of liturgy.

Tzalel proved to be a very bright, receptive and diligent disciple, who eagerly absorbed every bit of knowledge and indoctrination which he received at the hand of such a distinguished authority, as was his mentor. The brand of Chazzanuth originated by Kashtan was the beacon that lighted his path in threading his way on his brilliant career. No wonder that he too grew up to the stature of one of the greatest cantors of his generation.

Another worthy pupil of Kashtan was his own brother Nochum Leyb, who was the possessor of a fine tenor voice, an easy flowing coloratura and a very pleasant falsetto. He was also a capable composer and a very learned

"Talmud Chochom" (Hebrew scholar). He held down a cantorial position in Berditchev, where he was held in high esteem for his manifold virtues. By a curious coincidence he died soon after his older brother and teacher Shlomo passed away. Both their pure souls ascended to heaven and their eternal reward in Gan Eyden (paradise) in the same month of the identical year. Very applicable to their destiny is the familiar characterization "Hanehovim Vehaninum bechayeyhem uvmosom lo nifroduh". They were close and devoted to each other in their lives and even in death they were not separated.

As one of the most fitting epitaphs to the saga of one of the greatest personalities of the holy calling let us close the story of Kashtan's productive life with a quote from the writings of Joseph Singer the successor of Salomon Zultzer in the post of chief cantor of Vienna. In his considered opinion: "The years of Shlomo Kashtan's travels and innumerable sorties over the length and breadth of the Eastern European Jewish Centres, in the course of which he was crisscrossing repeatedly the various lands of the old continent for the purpose of making artistic guest appearances constituted an epoch of important cultural creativity of fruitful planting of spiritual seeds and the spreading in the process of priceless heritage, the blissful effect of which activity of his continues to make itself felt to this very day".

This appraisal by Singer, a cantor whose sympathies were with a school of thought that differed considerably from that of Kashtan, contains most certainly not one single superfluous word of recognition. If anything it is an understatement. The fact that even a prominent representative of the ultra modern camp pays such a warm tribute to the memory of Kashtan only tends to prove that his monumental contributions to the enrichment and expansion of the horizon of our liturgy transcend groupings in the fraternity of the dedicated "shelichey Tzibur" (emissaries of the community) and that all Chazzanim regardless of their viewpoints and preferences, irrespective of what brand and direction they favor, are in complete agreement in regard to the significance and importance of the path-breaking pioneering spade-work, which this titan of liturgy has done and upon which great heritage future generations were able to build.

CHAPTER 48

HIRSH ALTOONY WEINTRAUB

His son immortalized Kashtan's name perpetuating his memory by rescuing his works from oblivion and making them available for posterity.

Shlomo Kashtan passed away in the prime of his life at the age of 49 on the 6th day of the month Kislev in the year 1849. Just as during the major part of his eventful life he usually could be found roaming the highways and byways of the various countrysides, his premature departure from the scene too occurred away from the family hearth in the strange environment of the Galician city of Brod.

It occurred as the tragic result of a well meaning physician's mistaken diagnosis, this error additionally compounded by the unintentional malpractice applying the wrong medical treatment of a simple diabetic ailment which properly attended to could most likely have been held under control. By an unfortunate quirk of fate he was persuaded to stop in Brod and consult a local physician about his malady, notwithstanding the fact that he was on his way to another city to seek healing at the hand of a noted professor.

The change of plans proved to have been a fatal mistake. The devoted son Hirsh Altoony who, as always, was at his side on this last journey also, returned to Dubno with the lifeless body of his beloved father. The city, which for years basked proudly in the reflected glory suddenly was thrust into the gloomy shadows of deep mourning. The crown had fallen from their heads. The fatal eclipse of their sun was a hard, painful blow, not only to them, for their grief was shared by Jewish communities all over the world.

Life however must go on and the son of the unforgettable deceased gi-

ant of the Jewish musical world, Hirsh Altoony Weintraub was unanimously chosen to fill the vacancy as the cantor of Dubno.

He was a great authority in his field and a famous cantor in his own right.

He showed great promise already as a child of six. His father, therefore, at such a tender age, began teaching him the traditional melodies of the prayers, the rudimentary musical terms and some simple liturgical chants.

The perception of the youngster was so keen and his progress in the lessons given him so swift, that hardly had a year elapsed before he came to his father and said that he had brought him a present. What the boy handed to Reb Shlomo was a sheet of music paper, on which the lad had written down a composition of his own. It was the nicest present that he could have given his astonished father who was so overjoyed that he kissed the little composer and pressed him to his heart in overflowing happiness and pride.

As a reward, from then on he used to take him along with him and his choir on his journeys. Sometimes he let him chant a solo or a duet with himself or with another chorister. As Hirsh grew older, he even gave him an opportunity to recite a whole prayer by himself at the pulpit. On one occasion Altoony excelled to such an extent that Kashtan admitted, "My Hershel's Alto Yotzarto (Thou Hast Created) was even better than mine." What greater compliment could a youngster wish for?

When Weintraub, after his great father's demise, succeeded him and became the cantor of Dubno, he, too, continued to make occasional excursions into the larger Jewish communities of Russia, Austria, and of the adjoining countries, and everywhere he earned laurels with his guest appearances.

According to the famous music critic Kahnardy, he possessed a very beautiful voice of considerably high register, which was able to go over without any break into a well-sounding falsetto.

A well-known Christian musicologist happened to attend his chanting of the Jeremiads on "Tishoh B'ov," the fast day of the "Ninth of Av," was so deeply impressed with the masterful tragical manner in which he portrayed the destruction of the holy temple in Jerusalem that he was moved to tears. He wrote that Weintraub's laments reminded him of the famous painting, "The Mourning Jews at the Rivers of Babylon" by Benderman, and that it would be commendable that these prayers be translated into German and in Weintraub's artistic and vivid musical interpretation presented to audiences of all faiths.

Joseph Singer, who succeeded Salamon Zultzer as chief cantor of Vienna, wrote about Hirsh Weintraub: "Voice, talent, feeling and phantasy are united in him in a harmonious synthesis and joined forces to form a "Kunstwerk" (a work of art).

He always sought out and had access to the biggest authoritative experts, one of whom was the musical director, Sobolewsky of Koenigsberg. Like all true and genuine artists, he, too, was a perennial student who

throughout his life was anxious to learn and to perfect himself to the nth degree in his chosen profession.

His musical erudition and his profound knowledge of the sciences of harmony, composition and counterpoint find full and eloquent expression in his monumental work "Shirey Beys Adoshem" (Chants of the House of God) which is a veritable treasure, replete with glittering gems of our liturgical literature, from which cantors draw precious pearls of synagogue chants and religious melodies to this day.

But Hirsh Weintraub was not only a great cantor, a diligent researcher and a famous creator of compositions of lasting value, in addition he was also a great teacher of "Chazzonuth," who trained, educated and turned out a whole generation of well-equipped, and in some cases, outstanding disciples. One of them, Boruch Leyb Rozowsky was probably the most famous pupil to graduate from Weintraub's school, of whom his teacher and mentor had every reason and justification to be quite proud and even boastful.

Another outstanding cantor who graduated from Weintraub's school was A.M. Rabinowitz of Libau, Kurland, the author of musical works which excel in melody as well as in harmony. He was the brother of the famous Cantor Yudel Rabinowitz of Dwinsk.

If he had accomplished nothing else in his life save to gather together, preserve and by publishing them make accessible for future generations the compositions of his father he would've for this single feat alone deserved that his name be included in the roster of the most meritorious contributors to the enrichment of our cantorial literature.

But he did much more than that, for he himself was also a very prolific composer. His life work "Shirey Beys adoshem" (chants of the House of the Lord) in three parts is a monumental, most comprehensive, brilliant liturgical hand-book indispensable to any cantor worth his salt. In it Weintraub emerges as a methodical, scholarly, highly educated and with great talent endowed composer.

Without detracting however thereby from the immense importance of Hirsh Altoony's unquestionable contributions, it must be recorded that the greatest sensation and the most cherished, pleasant surprise for the cantorial fraternity of the world was undoubtedly the third section of the published work of his son and successor, dedicated to the memory of his sainted father.

In this last part of his magnum opus bearing the title "Shirey Shlomo" (the chants of Shlomo) are to be found some of the outstanding, glittering gems of Kashtan's liturgical legacy. His son, whose brand of Chazzonuth had already undergone a partial metamorphosis under the influence of the modernistic winds, that had begun blowing in the circles where he received his musical education, characterizes Kashtan's way of liturgical interpretation of the prayers as "alte weise" (old fashioned style.)

But old fashioned or not his "Yehi Rotzon" (may it be Thy will) recited on the Sabbath preceding the new moon, his "Umipney chatoey-

nuh" (but on account of our sins) of the additional service for festivals, his "Ato Yotzarto" (Thou didst form Thy world) said when the new moon begins on the Sabbath, his "Ki Keshimcho" (for even as Thy name), "Ato Noseyn Yod" (Thou givest a hand) and "Ato Hivdalto" (Thou has distinguished) all of which prayers are part of the ritual of the Day of Atonement, are being sung to this day not only in orthodox synagogues but equally in the temples of modern congregations, occupying consistently the very first line among the most valuable and relished musical fare in the liturgical repertoire of any singing ensemble.

The heritage which came down to us from under the gilt pen of this ingenious master continues to enchant audiences everywhere no matter how sophisticated they may be. Kashtan comes through in his inspired compositions as the incomparable representative of the old conservative "skarbove" (traditional, passionate cantorial "Steiger" [mode]), which thanks to his genius is timeless, having in his inimitable treatment retained its fragrant flavor and will therefore always remain new and fresh.

Kashtan was a phenomenal virtuoso, in a class by himself, his name will forever be enshrined in the Hall of Fame of Chazzonuth, because he lives on in the hearts of the Jewish people. For he was universally recognized as one of the most meritorious founders, architects and builders of the cantorial art, who left the unmistakable mark of his uniquely individualistic method on the further development of the cult of synagogue music.

To be the son of such a colossus can in certain respects be a disadvantage, a handicap. It is human nuature to use the yardstick of the father in measuring the son's quality and he is bound to suffer by the comparison. Hirsh Altoony did not possess in a comparable measure the classy eminence, the mercurial flamboyancy and the sparkling glitter of his father. But even though he was not a big name artist, he nonetheless was a bright shining star in his own right, a chip off the old block. Kashtan used to take him along on his frequent excursions, but so as to not neglect the education of the youngster during his absence from home he also made the necessary arrangements for a "Gemora Melamed" (Talmudic Teacher) to accompany them on these tours. He also hired a music teacher, whose duty was to acquaint his two sons with the basic principles of theory and harmony rhythm, composition and phrasing of the science of sound, both of them thus acquiring in the process a voluminous repertoire, which he later considerably expanded.

When Hirsh Weintraub was appointed as chief cantor of Dubno, he took a trip to Vienna for the purpose of replenishing his academic musical background and acquainting himself at close range with Solomon Zultzer and his revolutionary reform movement in the field of Jewish liturgy. Even though after intensive study of the ideology, he considered the radical departures from the familiar norm of the Zultzer school of thought too extreme for his taste, he found some of his modernistic innovations and adaptations worthy of application and not inconsistent with the spirit of the prayers and psalms. Accordingly he evolved a new format, a golden middle-course which essentially is a synthesis of the traditional old with

the practical, musically more nearly conforming new, which found ready acceptance in broad circles of the cantorial fraternity of his day and the trend originated by him, an amalgam of the best features of the old and new, endures and finds favor with the congregations of our current generation as well.

Following the example set by his great father he too, far from confining his professional activities to the community with which he was connected, frequently made guest appearances in nearby Jewish settlements and occasionally he would even journey to faraway places in order to propagate his brand of liturgical interpretation of the prayers in as many Jewish communities as he was able to visit without to any appreciable extent neglecting his duties to his constituents at home.

At one time having been called to Lemberg to officiate at a Sabbath service his presence in the city was taken advantage of by the arrangement committee of a concert for the benefit of a charitable fund for the general hospital of the Galician Capital, which was to be held under the patronage of Ferdinand, the Imperator of the realm.

When they learned that the famous cantor happened to be a visitor in Lemberg, they invited him to also lend his talent to the humanitarian cause — Weintraub of course readily assented to extend his stay in town so as to be at hand to take part in the gala affair. The monarch who graced the festive concert with his royal presence expressed his thanks to Weintraub in profuse terms of appreciation and awarded him an Imperial citation, naming him a knight.

In emulation of the examples set by the "Altneuschul" synagogue of Prague and the great synagogue of Wilna he too introduced the custom of welcoming and greeting of the holy Sabbath by the sounds of an orchestra of instrumental music with vocal accompaniment of a choir ensemble assisted by an organist on Fridays before sundown. As an extra feature he himself would on such occasion play the first violin.

In Berlin he was the honored guest of the magnate Loevenstein, who had built a private house of worship of his own, that had become the gathering place of the elite of the Berlin Jewish community. Weintraub would on such occasions regale them with his liturgical masterpieces. Lewandovsky, the great composer having attended such a service by Weintraub declared that he had never yet heard such a consistently well organized, artful religious service as the one conducted by the celebrated visitor.

With the rise of his fame it was inevitable that Dubno would be hard put to retain for long its outstanding cantor. Too many communities, larger, richer and more eminent than that modest provincial town, were harboring the ambition to lure him away from his post with attractive offers. From among the several cities that vied for his services he chose to accept the chief cantorial position at the hand of the Jewish community of Koenigsberg (East Prussia).

It was not so much the more favorable conditions of pecuniary compensation that induced Hirsh Weintraub to exchange Dubno for Koenigs-

berg, but principally was his decision prompted by the promising prospect of being able in the new environment to develop a more extensive and comprehensive musical activity. This expectation of the cantor was fully realized in his new post.

In the course of the years Koenigsberg became the mecca for fledgling cantors who gravitated to that seat of learning to sit at the feet of the acknowledged authority of liturgical art, who gave from the bounty of his wide ranging store of knowledge with generous benevolence and charity to all, who turned to him for instruction and advice.

Hirsh Weintraub earned the reputation of the foremost teacher of "Chazzonuth" who was blessed with the gift of most accurately defining the relevant rules and of expounding in terms, as exact as the hinges of fate, the basic principles that ought to govern the construction of the musical vestments for the prayers of the synagogue rituals. In time it became a generally accepted axiom, that to have been a disciple of Weintraub was tantamount to being eminently qualified for the practice of the sacred calling.

In 1862 he received a golden medal from the musical academy of Berlin as a memento for distinguished service rendered and in 1873 he was awarded the title of "royal musical director" by order of the Imperator of the Reich, Kaiser Wilhelm the first.

At the completion of forty years of laboring in the vineyard of the Lord, the community of Koenigsberg arranged a gala anniversary celebration in honor of its beloved cantor. The whole town, Jews and Gentiles alike, turned out en masse to pay homage and the feted celebrant nearing his seventieth birthday announced his intention to retire from active practice of his profession and at his recommendation his congregation elected Edward Birnbaum to succeed him in the post of chief cantor of Koenigsberg. Not long after that happy occasion at the age of seventy on the 22nd of December in the year 1881, Hirsh Weintraub passed away after a very fruitful life, replete with valuable content and outstanding achievements. He was a worthy son of a grand virtuoso father. Both their names have become immortal as towering pillars of the cantorial art.

CHAPTER 49

GERSHON SIROTA

Joys and sorrows in the career of Sirota — He becomes famous through his phonograph records — The assault against him marshalled by Pinye Minkowsky.

I remember it as if it had happened only yesterday. I was then still a small child. On that memorable day we had guests visiting us and, as is usual in the home of a cantor, the discussion inevitably turned to the subject of great cantors.

Someone turned to my father, as one considered to be an expert in this matter, with the question, "Who is in your opinion the greatest cantor of our era?" Without thinking about it and without a moment's hesitation, my father immediately answered that the king of the cantors was without question none other than Gershon Sirota of Warsaw.

That night I had a strange dream. I saw a man, a veritable giant, approaching the synagogue pulpit with measured steps accompanied by a group of assistants. Instead of a robe he wore a gold-embroidered white pelerine (cape) which rested lightly on his broad shoulders. On his majestic head, he wore instead of the cantorial headgear (yarmulke) a large heavy, high crown which was studded with several rows of diamonds and pearls. In his hand he carried, instead of a tuning fork, a long pointed silver "sceptre". As he neared the pulpit, the trustees of the congregation, with the Rabbi leading the way came to meet him, reverently bowed down before him, and conducted him not to an upholstered chair, but to a golden throne, upon which they set him down with great care and homage.

They bowed down again before him and walked back to their seats, all the while turning their faces toward him. Four of the adjutants now

came forward, carrying aloft in their raised hands an outspread "Talis" (ritual shawl) by its four corners like the top of a wedding canopy (chupa) and placed it with great ceremonial dignity upon his shoulders. Whereupon the royal personage walked up to the pulpit and opening his mouth he let out such a blasting shout that all the window-panes in the synagogue cracked and broke from the impact of his mighty voice and crashing down to the stone floor, they made such a thunderous noise that I awoke sweating and trembling. That's how my childish phantasy imagined and pictured the figure of the king of cantors — Gershon Sirota.

My father used to mention his name with greater awe and admiration than, for instance, the name of "Franz Joseph, the First" in whose land we lived and who was considered in those years as one of the foremost "chassidey umos huolom" (righteous men of the Gentile world) even though "Kaiser and King of Austria and Hungary" was surely a greater title than "King of the Cantors."

When I came, in later years, to Budapest, the metropolis of Hungary, I again encountered the name Sirota. The person who bore it was the cantor of the Bethlem-place Synagogue, and he was quite proud of the fact that he was, as he claimed, a distant relative of the famous Sirota of Warsaw.

Later on, I heard, that he made the grade and was called to the post of chief cantor of the temple in Buda (Ofen). He was not an outstanding cantor, and were it not for his name, "Shirota" (that's how it was pronounced in Hungarian), he probably would never have been elected to that prominent position.

They used to call him "the little Sirota," not because of his stature, but rather to distinguish between him and the well-known Sirota. He occupied the post in Buda until his death, which occurred recently.

But to return to the great Sirota, I, myself, never had the opportunity to hear Sirota in person, although I did have the privilege many years later of becoming acquainted with him. It occurred in the year 1927. I was at that juncture the cantor of the "Ohav Zedek" Synagogue, where I occupied the pulpit formerly held by Joseph Rosenblatt for 14 years. It was on the Sabbath when the blessing of the moon for the month of Elul was to be recited. In those years, it was still the custom for the cantor to officiate Friday evening too and especially was that so in the 116th Street Synagogue, where the auditorium was usually overfilled with worshipers for the Friday evening service.

At the prayer "Boyi Besholom" (Come in Peace), I turned around (as is the prescribed ritual) and observed that in the first row behind me were sitting Joseph Rosenblatt in his silk hat on one side, Yeshaaye Meizels (who was the cantor of the synagogue before Rosenblatt) on the other, and between them sat a distinguished, broad-shouldered, dark-complexioned handsome gentleman, with a short black round beard.

I did not know who he was but I surmised, that inasmuch as he was sitting between two cantors, he too probably had some connection with our profession. Realizing that I had among my audience such distinguish-

ed visitors, I naturally made a special effort to show off my ability in the best possible light.

After the conclusion of the service, Reb Yossele came over to me with the guest, whom he introduced to me, and to my great surprise and pleasure I learned that I had the great honor of having had the "King of Cantors" (in my father's opinion) come to hear my father's son conduct a religious service.

He had just arrived in New York from Warsaw, having been engaged to officiate at the High Holidays in the Winter Garden of the Bronx for the benefit of a Harlem institution. He had quit his post in the Tlomatzker Synagogue for the second and, as it turned out, the last time. He pressed my hand with a warm handshake, and placing his other hand patronizingly on my shoulder said, "Young man, you know the ropes. I'm confident that in time, you will go far and become a great cantor." At that moment, I thought to myself, "Oh, if only my sainted father would have lived to hear Sirota's favorable opinion about his son."

The invention of gramophone records during Sirota's lifetime played a large part in the growth and spread of his fame for he had the good fortune to be a pioneer in making records. In that era, there was only one way in which people were able to learn about an outstanding cantor's talent and achievement, namely, through the "grapevine route." From mouth to mouth the news spread, that in a certain city a cantor officiated, who possessed unusual qualities. If a resident of a provincial village was eager to hear great cantors, he usually managed somehow to betake himself to the great Jewish cantorial centers where the big shots (carp heads) of the profession were enthroned. On his return, this enterprising Jew was the hero of the day and young and old listened to his report open-mouthed, as he related the wonders of the great cantors of the day, whom he had heard sing.

And if the mountain did not come to Mohammed, Mohammed went to the mountain. There were cases, where a great cantor decided to make a tour of the country. Taking along a few of his singers, he visited several communities, officiating on a Sabbath, participating in Mincha-Maariv services on weekdays, or perhaps giving a concert. Such a wandering cantor was called a "Medina (country) cantor."

With these activities of his, the cantor killed two birds with one stone. First, he earned a few rubles, which was not to be sneezed at and surely did not make a hole in his pocket. The salary which the cantor used to receive, even at the biggest posts, was not too generous and a "blood transfusion" from outside sources came as a Godsend. Secondly, his name became better known as a result of his guest appearances. But at best this was a slow process. It took years for a cantor's name, no matter how good he was, to become well-known outside the confines of his city, not to mention the time it took for his fame to pervade the whole gubernie (state) and to spread throughout the land.

There was no possibility of a cantor becoming well known in other countries. A cantor could have lived as long as Methuselah without even

having had a ghost of a chance to become world famous, no matter how much he rated it. With the appearance of the new invention, there occurred a radical change to the good. The phonograph companies succeeded in distributing records through a net of branches, not only throughout the breadth and length of the land in a very short time but also to other countries and hemispheres.

The phonograph was a novelty, an extraordinary machine which people played in their homes on every festive occasion as a very popular and pleasant treat for their guests.

A singer could by this means become world famous overnight and be heard by many people at the same time, at the expended effort of a mere few minutes, which it took him to record the song at the studio. This was the case with Sirota. He was the first on the scene. His first twelve records came out in 1913 and they had a great impact, especially in the countries of the European continent, where Jews formed a large segment of the population.

I emphasize Europe, for oddly enough his records were not distributed in America until much later. Whatever the reason, it is a fact, that the first records exported to the United States came from France and Germany. They were the cantorial chants of Zavel Kwartin recorded by the French Company, Pathe and the German one, Victor.

Kwartin's first two records had such a success in the United States that they overshadowed even the records of Caruso which were also very popular in Jewish Circles. There followed Rosenblatt's first record, "Omar Reb Elozor" which he made for the Victor Company, and only later did the records of Sirota become available in the United States. Through his recordings, Sirota attracted great masses of followers, and thanks to them he received a great number of invitations for personal appearances. He traveled extensively and made numerous guest appearances in theatres and concert halls, as well as in synagogues and at communal gatherings.

Although the phonograph records were a great boon to Sirota, all was not hearts and flowers. The roses also brought with them thorns, which stung, wounded and carried heartaches in their wake. The matter of phonograph records and concerts caused great dissension in some quarters. Sirota was attacked and maligned, and suffered a lot of abuse. Especially vehement charges were hurled against him by Pinye Minkowsky, who kept after him with bitter attacks and poisonous arrows of reproach. Minkowsky wrote a book in which he dealt almost exclusively with the subject of phonograph records and concerts. He was like the man who upon returning from church was asked what the priest preached about and gave the answer — "About sin." "What did he say?" "He is against it." Minkowsky too was definitely against sin and to make records and give concerts was in his opinion an unforgivable sin.

To illustrate his point and justify his opposition, he related an incident that occurred one Friday evening at his bailiwick, the Broder Synagogue of Odessa. After the conclusion of the services, a soldier came

over to Minkowsky and complimented him on his chanting of the service. In the course of the conversation that ensued between them, the soldier particularly praised the "V'shomru" of Sirota. When the cantor asked him, where he heard Sirota sing it, the soldier replied, "The last time I heard it was in a house, which is not a home, and has a red lamp out front. The girls were playing the record for us for our amusement." Well, that's all Minkowsky needed. The story only poured more oil on the fire. He thundered both in speeches and in print, that it was sacrilegious to carry the holy prayers and psalms into the theatres, dance halls and houses of ill repute. It was demeaning and, therefore, unforgivable for a religious dignitary to lend a hand to such scandalous misuse of the sacred prayers.

It might suffice to give one quotation from Minkowsky's tirade: "The 'Gronom' of Warsaw [referring to Sirota], whose only asset is in his throat [gronom] struts up to the stage dressed in his priestly garments and belts out a few cantorial prayers. Then he takes off and throws away the synagogue-gown and the cantorial Yarmulka [hat], puts on a full dress suit and goes forth to sing a love song to the maiden 'Aida.' " And as if this were not enough, Pinye did not remain alone for long in his holy crusade. The well-known Rav Tzoir, young rabbi of Odessa soon also got involved in the fray and took a stand at the side of Minkowsky, contributing thereby considerable weight and effective assistance to the cause, espoused by Pinye with such evangelical zeal.

Rav Tzoir (Professor Chayim Chernowitz) published an open letter to the trustees of the Tlomatzker Synagogue asking, "Does it really not bother and concern the leaders of the Warsaw Synagogue and don't they feel disgusted and guilty for allowing the cantor who officiates at their pulpit to at the same time moonlight as an actor, who plays in theatres and circuses. Why don't they see to it that their cantor shall earn enough to make a decent living and not be obliged to drag himself around like a gypsy?"

The controversy became heated. In an article which appeared in the "Haint" ("Today") of Warsaw, Dr. Gershon Lewin, who presided over the "Hazomir" singing society defended Sirota and vehemently tore into the Rabbi of Odessa, calling him vile names and heaping abuse on him for his attack on the Tlomatzka congregregational leadership and its famous cantor.

Joining in the cacophony of condemnation, the cantor of the Wilna Choir Synagogue, Abraham Moshe Bernstein, sounded off in his cultured voice, with the following dictum: "If I were Rothschild," he wrote, "I would buy up all the records of cantorial chants in the world and I would burn them like a Jew burns all the Chometz [leavened bread which is burned before Passover]. To make doubly sure that another series of such records would never again be released, I would also buy up all the phonograph companies of the world. Thus, I would put an end to this Bacchanalia [scandalous, outrageous, decadent behavior]." Sharper words than these could hardly be used.

The presidium of the Tlomatzker Synagogue finally was obliged to take notice of all the criticism and call a meeting in order to deliberate the

matter. The outcome was a declaration that they could not order Sirota to stop giving concerts, but his cantorial garments must always remain in the synagogue building and he would not be allowed to use them at his concert appearances. There was no decision reached regarding his recording for gramophone companies. This question was, so it seems, glossed over in silence and so he went on with his recordings as heretofore, unhampered by his superiors at the congregation.

When Minkowsky heard about the Solomonic verdict of the Warsaw trustees, his only comment was, "Well, how do you like such a reshenye [decision]? It is a shame and a mockery."

When Sirota was asked what he had to say about the protests and attacks directed against his recordings, he replied, "What do I know? They are paying me for it, so I do blow into a tube."

CHAPTER 50

CANTOR GERSHON SIROTA BECAME FAMOUS WHEN HE WAS STILL A YOUNGSTER

The historic controversy between him and Minkowsky over the propriety of making phonograph records — His journey to Vienna — His father's illness interrupts his studies.

In the previous chapter, we related the answer that Sirota gave, when he was asked why he made recordings. But, of course, his response that he sang into the tube because it meant money in the till was not to be taken seriously. It was a facetious remark, made by him with tongue in cheek.

That he was paid for it handsomely was no secret. But that still did not answer the question raised by his critics as to whether or not a cantor has the moral right to earn money in such a fashion.

Minkowsky had stated his case, took his firm stand against it. Now the ball was in Sirota's court and he, with deep indignation, threw it back at his accusers, (mentioning by name only Minkowsky) with logical arguments and determination.

In an article which appeared in a Yiddish daily of Warsaw, he gave a factual answer to the charges and this time in a serious vein. He told the story of how it came about that he got involved in the project. On a certain Sabbath morning after the conclusion of the religious service, Sirota was besieged by a host of his admirers, who crowded around him trying to shake his hand, when a Mr. Isserlin, one of the most prominent members of the Wilna community, a very religious man and a great Talmudic

scholar, came over and whispered into his ear that he had a very important matter to discuss with him.

It turned out that a certain phonograph company had sought Isserlin's help and intercession to get Sirota interested in the new invention that was sweeping the world markets. Sirota was at first skeptical and undecided. He wanted to know Isserlin's opinion about the question of ethics and the compatibility of such a course of action with the religious character of the post he was occupying, a question that was sure to be raised by certain influential individuals of the ultra-conservative, fanatical circles that looked askance at any departure from traditional practices and was likely to condemn out of hand anything that was novel and untried.

Isserlin replied that in his considered opinion it was not only perfectly proper and fitting for a religious functionary to use the newly-invented device and to lend his talents to the recording of psalms and prayers, but that it was even most desirable for him to take advantage of the opportunity to do so. By recording these chants he would do a great service to his people. The persecuted and misery-ridden Jewish masses, who were living under hostile anti-Semitic regimes in the various lands, would find some solace and relief in listening to the beautiful inspirational chants that would bring into their beclouded lives a ray of hope and confidence in the eventual dawn of a better and brighter tomorrow.

Having been thus reassured by the man on whose unerring judgment he had come to rely on frequently, Sirota's twinges of doubt were stilled and set to rest and he made some test record platters by singing into a pilot machine which had been left by the agent with Mr. Isserlin for that purpose. The latter then forwarded the trial record to the offices of the phonograph company in St. Petersburg.

Soon afterward, there arrived in Wilna a representative of the firm, a Gentile, who came to see Sirota and work out a deal with him. He painted a vivid, rosy picture for the benefit of the cantor. "Young man," he said, "Just imagine! Your voice will be heard simultaneously in all corners of the big wide world, in New York, Rome, Moscow, London, Paris, Odessa, Yokohama, Babroisk, and everywhere. In the salon of the noble count and in the hut of the poor tailor — The working girl eating her spare one course meal, will have it enhanced and supplemented with the pleasure which your singing will give her — In all corners of the globe where human beings live and struggle and where lonely people are longing and craving for some encouraging sound, some inspiring word to bring some light and warmth into their drab existence and worry-filled life, your voice will provide it. Wouldn't that be a great satisfaction to you? You will by means of your recorded voice recruit new friends for the Jewish people and Jewish musical art, and you will become immortal."

The business official from the capital city at the shores of the Neva River spoke so persuasively, that he removed all of Sirota's remaining doubts and scruples. They dissolved into thin air under the impact of the agent's logical arguments. If it was a question of infusing new hope into miserable and suffering souls, if one could by the simple device of recor-

ding, of perpetuating his voice in a wondrous receptacle, and of having it made available to people in the farthest corners of the earth, rescue them from the swamp of loneliness and elevate their depressed spirits to the plane of greater enjoyment of inspirational chants, what reason or even justification could anyone have for refusing?

"No matter what the self-righteous stone-throwers, they themselves supposedly without blemish or sin, may say," Sirota writes, "I never felt and I still do not feel, that by my recording of liturgical chants I have committed any unseemly, unethical or improper act, or that I have thereby in any way demeaned the dignity of my sacred calling, or offended the religious feelings of anybody." Sirota later also recorded for the gramophone company.

Who was right? The verdict in the heated debate that ranged for quite a while between the two warring camps, that held stubbornly to their diametrically opposite views, has long since been rendered by the passage of time and by the evolving, profoundly changed circumstances. There is a Hebrew proverb, "What the passing of time can bring about, mind and logic is not able to achieve." The mere passage of time often has a way of automatically solving difficult problems, with which brilliant minds had wrangled for years without success.

Matters and activities that were looked upon by some as inappropriate, inadmissible and taboo in that long past era, are nowadays considered entirely natural, proper, harmless and even useful.

Pinye Minkowsky was far from being a "Tzadik," (saint) a strictly observant Jew in his private life. Even in regard to the conduct of religious services, he was decried and condemned as a radical reformer for having been the first cantor in Russia to introduce the use of an organ into a house of worship. But in justice to him it must be said that he jealously guarded the dignity of the cantorial profession and he himself maintained a high standard of morality and propriety, as befits a representative of a religious institution. We must therefore assume that in the question of concerts and recordings, he led a noble fight for the upholding of his firm and sincere convictions.

There was, however, another school of thought. These skeptics were not so sure about Pinye's real motives. They had their doubts and were far from convinced that the cantor of the "Broder shool" was engaged in a "Machlowka l'sheym shomayim," a crusade and controversy for the glory of the Lord, that he was fighting for what he considered to be a holy principle. They thought it more likely that envy and jealousy was lurking behind the pretense of fighting a holy war, that the real reason for his furious attacks on his colleagues was that he could not tolerate and take with equanimity the sight of Sirota's and Kwartin's (who was another target of his poisonous sling and arrows under the guise of the designation "Klonom" (shameful) sudden climb and rise to universal fame on the wings of the wizardry of the mechanically reproduced musical sounds. They surmised that he was jealous of their success in the new medium, and disappointed at having been bypassed and left out of this new develop-

ment. According to their opinion, his hurt ego prompted him to lash out and launch a campaign of vilification against his colleagues who had conquered this new medium.

According to the view of the partisans of this theory, it stands to reason that this version was the correct one. They point to the fact, that some years prior to the advent of the phonograph, at the time when Sirota was still a very young man at the beginning of his evolving career, when in response to his application for the then vacant post, the trustees of the "Broder synagogue" wanted to appoint him as assistant cantor to Pinye Minkowsky, the latter vetoed the plan and would under no circumstances allow the appointment to be confirmed. This case-history illustrates, according to their reasoning, that even then he considered Sirota too great a threat to his prominence in the congregation, too gifted a competitor to have at his side.

But whatever motive was the propelling factor behind Minkowsky's diatribes, his Don Quixotic battles availed him nothing or mighty little at the most, although it must be noted that in some countries, England for instance, cantors are still not allowed to make any recordings or stage or concert appearances. Cantors are considered there spiritual leaders (Geistliche) and must conduct themselves in strict accordance and compliance with the dignified customs and somber prescriptions that are in vogue for that caste in those lands, even to the extent of the wearing of suitable distinguishing vestments, including the white, stiff, celluloid collar usually worn by gentile priests.

* * *

Gershon Sirota was born in the year 1874 in Haysin, Podolia'er guberniye, where his father was the village cantor. When yet a child, he assisted his father at his religious synagogue services, together with the other youngsters whom his father had succeeded in rounding up for that purpose.

After a short while of serving his apprenticeship as one of the ensemble without any special distinction, his father, after preparations which he considered sufficient, gave in to the lad's insistent pleadings to let him sing a solo. The test was an unqualified success. The tot was acclaimed by the Jews of Haysin, so much so, that they suggested to their cantor, that he would do well to give his youngster more opportunities to show his mettle.

Eager to please his congregants and at the same time also his talented son, the cantor began in earnest to initiate the little fellow into the mysteries of the "musach" (traditional melodies) and the variety of "gusts" (modes, styles) until he had mastered all the different liturgical chants of the Sabbath morning ritual.

It took a lot of time, effort and patience, but the eager beaver little Gershon was game. He took to singing like a fish to water. Even when he was at play, he would leave his playmates and run breathlessly to his father's side as soon as he heard the latter call him for another singing session. No wonder, therefore, that he rapidly made great progress. His

diligence was rewarded.

When the "Shtot chazzon" (town's cantor) was satisfied that his son was now ready and fortified enough with knowledge to be put to the demanding test, he casually mentioned to the gabbay (head of ritual committee) that his lad had successfully completed a thorough course which he had given him and that he was now capable of reading the whole Sabbath service from beginning to end.

The understanding congregational dignitary, taking the hint, sauntered over to the cantor's son and tendered him the invitation to be prepared to mount the rostrum on the following Sabbath and lead the congregation in the morning service. This was a singular honor, especially when bestowed on such a tender-aged youngster. Another lad in his place would have considered himself lucky to be given such an unprecedented opportunity to show his ability. But not our "Yat'l" (little prankster). Far from being impressed and thankful, he declined the proffered honor out of hand. The proud gabbay was puzzled, but considering it below his dignity, he did not press the matter any further.

However, the father did pursue the matter and being anxious to get at the bottom of the matter, he demanded to know why the boy insulted the trustee with his refusal, when he should have been grateful to him for his kindness and willingness to let him officiate. Imagine the surprise of the father when Sirota junior bared his heart and told him the reason for his refusal. "Mount the pulpit? Why not. But just for the honor? Not me. I want to get paid." When still in kneepants, he already had a business head on his narrow shoulders. "I am not an amateur any longer," he said proudly. Money was already his main preoccupation even at that early stage of his life.

Well, the "chutzpanik" (impertinent) lad had a point there. "What people get for nothing, is not appreciated." the father had to concede. There is a Talmudic proverb "Asyah demogeyn mogeyn shavyah," (a treatment by a doctor who heals free of charge isn't worth anything). And besides, he had worked hard to learn the ropes and was entitled to some kind of a reward for his effort. But how to get around his refusal to perform work for nothing? That was the question. At any rate, after some reflection the chazzon promised his youngster that he would take up the matter of compensation with the gabbay. "I think we'll be able to work it out to your satisfaction," he added.

There is no record of what was said and decided in the course of the discussion, which the "Chazzon" was supposed to have had with the boss of the ritual committee, but it is a matter of record, that young Gershon had his way. His terms were duly met. And so he did, even though belatedly, deign to accept the invitation of the gabbay and did conduct the services on that Sabbath morning.

The little cantor did himself proud, chanting the prayers like a real professional, and from then on he was asked frequently to substitute for his father, chanting sometimes a "Shachris'l" (early morning prayer), on another occasion a "Mussaf'l" (the concluding half of the Sabbath ser-

vice), and each time on the day following the function his old man would bring him two rubles, which he was supposed to have received from the congregation as payment for the service rendered by Gershon, who was now in business for himself and on the road to become a capitalist.

Whether the money which his father handed him after each such function had really come from the congregational treasury or the senior Sirota paid it out from his own pocket just to have his son willingly mount the altar, Gershon was never able to find out.

One day, (it was a short time before one of the festivals of the Jewish calendar) a letter arrived from his grandfather, who was residing in Odessa in which he requested that Gershon be sent to him for a visit. Of course, he wanted to see his grandson and have him spend some time with him, his wife and family. But there was an additional reason that prompted the grandfather to tender the invitation. Gershon's parents used to write him about the great furor that the young little prodigy was creating in the whole vicinity of Haysin by his chants in the synagogue. He was, therefore, very curious and quite anxious to hear the youngster with his own ears.

Gershon was at this juncture already "Bar Mitzvah" (son of the commandments) a mature 13-year-old, and the idea of visiting his grandparents was for him an exciting prospect, not only because he loved them and was longing to see them, but also because it was a great opportunity for him to get out from the confines of the small provincial town and see the world. What a chance! To get to see the big city of Odessa and to perhaps also hear the great cantors of that important centre of liturgical art.

The trustees of the "Beth Hamedrosh" (small house of prayer) to which his grandfather belonged, succeeded in persuading the visiting grandson, with ruble arguments, to go up to the "Omud" (platform) and conduct the service. When having completed his task he stepped down, the proud grandfather with tears of joy in his eyes, took him in his arms and kissed him. The whole congregation was deeply impressed. It was indeed true what the parents had written him. With the speed of lightning, the news about the wonder-boy spread throughout the city.

Several professionals of the Jewish musical world became quite interested in the boy. Especially did Yakovkin, the choirmaster of the Shalashna Synagogue, take a great interest in him and he did not rest until he succeeded in acquiring him as a member of his chorus.

In the meantime, his parents had moved to Odessa, where the father landed a post as the cantor of one of the smaller congregations. Gershon took advantage of every opportunity that he had to make the rounds and listen to the great cantors of the many large synagogues that dotted the streets of Odessa. He used to run from one house of worship to the other, killing two birds with one shot, covering and taking in two cantors on one and the same Sabbath, whenever he had a free one from his duties in the chorus. These were all outstanding examples of the artistic, tradition-true cantors and the perceptive teenager learned a lot from everyone of them.

Particularly was he drawn, as by a magnet, to Bachman, whose extraordinary talent, as well as heroic voice, made a deep impression on the sensitive Gershon. This great master was and remained his ideal, whom he venerated, and who had a lasting influence on him in shaping his own style.

Yakovkin, who took the young chorister under his wings, was trying to convince him that he ought to get a formal, thorough musical education by registering as a student in a school of music. He introduced him to Naradeyev, a good friend of his, the director of a theater, who, after having become convinced that the young fellow had great potentialities, gave him a letter of recommendation to Baron Kolbuss, professor and director of the Odessa conservatory of music, who promptly granted him a scholarship, thus exempting him from having to pay any tuition.

After a while, having discovered that the pupil was showing great promise, the Baron made him his own ward and personally gave him lessons in musical theory and harmony and the technique of voice production. He also coached him in the practical rendition of musical works, teaching him several operatic arias.

On one occasion, when his favorite pupil arrived for a scheduled lesson, the Baron asked him to sing a certain aria, which he knew already by heart. When he finished, the door of the adjoining room opened and in walked a number of well-known artists of the Russian musical stage. All of them were applauding and giving enthusiastic expression of their admiration for the excellent performance which they had just heard. They were lavish in their praise of the young man and foresaw for him a brilliant future in the field of opera.

However, to his very pious father the whole business of studying at the conservatory was anathema. He had not been in favor of it from the very beginning and now his misgivings multiplied. He feared that his son might yet be led into strange and, to his way of thinking, thorny and dangerous roads.

His growing suspicions that something untoward might come of this flirting with temptation and danger prompted his decision that it was high time for him to act. He went to see Baron Kolbuss and told him frankly that he would never give his blessing to his son devoting himself to a career in opera, nor to any other kind of secular singing profession on the stage. His future was in the synagogue, his destiny was to become a cantor, an intermediary before the throne of the Almighty on behalf of his congregation.

The arguments of the nobleman, that with his golden voice and great musical potentiality properly developed, his son could eventually earn as much as one hundred thousand rubles a year, were unable to sway the poor servant of the Lord. Of what account was money, when it would mean glossing over and compromising his principles, his firmly held convictions? More than ever was he determined to get his Gershon back on the right track, insisting that he at once quit the conservatory and concentrate all his energies on his sacred calling which everybody could clearly see

was prescribed for him . . . "Chazzonuth."

All along he had continued to sing in Yakovkin's choir, and one Friday evening, when the leader gave him a particularly effective solo to sing, he performed so well, that the congregants in their enthusiastic enchantment began to applaud. Following that Sabbath, the successful soloist's wages were raised from 25 rubles a month to 50 rubles.

With the doubling of his paycheck, there went also a considerable increase in the number of his solos. The worshipers of the Shalashna Synagogue demanded to hear more and more from the gifted singer, whose beautiful tenor voice rang out with glowing brightness and ear-caressing sounds in the palace-like holy edifice which was known for its particularly fine acoustics.

Gershon's ever growing popularity with the members of the congregation did not please very much the cantor of the Shalashna Synagogue, Yankel Soroker, a great cantor, but who by then was already of advanced age, and whose voice slowly but surely was fading. When the trustees found out that the leading soloist of the choir was also a quite capable reader in his own right, they asked Yakovkin to allow him to officiate on a Sabbath service, when the cantor of the congregation was off duty. The tenor completed his assignment so successfully, that at a board meeting that was called soon afterward, he was by acclamation unanimously appointed to the post of assistant cantor with a salary of one hundred rubles a month. He did not, however, hold this job for a very long time. For Yankel Soroker and his wife paid a surprise visit one day to the parents of his assistant cantor. He came right to the point, pouring out his heart and complaints, "What do you want of me? Don't you see? You are ruining me. Because of your son, I cannot go anymore to the pulpit. He is overshadowing me and I am losing my grip on my position. Have God in your heart. I have a wife and children and your son is a young man with a great future. Why does he need to be assistant cantor in my synagogue? For the High Holidays alone, he could earn more than for three years as my sidekick." Tears glistened in his eyes. It was impossible to deny his plea.

Shortly after that, Sirota resigned from the second place position at the Shalashna Synagogue and immediately was hired by the congregation of the "Prikashtshikes" in a suburb of Odessa. The first choir leader to serve with him in this post was Ben Zion Hoffman, generally referred to as "The White Dirizsor," who was reputed to be a "notenfresser" (an excellent rapid sight reader). Eventually he got his teacher and mentor, Yakovkin, to become his choir leader.

He was now all of eighteen years old, the point in a youth's life, when according to Jewish custom, it was time for him to choose for himself a mate. And that's where he found her, waiting to ensnare the brand-new cantor of her father's congregation. It was practically his own bailiwick. For the father of the bride was the "gabbay," the chief trustee of that religious organization, who had the main say in the deliberations of that august body, the board of directors. In other words, it was the case of the employee marrying the daughter of his boss, the classical method for an

ambitious young man to insure for himself a successful career. But in this instance, such practical considerations were not very likely to have figured in the decision of the bridegroom and could not have very well influenced him in making his choice. For our Gershon was not in need of anyone to lean on or to help him push his wagon up hill.

He was able to stand on his own feet, to get ahead purely on his own merit and, besides, he never intended to waste his time and energy by remaining long in a post, that was hardly suitable for a man of his great talents and potentialities. He considered it merely as a temporary phase in his upward march. It served his purpose as a useful stepping-stone, a platform from which his name could become better known and a launching pad, a springboard to higher posts.

Even though he left the Shalashna Synagogue, in deference to the plea of Yankel Soroker, the Jews who used to worship at that house of prayer could not forget him. When the season of the High Holidays drew near, the trustees, in whose service he had previously functioned, came to Sirota with the following proposition.

Inasmuch as there was great dissatisfaction among the membership with the elderly cantor's way of reading the services, they explained, it was necessary to pacify them at least partially. They were, therefore, sent to him on a mission of persuading him to accept the task of conducting the "Shacharis" (morning) devotions on the coming Rosh Hashono (New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) in their synagogue. It would be a great favor that would be appreciated by all the congregants. The committee worked on him so long and so determinedly, that they finally succeeded in getting him to reluctantly agree. It was no child's play, what he had thus committed himself to under strong pressure. Maybe if he had known the extent of the hardships involved, he would have thought twice before letting the delegation make up his mind for him.

On the first day of Rosh Hashono, he began his chores at the "Shalashna Synagogue," and after concluding the morning service there, he walked, accompanied by a group of his devoted admirers, through the streets of Odessa garbed in his priestly white robe, cantorial skull cap and prayer shawl all the way to the outlying "Prikaztchkes Synagogue" to lead his own members in the prayers of the "Mussaf" (additional) devotion.

But this ordeal was nothing in comparison to the distances he had to cover on the second day of the festival. First he had to walk back to the "Shalashna Synagogue," chant the first half of the Rosh Hashono ritual and after having gotten through his task in that sanctuary, he was obliged to begin the same pilgrimage as on the previous day all over again in the opposite direction. After all that walking back and forth, there was still looming before him the big job of praying "Mussaf."

It is inconceivable how he ever managed to bring that forth. Only a young fellow with the iron constitution, stamina and the mighty, tireless voice of Sirota was capable of accomplishing the miraculous feat of walking several miles, chanting the rituals of "Shacharis" as well as "Mussaf," and after such a colossal, superhuman exertion and stress still

be able to stand on his feet. But he vowed that never again would he dare attempt anything like it.

Needless to say, Baron Kolbass, as well as Naradeyev, the director of the city theater, were disappointed at the turn of events, as they unfolded for the favorite pupil of the conservatory. But they had not as yet given up their hope to win back eventually the wonderful tenor for the opera stage, where in their opinion he was sure to earn unprecedented laurels.

A suitable opportunity soon presented itself. Naradeyev and the Baron made plans for the production of Haydn's "The Creation," and the director of the theater, where this oratorio was to be staged sought the intervention of his friend, Yakovkin, asking him to use his influence with Sirota to make him agree to participate in this musical enterprise. Sirota always had a soft spot in his heart for this particular work of Haydn and Yakovkin did not have to use much persuasion to get his consent. He agreed to take on the role assigned to him and he appeared in the production of the Oratorio, together with a first rate cast headed by the famous opera star, Sibiriakoff.

Incidentally, this singer was known in his hometown of Sidilkov, Gubernia of Wholin as "Lipeh Bass," who was a "meshorer" in the chorus of the local cantor, Aaron Rozmarin.

Sirota's success was tremendous and for days after the event his brilliant performance was the talk of the town. "It is a shame," was the general opinion of the secular musical quarters, " that such a great potential talent goes to waste in the confines of the four walls of a temple."

The "musical circle," an association of music lovers to which belonged great "metzenates," patrons, generous supporters of the arts, decided to do something about it. They offered to send the young man with the grand voice at their expense to Vienna, so as to enable him to continue his studies in the world famous conservatory of the Austrian capital.

Sirota's "wanderlust", his love of travel, and his desire to see the world, again asserted itself, and he did not hesitate long before gratefully accepting the stipend that was so generously offered him. To make the decision easier for him, his congregation granted him an extended leave of absence with full pay, hoping in the long run to get the benefit of his studies in Vienna, of the profoundly improved musical background which he was bound to gain during his stay there. Things, however, sometimes have a way of turning out much differently than planned.

Upon arrival in Vienna, he naturally went to hear the numerous famous cantors of whom that great metropolis and prominent center of Jewish culture had ample reason to boast. In this manner, he became acquainted with Joseph Singer, the successor of Solomon Zultzer at the "Seitenshteten Temple," the central house of worship of the Vienna Jewish Community. This venerable cantor became very much interested in the 20-year-old visitor from Odessa, whose extraordinary vocal equipment and great musical intelligence and perception impressed him favorably. He became convinced that these valuable assets augured well for his future.

Since Singer himself was already advanced in years and about ready

to retire, he proposed to the Congregation, that they should seriously consider Gershon Sirota for the post, as the man best qualified in his opinion to succeed him. The chief cantor's recommendation was taken up by the board of directors at a special meeting called with that matter on the agenda. Nothing came of it, however, because most of the trustees expressed their skepticism about the wisdom of appointing a young man of such tender age to the most prominent chief cantorial position in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. "Maybe in a few years when he will have become more mature," they said.

In spite of that setback, Cantor Singer continued his promotional activities on behalf of his young colleague, in whom he perceived a future great star on the liturgical horizon. At a Chanukah celebration, he introduced him to Baron Anselm Rothschild and his son-in-law, Ritter von Guttman, with the words, "This is a young cantor from Odessa, the possessor of the most beautiful tenor voice of our time."

Rothschild invited him to a grand ball which was to be held in his palace. It was a festive event, attended by bejeweled grand duchesses, countesses and bemedaled military brass mingling with heads of the government, noblemen and members of the royal court. The elite of the top layer of aristocracy from all over Austria were assembled in the ballroom.

Sirota sang and was a tremendous success. Baron Guttman remarked, "Such a voice belongs in the Kaiserlicher Opera," but Rothschild was of a different opinion saying, "This is our future Wiener Obercantor (Chief Cantor of Vienna)."

When Rothschild learned that the phenomenal singer had come to Vienna to continue his studies in the conservatory and that he was taking lessons from a certain vocal teacher, he asked Sirota to come to his office to discuss the matter of making a change and begin studying with the best professor of that time, at the Baron's own expense.

Intoxicated by the pomp and grandeur of the Rothschild palace and gloriously happy with the great impression that his singing had made on the creme de la creme of the Austrian gentry, Sirota returned in high spirits in the wee morning hours to his room, where he found a telegram that had just arrived. His heart skipped a beat. Something was wrong. He opened it up and read the message. He became flushed with fever, trembling and shivering with fear, feeling hot and ice-cold at the same time. The words danced before his eyes. "The father is dangerously ill. Come home at once."

All his plans were shattered to smithereens. No more Vienna, no more conservatory. Goodby Rothschild, goodbye dreams. He must get back to Odessa, back home to the dear, beloved, dangerously-sick father. Fate derailed him once again.

Leaving everything behind, he rushed home to the bedside of his fatally stricken father. On arrival he found his beloved parent just barely clinging tenaciously to his fast-ebbing life.

When the mortally ill patient caught sight of his dear son, a faint

smile of recognition and satisfaction lighted up his blood-drained, pale countenance.

Having had his last wish to see his beloved son fulfilled, he gave up his hopeless struggle with the "maloch hamoves" (angel of death) and lapsed into a coma, from which he was not destined to come out alive. His pure soul ascended to heaven, leaving his heart-broken Gershon an orphan.

CHAPTER 51

SIROTA IS ELECTED CHIEF CANTOR OF WILNA FOR LIFE

The difficulties he encountered and intrigues to which he was subjected — The examinations which he had to go through.

We incorporated the treatise dealing with the career of Sirota in the section under the heading of "Cantors of Wilna," in spite of the fact, that when he came to Wilna he had already had, as we have seen, a pretty extensive cantorial past in Odessa. But in Odessa he had not as yet played an important role for the most plausible reason that he could not have been highly regarded when measured in relation to the great "lions" who reigned there in that era. Only when he landed the most prominent position in Wilna, did his star begin to shine brighter and only there did he manage to draw upon himself the attention of the cantorial world.

The reason for the thus delayed recognition could have been due to several factors. In Odessa, he was still too young and inexperienced for his great qualities to become clearly evident. Whereas Wilna found him already more mature. It is also conceivable that his new post was the decisive factor making for all the difference. It is quite possible, that in the small synagogue in Odessa whose pulpit he graced, his voice was too big for the cramped auditorium and the confining atmosphere may also have had a stifling effect on him. It was hardly the ideal surroundings for stimulating his dormant talent and developing its great potentialities.

On the other hand, the great synagogue of Wilna was the perfect ideal setting for him. In its mammoth sanctuary, his mighty voice rang out in its full splendor. Here at last he was really discovered and his name became

well known throughout the world. It is however, most likely, that a combination of the above-mentioned reasons contributed to the fact that whereas in Odessa Sirota was only one of many cantors, in Wilna he achieved world prominence, rising head and shoulders above his colleagues to fame and fortune. In Odessa he was a promise; in Wilna he became the promise fulfilled.

Unquestionably, it was Wilna which made him the great cantor the world came to consider him. He himself admitted as much by writing, on one occasion, "The pulpit of the Wilna great synagogue is the best conservatory."

His appointment to the post at the "Lithuanian Jerusalem" did not come easily to Sirota. There were many complications and handicaps, which he had to stave off and many hurdles in his path, which he had to clear, before he was able to pocket the coveted prize. The congregation had discharged the former cantor, Kahan, in the wake of a scandal which rocked the city. He was accused of having committed a serious transgression. He was allegedly observed putting a piece of candy in his mouth while officiating on the Day of Atonement. He was stripped of his post in open contravention of the explicit stipulation of the synagogue's constitution, according to which an elected cantor of the congregation cannot ever be dismissed; once engaged, his tenure was for life.

One man, Reb Munye Soltz, president, chief trustee and gabbay (head of the ritual committee), stubbornly insisted that the offending cantor must go and that no matter what the consequences he must have his way. He prevailed, even though his autocratic dictatorial way of forcing the issue and by riding roughshod over the opposition imposing his will meant the circumvention of tradition and the breaking of a time-hallowed rule.

To this tough leader of the congregation, who ruled the Wilna community with an iron hand, came a cantor who held down a position in one of the local synagogues. He told the powerful president that while visiting recently in Odessa, he had had the occasion to hear a young man with a colossal voice who, in his opinion, would be just the right cantor for the vacant post at the pulpit of the great synagogue. He suggested that he be invited to give a trial performance. Soltz's reply was, "If that young man should by chance sometime happen to be in Wilna, let him come in to see me. We'll look him over and then we'll see."

It so happened that just at that juncture the Shalashne Synagogue of Odessa tried for the second time to lure away Sirota, but this time not for the subordinate role previously offered to him but for the main post of full-fledged chief cantor of their congregation. It was a tempting proposition. There was, however, one circumstance, which made him hesitate. He was reluctant to consider the offer for the reason that this congregation also had at its helm a dictatorial head, its president, Cooper-Wasser, a supplier of cattle to the government. He treated the employees of his congregation not much better than he did his cattle. In his book, a cantor's usefulness lasted only as long as he caused a riot in the surrounding streets. One of the gems of his philosophy was expressed in this wise dictum,

"When the time comes that it isn't necessary any longer to call out the police to disperse the mob that is laying siege to the synagogue, it is imperative to change cantors."

To accept a post under the domination of this "noble" soul was not exactly the most fervent desire of Sirota. While pondering the pros and cons of the position and hanging on the horns of his dilemma, the report of his colleague about the talk which he had with the president of the Wilna congregation came like a God-sent blessing. When the cantor from Wilna related to him what Soltz had said, he sensed that he had found the solution to his problem. He was willing to grant him an interview whenever he happened to be in Wilna? That was all he needed. He would happen to be in Wilna, immediately, on purpose. He must see the president at once. Without wasting a minute, he was on his way. Upon arriving in Wilna, he proceeded in the company of his colleague who doubled as "matchmaker" to the presence of the mighty boss.

With a serious mien and an ill-boding, suspicious expression on his face, his parchment-like forehead wrinkled in innumerable folds, Soltz sat in his chancery, talking with his friend Hash, a proprietor of a wholesale lumber yard and a broker dealing in forests, and a fellow member of the Ritual Committee. In contrast to the austere and morose mien of Reb Munye, Hash was of a jovial nature and a wit.

Their discussion was interrupted by the entrance of the Wilna cantor, Sirota's sponsor, with the young man in tow, who was as thin as a rail but well-groomed and wearing the latest fashion among artists — a long cape thrown over his shoulders. Sirota at that time was all of twenty-two years old, but due to his very slim appearance he looked much younger. No sprout of hirsute covering was discernable on his chin, although the first faint signs of a mustache were apparent. The two trustees looked the young sport over, taking his measure with undisguised disdain. That his appearance did not make a very favorable impression on the congregational officers was a fairly apparent conclusion judging by their facial expression.

When Soltz, glaring at him with his piercing eyes, came to and recovered from his very apparent disappointment, he broke the embarrassing tension, stammering out his first question which he directed to the local dignitary in a jocular vein, "Well, where did you leave the cantor? Oh, so this is the cantor? You mean to say that this is the cantor who aspires to the position in the great synagogue? is that so?" And turning to Sirota and addressing him directly, he asked, "Do you at least know who our last cantor was?" He said this sarcastically, since Cantor Kahan, aside from possessing outstanding musical qualities, was a very handsome man, a personality with a most imposing appearance. When he strutted down the street, people used to turn around to take another look at him and the by-passing peasants kissed his hand, just as they did that of their priests. "And do you, in general, have any idea," Soltz kept on lecturing him, gritting his teeth in a temper, "what kind of cantors have graced our pulpit? Have you heard about the Balebeysel, about Finesinger, Cooper, and

all the other famous masters? Well, do you really think that you can fill their shoes?"

Sirota kept quiet and just stood there, unable to get in a word edgewise, for Soltz kept on haranguing him. "And when did you arrive from Odessa? The night before? Do you know when the trains are leaving for Odessa?" Well, this was already too much. Now it was time for Sirota to answer him. He was unable to restrain himself any longer but still he quietly replied, "When I'll be ready to leave town, I'll get a timetable."

"Do you know that we have no choir now?" said Soltz.

"Well, in that case, I'll look for assistance to God Almighty," answered Sirota.

"You want to officiate at the Mussaf service, Sacharis, and Friday evening, too? Won't that be too much for a frail young man like you?" questioned Soltz.

Sirota could not take it any longer and burst out, "My dear Mr. 'Parness' [President], I came to see you, because you told my colleague, that you would be glad to see me. Now if you want to let me officiate on trial well and good. If not, it will be no tragedy. If you should like my services, then you will have done yourself a good turn, and if not, I'll surely have no recriminations against you. In either case, you won't be under any obligations to me whatever."

Hash, who up to this point, had not uttered a word, now took up the role of interrogator and began his own needling of the candidate by asking him, "Have you had a chance to see our synagogue? Have you seen the city? Do you know that Wilna is bigger than you?"

"You are mistaken," retorted Sirota, "I'm bigger than Wilna."

"Is that so?" said Hash, "In that case, it follows that you are a "langer" [long one — in Yiddish parlance - a fool or an idiot].

But Sirota let him have it in kind, "It does not mean at all that I am a 'Langer,' but sometimes I come up against 'lange' with whom I'm forced to deal."

Seeing that they had encountered a proud, conceited, self-confident individual, who was so sure of himself, that he considered himself even too big for Wilna, they softended. In a complete turnabout they decided that perhaps the young man was after all worthy of their further consideration.

"Well," said Soltz, "Sit down, young man." Up to this point, he did not even let on that he was aware that his visitors were standing. He added, "I'll have to call the sexton. You will officiate at the services this coming Sabbath."

Ever since Kahan had been removed from his post, the services at the synagogue were conducted by the sexton and the reader of the Torah, Reb Abraham Chayim Mohilever, a capable good "Baal Tefila" (reader of the prayers). In addition to his other good qualities, he was also authorized to practice in a Rabbinical capacity. He had "Smicha." But even though he was wearing several hats he was getting only one salary, and a meager one at that.

Reb Abraham Chayim arrived shortly thereafter and Reb Munye asked him, "How many applicants have so far given auditions?" "Fifteen down and many more to go," answered Reb Abraham Chayim. "Fifteen only? Well, meet the sixteenth. You will be good enough to cede the pulpit to the visitor from Odessa this coming Saturday," said Reb Munye.

In spite of having deigned to let Sirota show his mettle in front of the worshipers, Reb Munye, as well as the congregation, had reservations about the new candidate and remained highly skeptical. It was only natural. How could it have been otherwise, when nobody had ever heard of him?

'Well, well," people said, mockingly. "After so many disappointments things are at last looking up. We have a new contestant. Look who the invader is. Just look who came to conquer the great synagogue. Some sport from a tiny congregation in a side street of an Odessa suburb. Are we already scraping the bottom of the barrel?"

Even before he ascended the pulpit, the verdict was in. The people were heard to say, "He is definitely an 'also-ran,' out of the question as a serious contender. Besides, he is too young, a 'Tzootzick" [suckling]. They preferred older, more impressive looking cantors and he lacked even the appearance and popular image of one. They mumbled, "He is wasting his time and breath. But if he is so anxious to have an audition, pushes himself to the pulpit and insists on wasting his energy to no good purpose, straining his vocal cords to no avail, let him. Who cares? After having endured the screeching, grimaces and funny antics of fifteen 'Kalikes' [cripples] and 'Drongotches' [musical analfabets], listening to one more won't kill us."

How much Reb Munye thought of Sirota's chances can be gleaned from the fact that he did not even deign to give him the courtesy of coming to the service on Friday evening. His failure to show up rankled Sirota very much, ruined his mood and composure and had a depressing effect on his chanting.

The congregants were impressed by the quality of his voice, but they kept repeating and demanding, "Shtoff, Shtoff [material, matter - substance, content]. Maybe tomorrow you can give out with more 'Shtoff'." This was the advice volunteered by his newly-found well-wishers who sensed that he might prove to be the right man after all, if he would not rely entirely on his brilliant voice and if he also had the ability to interpret his material. They wanted him to make good and, therefore, urged him to deliver some worthwhile material at his next appearance.

Others teased him, hinting that he was through and consoled him by saying, "At least, you'll have the satisfaction of being able to boast that you officiated on trial in the great synagogue of Wilna. This in itself is a great privilege and honor, you know."

Sirota paid no heed to these remarks. He was pretty disgusted and was even toying with the idea of quitting then and there. Why go through the agony of another service? Maybe he ought to decline to perform the next day. But when he saw that Soltz did show up, he changed his mind.

He must show him what he was capable of. But the "Shacharis" service was nothing to brag about. The president sat opposite him with an inscrutable, bored expression on his poker face, which unnerved Sirota. As if Satan were determined to trip him, he was not able to produce a decent note from his throat, which felt like it was closed up with seven locks.

At intermission, during the reading of the weekly portion of the Bible, the cantor who had recommended him for the post burst into the room, where he was resting up and upbraided him, saying, "Man alive, what are you doing? You are embarrassing me no end. I won't be able to face people. Didn't I hear you? Don't I know that you have the ability? Why don't you come out with the goods? What are you saving it for? You are your own worst enemy. Come on, get going. You can still win the day with the "Mussaf." Show them what the real Sirota is like."

His manager's reproach and justified indignation had the effect of somehow shaking him up and strengthening his determination to see the thing through. In the course of the Shacharis service, he had warmed up his vocal chords and when it came time for him to continue with the Mussaf [supplementary] service, he felt as if an inexhaustible well of vocal and musical ideas had suddenly opened up. He was once again in full control and he sang with the utmost power and beauty.

As Sirota began to unload the real "shtoff" and shooting off flares, the worshipers were caught with their guard down and were seen to gape. Surprise was written all over their faces and astonishment mirrored in their eyes. What a sudden change! What a revelation! It was as though an entirely different cantor had ascended the pulpit. The audience was stunned by the new, mighty sounds, which filled all the corners of the giant auditorium and electrified the atmosphere, as if it had been struck by lightning. In less than an hour, the situation was completely reversed. Practically all the listeners made a somersault, figuratively, in their estimation of the young man, who was standing on the platform, showing off his wares in a steady stream of bomblike explosions, each of which hit home like bullseyes.

From the ice-cold, almost hostile mood and attitude toward the young applicant, who had the "Chutzpa" [gall and colossal nerve] to even dream of ever becoming the chief cantor of Wilna, the consensus of the public that was present suddenly turned into enthusiastic appreciation and boundless admiration for the wonderfuilly qualified cantor, who was endowed with such rare talents.

Even Reb Munye Soltz thawed. A completely changed man, he ran up to Sirota after the conclusion of the service, and with a broad smile lighting up his usually gloomy face, he pressed his hand warmly, congratulating him with the customary "Yasher Koach" [may your strength grow]. A great mob accompanied the cantor in the streets on his way to the house of the chief trustee where a reception "Kiddush" [sanctification of the Sabbath] was prepared and the people cried with boundless enthusiasm, "Yechi Hamelech" [Long Live the King].

Reb Shmooel Liptzer, the oldest and most respected "More Horooah"

(judge of the Rabbinical Court), who was considered an expert in cantorial matters and on whose judgment people used to put great reliance, voiced his opinion to all and sundry. "What a voice! What cantorial ability! What a Tefila [interpretation of prayer]! Since the 'Balebeysel' we haven't heard anything like it. OO-vah! OO-vah! [Oh, I can't get over it]"

That night, after bidding farewell to the departing Sabbath, he was invited to a conference with the trustees. The oldest trustee, Parness, who was reputed to have the distinction of being able to trace back his family tree all the way to King David, voiced a request by asking "Could you render us something appropriate?" Although he was tired, Sirota obliged by singing some lively chants to the texts of the Saturday night "Zemiros" [table songs]. There followed the second question, "Can you officiate with a choir?" He replied with a question, "Do you have a choir? I thought, Reb Munye, you told me that there was no choir." "Well, we'll get together some kind of a temporary choir, and we would like you to conduct the services next Sabbath assisted by the new ensemble."

The second round was very successful and created a veritable public furor. Interest in the candidate had risen to an unusually high pitch. People were laying siege to the synagogue court, eager to find out what was going on. What was the decision? Yes or no? Why the delay in getting down to brass tacks? But the trustees were in no hurry. "Yes, very nice," they told Sirota. "You made a hit with our members. But who are you? First, we must make inquiries and secure references from reputable rabbis, who know you. Before taking such a serious step, we have to make sure that there are no skeletons in your closet."

Sirota gave as a reference the name of Rabbi Pomerantz of Odessa, who replied promptly, stating that he knew Sirota to be a fine, decent, upright, young man, whose conduct was irreproachable and in complete compliance with Jewish religious law and prescribed behavior.

Well, that should have settled it. But there arose other obstacles. Some venerable and influential members raised the objection that he was too young. Whoever heard of entrusting the important task of representing one of the most prestigious Jewish communities of the world before the Father in Heaven to an inexperienced, immature fledgling in his early twenties? Reb Shmooel Liptzer countered the arguments of the opposing clique with ridicule, "What a serious defect! The bride is too beautiful. If his age is the only fault you can find, don't you worry. Before he'll have served under you a single year, you'll have given him so much trouble and heartache that he'll be able to apply to himself the famous words of Rabbi Elozor ben Azaryoh, 'I feel like a man of seventy'."

The trustees were not ready to come to any definite conclusion. They procrastinated, putting off the matter time and again. They made Sirota officiate in the regional synagogues of the different sections of Wilna. After all, the position was that of chief cantor of the entire city, and it was a lifetime position. It could not be dealt with lightly or impulsively. One more meeting and then another one. The trustees read to him the points of the constitution, stipulating the duties of the cantor. One: - he must attend

the daily services mornings and evenings. Two: - each and every day he must attend the study session and learn at least one page of "Gemoro" [Talmud]. In case, Heaven forbid, he does not know how, he should listen attentively to the Rabbi explaining the topic in question, until he'll get the drift of the scriptures. Three: - twice a year on the day preceding the first days of the months of Nissan and Elool, he was obliged to chant the service of Yom Kippur Kooton (little Day of Atonement). Four: - once a year, he must recite the Slichos [forgiveness] prayers at the synagogue of the "Chevra Kadisha" [the holy association of the buriers]. Sirota, even though bored by all these formalities, nevertheless nodded obediently, agreeing to abide by all the rules.

Finally, Sirota was given to understand that he was almost sure to be elected and could already consider himself the cantor of the great synagogue, but they could not as yet sign the contract officially. There were some holdouts, groups of members who thought that he had not as yet qualified sufficiently to the complete satisfaction of all. They insisted on going slowly and hold back for a spell the signing and sealing of an official agreement. The trustees' delaying tactics and the endless red tape at last got on Sirota's nerves. His patience exhausted, he gave them an ultimatum, "No more dilly-dallying for me. I demand an unequivocal answer. If you don't settle the matter here and now, I'm ready to board the train tomorrow and return to Odessa." His firm tone and the determined stand which he took produced the desired effect and hastened the final decision.

The actual reason for the protracted deliberations before arriving at a decision was, that a clique within the synagogue membership was committed to support the candidacy of another contestant, and was stubbornly determined to foil and prevent the election of Sirota, if necessary by trumped up charges. They would not stop at anything and were ready to employ any means to achieve their objective. They went so far as to invent a compromising story which they confidently believed would plant doubts in the minds of the people about the wisdom of engaging the latest entry in the contest. It was, of course, libelous and involved a streetwalker. It seemed spurious on the face of it, but after the scandalous experience with the former cantor, Kahan, they had learned the advisability of handling matters with scrupulous caution. It was of the utmost importance to make doubly sure that the cantor whom they selected and engaged for the post, be a God-fearing, observant Jew worthy of the trust.

A thorough investigation soon ascertained the sordid truth, that the loose woman who claimed to have had dealings with the newcomer to the city, was bribed to bring these charges. Under cross-examination, she finally admitted her guilt. The interrogating trustees and Rabbis also succeeded in eliciting from her the names of the despicable plotters, who sank so low as to be able to commit such a disgraceful act.

After the truth had thus emerged triumphantly like oil rising up to the surface of the water, the cantorial contract was signed and sealed and handed to Sirota at a festive gathering. It was for the term of one year, with

the stipulation that if after the termination of the trial year, the congregation had no reason for complaint and had no fault to find with the religious and moral conduct of the cantor, the agreement would be extended and would remain in effect for as long as he lived. This was the usual procedure with all the former cantors. Once confirmed, it was for ever.

Forever? Well, yes, as far as the congregation was concerned. But for the cantors, the eternal wanderers, the "forever" feature of their employment, which was so boastfully stressed and underscored by the trustees as a big boon and privilege for the lucky chosen one, meant very little and was of questionable value to him. Who wants to stay forever in one place, especially in the poor city of Wilna? Remain an eternal "Kabtzen" [poor devil]?

The cantors considered Wilna a very useful stepping stone, valuable springboard for an ambitious man from which to jump to higher spheres. Wilna was one of the biggest, if not the biggest, most prominent cantorial posts. It gave the incumbent considerable prestige and standing in the sacred profession, but financially it was not very rewarding. There were scores of much better paid positions. So the chances of a really famous cantor staying put in Wilna for the duration of his life were very slim indeed.

Furthermore, even from the viewpoint of the congregation, the life contract meant very little. Firstly, witness the case of Cantor Kahan and, secondly, if a congregation is determined to get rid of an unwelcome communal official, there are many ways of making it too hot for him to hold on to his job by force. Often it is quite unnecessary to fire an employee outright. All kinds of indirect means are available to bosses by which they can make the employee resign voluntarily.

The story goes that the famous Rabbi Reb Yankele Charif once came to Wilna and delivered a sermon, which made a very profound impression upon the devout and prompted the leaders of the community to offer him the post of Maggid (city preacher, the highest Rabbinical authority of Wilna, inasmuch as after the last spiritual leader Rabbi Shmuel, no official Chief Rabbi was ever elected). The visiting Rabbi thanked them for their confidence and asked for time to consider the matter. He promised to give them a definite answer the next day. When they returned on the morrow to find out whether or not he had decided to become their religious leader, they got their answer, but they did not relish it particularly.

"My dear fellow Jews," the sage informed them, dashing their hopes, "I'm indeed sorry, but I cannot help but turn down your kind offer." "What is the reason, dear Rabbi," they inquired, "Is it perhaps that the salary is not adequate? We can adjust it to meet your wishes. We are sure that it will be possible to secure consent for a sizeable raise at the plenary meeting of the membership." "Oh no," answered the Rabbi, "it isn't a question of money. But since you assured me that any connection of an official with the Wilna community is for life, I betook myself to the cemetery to look around and see how many of your former Rabbis and preachers are buried there. Why! Surely, I thought, I would find at least a

score of headstones of the great luminaries who have in the course of the past decades graced your pulpit! But I was in for a great disappointment. Curiously enough, my search was fruitless. I wasn't able to locate a single burial plot of a spiritual leader of your congregation. Where did all your elected-for-a-lifetime preachers disappear to? They must have fled to the four corners of the world, most likely for the reason that they couldn't stand any longer the great overwhelming loving care, honor and considerate gentle treatment which you showered upon them." The same thing applied to cantors and with even more justification.

But let us not be killjoys. This is not the time to dwell on such pessimistic thoughts. It would not be right to spoil the pleasure, joy and happiness of the just appointed Chief Cantor by implying that his lot and future in his new position may prove to be not as rosy as it seems now. Let us hope that the just concluded match will be eminently successful and will prove to be a permanent bond, which will unite the two contracting parties in an eternal tie. All the signs augur well and point to a very happy, bright future. Look at all the embracing and hugging that is going on. Just observe the affectionate way and manner in which the people express their adulation for the newly crowned hero, at the way they are carrying the cantor aloft in the palms of their hands, and yelling at the top of their voices "Yechi Hamelech" [Long Live the King]. It is indeed a merry, happy, heartwarming scene. It should only endure! "Halevaay" (let's hope).

They did not want to leave Sirota out of their sight and prevailed upon him to forget about returning home to Odessa. He had to defer to their wishes, although he had not brought along with him even the bare necessities for a prolonged stay. The congregation sent adequate funds to his wife for the expenses of moving, with an urgent request that she forthwith prepare to join her husband, together with their children and all their possessions. Meanwhile, a suitable habitation was acquired and furnished for the cantor and his family.

As is always the case, something that has been acquired after overcoming difficulties and handicaps is better appreciated. After such a hard ordeal, Wilna was relieved and breathed easier. With each additional service, Sirota's stature grew in the eyes of the congregation. It gradually discovered new admirable qualities in the young cantor. There was no question any more in anybody's mind that here was an extraordinarily endowed artist of God's grace.

"The 'Wilna Balebeysel' had arisen from his grave and had returned to his pulpit." This was the feeling among the exulting Jewish inhabitants of the city, who at that juncture (1897) numbered 63,996 out of a total population of 154,532, a pretty respectable Kehillah "Keyn Yirboo" (May they thrive and multiply).

CHAPTER 52

"MENDELE MOCHEYR SFORIM" GOT SIROTA OFF FROM MILITARY SERVICE

The governor of Wilna came often to the synagogue to hear Sirota — Religious concerts are successful — The Tzar's mother rewards the cantor — The reception for Dr. Herzl.

For having had the possibility to acquire as its cantor a young man of an age when normally he would have had to be a boarder of "Fonye" (the Tzar) and obliged to dwell and perform K.P. duties in barracks or armories, Wilna had to be thankful to our well-known classic writer Sholom Yaakov Abramovitch who attained universal fame under the *nom de plume* Mendele Mocher Sforim (bookseller). The "Zeyde" (grandfather), as he was called, was instrumental in having Sirota released from military service after he was recruited, taken into the army and after he had already served the "Batyushka" (dear little father) a short time.

Sirota once did him a favor by rendering a free service for his beloved institution and Mendele did not forget it. When the opportunity presented itself to return the favor to the cantor, he took advantage of it and he did it anonymously, even though nobody had approached him with a request to act in the matter. He took the initiative, when he saw that there was a possibility to accomplish something on Sirota's behalf and even the beneficiary himself did not know who it was that had helped him. Only years later at a banquet in honor of Mendele did Sirota find out by accident who it was that intervened on his behalf.

As is well known, Mendele was the principal of the largest Talmud Torah in Odessa. Yakowkin, Sirota's choir leader, was at the same time the musical director of Mendele's institution. Every year on Purim day, they used to arrange a gala festival, on which occasion the Megillah was read in the presence of the most prominent citizens of the Jewish community. One year, Yakowkin proposed to Mendele that he invite his cantor to participate because, as he expressed it, "To hear Sirota read the Megillah is worth ten rubles a ticket." But the Zeyde, apparently afraid to risk an embarrassing fiasco, insisted that he first must examine the cantor, and only when Sirota passed the test with flying colors did he let him read the Megillah.

When he learned that Sirota was taken into the army and the congregants of the Prikaztchikes Synagogue were inconsolable at the loss of their cantor and did not know who to turn to and what to do to effect his release from the iron grip of the military authorities, Mendele decided to do what he could to bring about his discharge.

He wrote a letter to his friend and great admirer, the great magnate, Abraham Greenberg, who was well thought of by high officials. He was on friendly terms with the influential members of the nobility, who were powerful in the highest circles.

He happened to be also well acquainted with the chief doctor of the regiment in which Sirota was serving, who had the deciding voice at the examination of recruits. A word from Greenberg to him usually brought results. The doctor was a great lover of music, and when he was told that among the soldiers of his regiment there was a great singer, he invited him to a party, which was held in his home in honor of the Christmas season. Sirota's songs were the highlight of the evening and earned him high praise from all who were present, at the shindig, among them many army doctors.

A few days later, Sirota was suddenly taken ill. After he spent a short time in the hospital, the chief doctor sent him home with an official document discharging him from the army on the grounds of physical disability.

Thanks to Greenberg's influence and partly also due to the charm of his voice, Sirota got rid of the uniform of Nicolaay, but the chief doctor came under suspicion and paid dearly for Sirota's entertainment which embellished his Christmas party. Some informer whispered into the ear of the commander of the Odessa Army Corps the charge that the young man's discharge was improperly arranged, and was done on the basis of a trumped up malady. As a result of the investigation which was ordered, the chief doctor was demoted. His benevolent act, inspired by his intention to promote the career of the young cantor, cost him his own.

Sirota arrived in Wilna in 1896 and for the next nine years he occupied the pulpit in the great synagogue of the city. He immediately proceeded to reorganize and bring up to date the formerly woefully neglected choir of the congregation. He succeeded in his efforts, in spite of all the difficulties which he encountered and in spite of the opposition of Reb Munye Soltz, who professed to have no use for choirs and leaders, to

whom he mockingly referred as the "shtekl dreyers" [stick swingers].

His first choir leader was Isaac Shlossberg (the son of the famous cantor, the lion-voiced Shlossberg, also known as Leibele Alookster). After him came Nathan Abramson, who in later years was a cantor in New York and in whose choir in Wilna, "Meyer'l the Soprano," the well-known musicologist, composer and choirmaster, Meyer Machtenberg, was one of the singers.

But the lustreful period of Sirota's Chazzanuth began only, when Leo Leow took over as his choir leader. A. M. Bernstein, the cantor of the choir synagogue in Wilna, who was the "shadchen" (matchmaker) of the so eminently successful match, writes, "It once occurred to the music critic M. Kipniss to compare the success of the different cantors with the success of racehorses. About Sirota he said that he could be compared to a horse with extra long legs who with one gallop can cover considerable territory. It's no wonder then that he arrives first at the goal, leaving the other nags far behind.

"I would add," writes Bernstein, "that the good racehorse needs also a good jockey in order to win. It was Sirota's luck, that he had an excellent jockey, Leo Loew, as a leader and adviser in his cantorial art, and a great share of the credit for Sirota's successes belongs to Leow."

Implied in Bernstein's appraisal seems to be the thought, that in his opinion in the success story of the Sirota-Leow combine the latter played the role of Svengali to the former's Trilby.

Well, you cannot blame the matchmaker, who engineered the association between them, for giving himself a pat on the back for having had the brilliant idea of recommending Leow for the post. But even if he may have somewhat exaggerated the importance of his protege and the size of the credit that was due him, it undoubtedly was considerable.

The Sirota-Leow combination was really something to behold. Leow commanded a choir of over fifty singers. Not all who stood under his baton in the synagogue took part in the singing. Some among them were "Statists," new recruits, still undergoing training and not yet ready for baptism by fire. They were not permitted to open their mouths. They were there to look, listen and learn. They were, so to say, in reserve.

Leow used to work a long time with a candidate before he graduated and was accepted as a full-fledged member of his choir, with full rights to begin singing in the synagogue. When he thought that his choir was at last ready to perform not only in the confines of the sanctuary but also before the general public outside of the walls of the synagogue, Leow decided to take an audacious step. He persuaded Sirota that they jointly should present a concert of prayers, psalms and folksongs in a concert hall.

The trustees of the congregation and a large segment of the membership received the news with alarm and shook their heads in strong disapproval. The pious Jews stormed in anger, "What do they think? To sing holy prayers for an audience of gentiles in a dance hall? Such a sacrilege! Blood will be spilled." Sirota and Leow were warned that they were playing with fire and were risking their positions. People threatened to bombard them

with a barrage of rotten apples and eggs.

But contrary to all expectations nothing untoward occurred. The concert turned out to be such an unqualified success and the gentile press printed such enthusiastic articles about the participants, that under the impact of the favorable reception the synagogue committee also changed its tune and instead of reproaching them for their action, they surprisingly asked Sirota and Leow to arrange another similar concert and to this time hire for that purpose the largest hall in the city, the "Baratzkoy" concert hall.

The report about the sensational success of these sacred concerts soon reached the communities of the neighboring cities and many of them like Grodno, Bialistok and Minsk invited them to also pay them a visit and repeat for them the programs which received such a warm reception in Wilna.

Sirota made also other innovations. At the request of his friends and admirers, he decided to revive an old custom, which had been initiated by a former cantor of Wilna, Chayim Lomzer, to receive and greet once a year the Queen Sabbath on her arrival with song and music.

Friday afternoon of the Sabbath when the portion of the Torah "Behaaloscho" was to be read, Chayim Lomzer, accompanied by his choir and a large orchestra, used to give a concert in the court compound of the synagogue building. They used to sing "Lecho Neranena," "Lecho Dodi" and other chapters from the Sabbath service. When it was announced that Sirota would sing in the court of the synagogue, masses of people poured in from all the surrounding streets, flooding the place. It was feared that mishaps might result as a consequence, such as had actually occurred in one instance on previous such occasions. They were, therefore, forced to cut out at least the participation of the orchestra, and henceforth only Sirota and his choir were heard on such occasions. This circumstance did, however, not appreciably reduce the density of the crowd, for not the orchestra was the main drawing card, but the cantor.

These public appearances made a great impression also on the gentile population and gradually more and more prominent city officials, noblemen, and high ranking military officers were seen at the synagogue, whenever Sirota conducted the services. All of them left singing the praises of the cantor and were highly pleased and grateful for the pleasure which his marvelous singing gave them.

In time, the reputation of the excellent Jewish cantor reached also the ears of the General Governor Sviatopolk-Mirsky, who one day advised the synagogue officials of his desire to make a visit to the holy place, to listen to the services of their cantor. The trustees were worried, excited and busy making special arrangements to receive the dignitaries with proper solemnity. They asked Sirota to prepare something special in honor of the high official and his retinue. "We should only, God forbid, not have to be ashamed," they said. The trustees needn't have worried. They most certainly did not have to bury their heads in shame, for Sirota made an extraordinarily strong and favorable impression upon the distinguished per-

sonage which fact soon became evident for all to see. From that day on, the governor did not miss a holiday service of Sirota's. The president of the congregation, Munye Soltz, usually stood at his side and explained the meaning of the prayers.

When the priests ascended to the estrade to pronounce the blessings, "Birchas Kohanim" the governor wanted to know why they closed their eyes and covered their faces with the prayer shawls over their heads and why the congregants turned away their faces so as not to look upon the priests. Reb Munye explained to him that it was the duty of the priests to bless every worshiper without exception and it had to be done by them sincerely and wholeheartedly. But what would happen if the "Cohen" (priest) would lift his eyes and his glance would fall upon an enemy of his? How would it be possible for him to include him too, wholeheartedly, in his blessing pronouncements? That was why he was forbidden to look upon anyone and no one in the congregation was allowed to look upon him. Only in this way were they able to concentrate entirely on blessing the whole congregation without distraction.

Another reason for the congregation turning away was, he said, that when the priests pronounce the blessing, God's Shechinah (glory) is present in the sanctuary and assisting them, as it is written, "Vesomu es shemi al beney yisroeil vaani avorcheim [the kohanim shall pronounce my name on the children of Israel and then I will bless them]. And to look into the face of the "Shechinah" is not only prohibited but dangerous as well.

One nice morning there was a knock on Sirota's door. It was the sheriff of Wilna, Shnitkin, a heavyset man, with the beard of a patriarch, and in his hand was an order from the chief of police to Sirota, to report immediately to the chancellery of the general governor. With the speed of lightning the news spread through the ghetto, "They have arrested our cantor. Who knows what kind of heinous crime they are going to accuse him of?" Great was the commotion and agitation of the masses. The president went to the Rabbi and together they went to the authorities to find out what they had against their cantor. No one knew. Rumors of gloom and doom were flying about. The pious Jews ran to the synagogue to pray, to say "Thilim," (King David's psalms) and thus try to avert the "Gezeyra" (decree) calamity, whatever it might be.

With his frightened heart pounding and his feverish mind searching for an explanation, Sirota, led by the sheriff, arrived at the headquarters of the governor, Sviatopolk Mirsky, who after greeting him amiably, was saying, "You know, Cantor Sirota, I heard you recently in the synagogue and enjoyed the services very much. I had no chance to thank you, as I had to leave before the conclusion of the service. I asked you over because I have a request. I hope you will not refuse me."

The city soon learned, what it was all about and the Jewish population breathed more freely. "It seems that our prayers and Thilim did help," boasted the pious Jews. No lesser personage than the Dowager Tsarina Maria Fiadorowna requested that the Jewish cantor give a concert for the benefit of the Insititution for the blind of Wilna which was her fa-

vorite charity and functioned under her gracious patronage and special protection.

How does the mother of the Tsar know about the cantor? The noblemen, who headed the institution and were influential in court circles, reported to her that the greatest attraction and drawing card would be the cantor of the synagogue and his choir. If a concert could be arranged with their participation, a large sum could be realized for the Queen Mother's favorite charity.

The Jews of Wilna were in seventh heaven. "Such an honor! Her Majesty is dependent on the services and good will of our cantor! You know they are talking about him in the palace of the Tsar. They will soon invite him to St. Petersburg to give concerts for the Batyushka, the Tsar Nikolai. 'Yeshuoth Venechumoth' (help, deliverance and consolation) will yet come to the Jewish people as a result of the favorable turn of events and all this thanks to our wonderful cantor." Sirota's stock soared immensely in the eyes of his congregants.

The concert which was held in the largest concert hall of the city was a grandiose, gala affair, Sirota arranged the program according to the directions of the Governor. The compositions that caught his fancy when he heard them in the synagogue — "Retzey," "Adon olom," "Adoshem Adoshem" — found favor with the nobility of Wilna too, who, decked out in the latest fashion creations, attended the Queen Mother's affair. At the conclusion of the concert, the Governor warmly congratulated the cantor, declaring that he never would have believed that the Jewish ghetto could produce an artist of such a high calibre. Finally, he read a personal commendation from the Queen Mother addressed to Sirota and presented him with a gold watch with an engraved, grateful dedication from Her Majesty.

This Governor Swiatopolk Mirsky soon thereafter became a very important personage. He was appointed to the Cabinet as Minister of the Interior. The talk in Wilna was that this was his reward for having arranged the successful concert at the request of the Tsarina mother. He was never a Jew-baiter. With his frequent visits to the synagogue, he won the hearts of the Jews. Although the general attitude of the Russian government toward the Jewish population was unfriendly and even hostile, his appointment to the important cabinet post awakened new hope, that the new Minister of the Interior would bring about a radical change for the better in the attitude of the rulers of the Tsar's realm.

On the day when the Governor left Wilna, all the rabbis, cantors, trustees, and a great throng of the Jewish population accompanied him to the railroad station in a large procession and carrying torchlights. The station building was besieged by police and militia, a large delegation of priests was waiting to be ushered in to his presence but the Governor gave precedence to the Jewish delegation. Sirota chanted in his honor a "Mi Sheberach" (He Who Blessed) which touched him very much. He took very warm leave from the cantor, repeating again what a deep impression his services on the festivals and holy days and particularly on "Kol

Nidrey'' always made on him. The words were very nice and friendly, but the great hopes which the Jewish masses pinned on the new Minister for the improvement and alleviation of their situation very soon faded away. It proved to have been a mirage. Nothing changed. The system went on as heretofore with its discrimination against the helpless minority. As the old Russian proverb so poignantly puts it: ''The dream was beautiful, but the awakening was 'passkudneh'.''

That the Jews could expect little from the Russian government and for that matter from any government and that the direction of their fate was in their own hands was continually preached by the then considered Utopian ''dreamer'' Theodore Herzl. In the year 1903 on his return from a very disappointing conference with the Jewbaiting Premier Plehwe, Dr. Herzl stopped off in Wilna. He was very depressed. In Wilna, he came for the first time face to face with the burning Jewish problem in its stark naked reality, its poverty and outlawry and rightlessness. Here he learned firsthand of the intolerable conditions that were the background of the tragic eruption of the preceding year.

In the spring of 1902, Vilna was rocked by the assassination attempt by a Jew named Hirsh Lekert upon the Gubernator of Vilna, Von Wahl.

The Jewish laborers of the city were celebrating the first day of May with a demonstration against the brutal suppression of their freedom and human rights by the openly antisemitic regime. A great number of demonstrators were arrested and on the direct order of the governor tortured like the worst criminals.

A group of the ''Bund'' thereupon decided to take revenge for the undeserved brutal treatment accorded their incarcerated comrades and Hirsh Lekert was given the assignment.

However he bungled the job. The gubernator was merely wounded, the assailant was unable to make good his escape. He was tried, found guilty and sentenced to death.

A similar case occurred in Odessa when a laborer by the name of Stillman shot and wounded the chief of the police. That in the aftermath of these assassination attempts still more repressive measures were applied against the Jewish population goes without saying.

The ''Tzedoko Gedola'' (great charity) arranged a banquet in Herzl's honor in the summer villa of a trustee, on the outskirts of the city. The visitor declined a big festive reception, which had been planned, for the reason that sadness and despair plagued his soul. Sirota and Leow presented two psalms of David. Herzl listened attentively. His face showed the strain. He was pale and apparently very tired. His eyes burned with a strange, magical prophetic fire. he relished the consoling words of the ancient Jewish king. He kept on asking for more, as if the prophetic visions of David were a balm that brought healing to his wounded heart. And repeatedly he pressed warmly the hands of the two artists who had succeeded in lifting his spirits. His face shone as if their songs, heralding a brighter Jewish future, had infused a new soul and a new hope in him and had given him, who was at that time already a very sick man, new energy

for his difficult historic mission on behalf of his beloved people. Alas, it was not to be. A cruel fate countermanded his great plans. His wounded, big heart gave out and he passed away in the following year.

CHAPTER 53

WHEN GERSHON SIROTA BECAME THE CANTOR OF THE TLOMATZKA STREET SYNAGOGUE OF WARSAW

The Wilna Jewish community brings a lawsuit in the religious court against the cantor for accepting a call to the post of Yekaterinoslav — Baron Guinzburg tried to lure Sirota to St. Petersburg.

The years which Sirota spent in Wilna were the happiest period of his life. There he was in his element among congenial folk, people with whom he was able to communicate and in whose company he felt at home. They took as good care of him as does a hen of her brood. He was to his flock as precious as the apple of their eye.

Even Munye Soltz, who in the beginning was distant, cold and reserved toward him, thawed in time and ended up becoming one of his most intimate friends and confidantes. On one occasion, on the festival of Purim, when it is customary to exchange gifts, he even went so far as to send Sirota as a "Shlachmoonas" present a life insurance policy for fifteen thousand rubles made out to the cantor, with the premium paid up. When the pleasantly surprised Sirota profusely thanked him for this generous token of his regard, he shrugged off the matter as nothing more than his obligation. "I had to do it for your security," he said, adding with a sly smile, "As long as I am Parness [trustee] you are safe, but you can never tell what may happen. One nice day they may strip me of my job and you will be out in the cold." He need not have worried about that eventuality. Nobody sought to replace him. He remained chief Parness (the equivalent

of President) until his death.

And Soltz knew very well, that even in the unlikely event that he'd be ousted, this would in no way affect Sirota's hold on the affection of the membership. Rather would it seem that the gift was intended as a means of tying the cantor more firmly to Wilna.

Sirota was a "nash Brat," one of the boys, who loved to mingle with the crowd and to spend his spare time in genial companionship with friends. The circle of his diehard, devoted fans, that swarmed around him like bees around flowers, grew larger by the day. His home became the "Beys vaad", the gathering place for — I was by force of habit almost about to add the word that usually goes with "Beys vaad" — "Lechachomim" (for wise men). But, on second thought, how can one apply such a characterization to the motley group of "melomans" (music lovers) that used to meet at Sirota's home? After all, where lies the "wisdom" or even the common sense in deserting one's business place, office or job, not to mention one's family and hang around the cantor's house solely for the sake of a chance to hear some chanting of liturgical songs? As was to be expected, the wives of these constant followers of his came to Sirota with their complaints, berating him bitterly for undermining their marriages, the peace of their home life, since on account of him their husbands were neglecting their businesses and professions, their mates and offspring, to the detriment of all concerned.

Poor Sirota was, of course, the innocent target of the blame heaped on his head by the distraught females. He himself would have been only too glad to see this incessant flow of uninvited guests to his house abate. He often wished they would go home and leave him alone. He longed for some privacy, a quiet interlude free of interference from outsiders. But what could he do when he was besieged by these well-meaning, loyal kindred spirits? He surely could not throw them out of his house. They all had some axe to grind and came to him with a request of some kind or other. There were those who wanted Sirota to listen to them sing, hoping to join his chorus. Others thought that they possessed sufficient talent for becoming cantors and wanted him to teach them music and the art of liturgical chants. To listen to everybody, to answer them, and to remain noncommital, required no mean touch of diplomacy.

There was, for instance, the case of Rabbi Shmuel Luptzer, the oldest religious authority in the Wilna of that period, who was pushing eighty but nonetheless in full possession of his mental faculties. He was also a very shrewd and wise dignitary, who by virtue of his superior intellect was the generally recognized, most influential leader of the Jewish community. One day he invited the cantor to pay him a visit. Upon entering his study, Sirota found the anteroom full of people, parties to disputes submitted to the religious court, waiting to be called into the inner sanctum for disposition of their lawsuits. But upon being told that Sirota had arrived, the rabbi ordered that he be shown in at once to this private quarters. Forgetting all about the complainants and defendants who were waiting impatiently, he greeted his visitor by regaling him with the singing of "Vehaviyainu

lesholom" (Bring Us in Peace) as he had heard it chanted by the "Wilna'er Balebeysel."

The Balebeysel was Reb Shmuel Luptzer's cardinal weakness. He had a soft spot in his heart for that phenomenal cantorial wizard, whom he had yet had the privilege of knowing personally and hearing sing. "Oh," he sighed with overflowing sentimental, nostalgic remembrance, "If you only would have heard him! What can I tell you? It is impossible to describe. The heart melted under the impact of his voice. Such unbelievable sweetness the world has never known. One could not listen to him too long, because after a while you were so overcome by the celestial sounds, that you were likely to faint." The veteran rabbi went on in this nostalgic vein, pouring out his innermost, venerating feelings about the idolized "Balebeysel" until at last he came to the point. Suddenly changing the subject, he was saying to Sirota, "I have a proposition to make to you. I am somewhat bashful about asking you, but it has been on my mind for some time. Would you be willing to teach me how to write and read music? And meanwhile, would you please write down for me in notes the Balebeysel's composition of 'Vehaviyainu lesholom'?" He looked with an embarrassed, quizzical smile at the surprised cantor, anxiously awaiting his reaction. Sirota was caught off guard by the unlikely request, but quickly regained his bearing. "I would consider it on one condition, Rabbi," he at last managed to find the words. "You'll have to solemnly promise me, that after I will have given you these lessons you won't turn around and set out to compete with me in the cantorial field."

It was generally held that a position once filled at the central congregation of Wilna was for life. But there is nothing eternal and permanent in human society. Everything, may it be the best and most perfect, must some day come to an end. The great synagogue of Wilna may indeed have been, as Sirota himself called it, "the best conservatory ever" but for how long a stretch can one stay put in a conservatory, even the very best one? There perforce must be a time limit even for that. There comes, after all, a time to graduate.

That fateful moment, when Sirota might conclude that he had already learned in Wilna all there was to learn and might decide that he was ready to leave their combination conversatory-synagogue was dreaded by the Jews of Wilna. They were fearful and most concerned, that the time was not far off when that might happen. They had had some intimation to that effect. They knew that Sirota was being wooed by many congregations. Those communities offered him better paying positions with considerably more favorable terms than he enjoyed in their midst. Of course, none of these posts enjoyed the moral prestige of Wilna. But then this solitary fact might not weigh very heavily in Sirota's consideration and the prosaic pecuniary benefits might tip the scale in favor of the "moneybags." It was quite conceivable that he would leave them.

The trustees, aware of the possibility, kept wondering about it and frequently would discuss it among themselves. Munye Soltz, who as the chief trustee and chairman of the board, was usually the spokesman for

the august body, summed up his point of view thus, "Sirota would want to quit his post? That would not disconcert us. On the contrary, he would have our wholehearted blessing and best wishes. Reb Chayim Oyzer (chief rabbi) would contemplate leaving us for another post? Why not? With the greatest of pleasure! Conversely, however, should any of the small fry, alley-kloiz rabbis want to leave town, or a pedestrian third class 'baal tefilah' reader-cantor of a small house of prayer would wish to move to a post in another town, under no circumstances would I stand for it. I would much rather raise his salary to whatever level would satisfy him so as to make him stay put. You want to know why? Elementary, my dear Watson. Sirota and Grodzensky [Chayim Oyzer] are famous and Wilna does not have to be ashamed of them. Wherever they might go, they will reflect honor on us. We'll be able to take pride in their being called 'Rabbi of Wilna' or 'Chief Cantor of Wilna'. The lowly, insignificant congregational nonentities of ours, on the other hand, would only harm our reputation if they should venture to other localities. People would wonder and patronizingly muse, 'Is this, too, a product of Wilna?' We would lose face and prestige. That's why as far as they are concerned, it is better to keep them here."

It was an ingeniously contrived "Pshet'l" — a hardly logical "galgen humoristic" (grim humour) explanation and reasoning by the Talmudically-sharpened mind of a shrewd Wilna gabbay. The other trustees laughed at the funny exposition of their colleague, but their laughter was tinged with anxiety at the prospect of losing their beloved cantor, no matter how much honor he would reflect upon them in the eyes of the outside world.

That they had indeed something to be concerned about and that there were straws in the wind that pointed to the possibility of Wilna losing its cantor, became evident, when Baron Guinzburg arrived in town to participate in the memorial service honoring the famous sculptor Antokolsky who was a native of Wilna. Mark Antokolsky was born in 1842 in the Wilna ghetto to poor parents and passed away in 1902. Stassov wrote about him: "He is the greatest sculptor of our age, who refused to follow fame at the price of sacrificing his Jewish identity." At a mass meeting in Cooper Union called to protest the pogroms in Russia, the venerable diplomat Andrew White who in the 1870's was the American ambassador to the court of Tzar Alexander II and who presided, in his opening address declared that Russia produced three great personalities whom he was privileged to know: Lev Tolstoy, Mark Antokolsky and the prime minister, Count Sergey Witte.

Sirota took part in the ritual, reciting an appropriate psalm and chanting the usual lament, and the dirge of "Eil moley rachamim [Lord, who is full of compassion]."

Sirota's marvellous voice and cantorial artistry so strongly impressed the Baron, that he decided to proffer him the cantorial post of his congregation. When Sirota to his disappointment evinced scant interest in Guinzburg's proposition that he exchange his present pulpit for that of St. Petersburg, the Baron made a determined effort to convince the cantor

that his presence in the metropolis of the Russian empire was much more important than in the provincial town of Wilna and that for him personally also the transfer to Petersburg would mean a quantum leap forward in his career not only as far as status is concerned but in regard to financial reward as well.

Seeing that even his most persuasive arguments failed to win over the reluctant cantor, Guinzburg in a switch of strategy, hoping to gain his end via indirect approach, suggested to Sirota that he come to St. Petersburg for the purpose of giving a recital which the Baron would sponsor. This offer proved to be more to the liking of the luke-warm cantor.

The concert which attracted the elite of the Jewish community of the metropolis was a gala event and a great triumph for the cantor from Wilna. The famous opera star Davidov, the leading tenor of the imperial opera company of St. Petersburg, rushed over to the cantor, enthusiastically embracing and kissing him, at the same time giving expression to his great admiration by remarking to all the assembled artists: "If I had but half of Sirota's leonine voice, Caruso would be of no account compared to me".

Baron Guinzburg had arranged a festive reception in honor of the guest star, who had so completely charmed his audience. At this sumptuous banquet to which the most prominent invited guests sat down after the concert, the subject matter that was uppermost in the host's mind was once again broached. Sirota was importuned to give serious consideration to their offer, that he accept the post of cantor at the pulpit of the Guinzburg synagogue.

Sirota, however, made no commitment. All the Baron and hs fellow trustees succeeded in getting from the visitor was a promise to weigh the matter, talk it over with his wife, and then give them his answer.

But between you and me and the lamppost not for one moment did he contemplate complying with their request. All the pomp and glitter of high society to which he was exposed during his sojourn in the capitol city, could not persuade him to change his mind. The formal and cold atmosphere, the assimilationist climate, which he encountered in the Jewish circles at St. Petersburg did not in the least appeal to him. He preferred to stay on with the warm hearted "Yiddish" Jews of Wilna, in whose midst he felt at home and fully appreciated.

The staunch loyalty of his congregants was the one most cherished asset, about the genuineness and rocklike solidity of which he never had any doubts. However, there came a time when a conversation which he chanced to overhear made him inclined to suspect that even this for a long time held strong conviction of his may have been a mere delusion.

For a man who had been lulled into feeling completely and unshakably secure in his post by the constant gushing flow of rapturous expressions of praise, it must've come as a rude jolt to discover that behind the facade of hearts and flowers and flattery there often was also lurking deprecating, disparaging criticism and detrimental, cynical intrigue.

How he stumbled upon this disheartening evidence? It happened at

the time, when he was laid up with a severe case of bronchitis which incapacitated him, disabling him from performing his duties for several weeks. One day as he entered the synagogue he overheard two prominent members of the congregation discussing him. When he became aware of the drift of the conversation, he cocked his ears to better catch the spoken words. The pair had not noticed his presence, let alone that he was eavesdropping, so they gave frank expression to their innermost thoughts. "It's too bad about Sirota," said Berl to Schmerl, "but it is his tough luck. The public cannot be penalized. Time and tide waits for no man. If he is ill and cannot officiate, he is out and we'll have to look around for a new cantor."

He was astounded to hear such cynical talk. It was a sobering revelation, additional proof how fickle people are. It confirmed the sad truth, that a cantor may have a hundred times thrilled his audience; if he should fail once or twice to deliver the goods his excellent track-record is forgotten, the public turns it's back on him and is looking for a new face to replace its recent favorite.

It was a galling experience for Sirota and he vowed to quit his post at the first opportunity. He did not have to wait very long for it to present itself. This time it was the Jewish community of Yekaterinoslav which was tempting Sirota and offering him the cantorial position on a silver platter. Under normal circumstances he would've dismissed this proposition too out of hand, just as he had ignored many others in the past. But in his present mood of pique he was receptive and answering the call, he demonstratively left for Yekaterinoslav, ostensibly for the avowed purpose of closing the deal and tying the knot with the congregation of that city.

Their cantor's puzzling action caught the Jews of Wilna by surprise. Speculation was ripe among the apprehensive populace. Has he really the serious intention of leaving them? Why would he consider transferring to the provincial, insignificant city, when he shot down trial balloons from much more prominent, larger and richer communities?

Soon the rumor swept Wilna that Sirota had struck out in Yekaterinoslav, that his audition did not go over. As unbelievable as this sounded, it gained general credence in the circles of his devotees, because they so fervently hoped that it was true. Sirota's quick return to Wilna seemed to bear out the theory, that having failed in his mission, the disappointed cantor hurried back to safeguard his present position.

No sooner did he reach town, than he went to see Munye Soltz, who greeted his cantor with a wily wry smile and sly reassuring and consoling words, "I hear that you had some disappointing experience. Still and all," he said in a condescending, patronizing voice, "you ought not take it to heart nor feel humiliated or degraded. In our eyes you have not lost stature one bit. A cantor is like a wife. It pleases her loving husband if people find her charming and beautiful, but he wouldn't want anybody to take her away from him".

The ironic stance assumed by the head of the congregation and the soothing manner in which he tried to pour healing salve on his imaginary

wounds greatly amused Sirota and without a single word of reply he drew out a document from the inner pocket of his coat and handed it to Soltz.

"What is this?" wondered the latter, taken aback by the ironic smile that lit up the cantor's countenance. "Oh! Only a contract" replied Sirota calmly. "I signed up with the Yekaterinoslav congregation." The funniest ironic aspect of the whole matter and the most galling to the chief trustee was the fact that on the dotted line of the contract he found the signature of his nephew. The news spread like wildfire. It shocked and rocked the whole Jewish community, which had been lulled into the belief that the danger of losing their beloved cantor had passed. The new turn of events cast a shadow of deep gloom over the city. It was unthinkable that Wilna would stand idly by and let any other city lure away their cantor.

A general clamor went up, urging the leaders of the community to leave no stone unturned to bring about a reversal of the threatening defection of Sirota. "We can not allow this to happen" was the unanimous tenor of the mood of the people.

Preventive measures calculated to mollify the cantor were taken. An urgent meeting of the board of directors voluntarily voted him a considerable raise in salary without even having waited for him to request it. A motion was adapted expressing the deep regret of the trustees about the slanderous rumor, which had been circulated around town regarding his alleged fiasco in Yekaterinoslav.

Sirota was bombarded with pleas. The most influential personalities humbled themselves before him and almost prostrated themselves to his feet, importuning him to stay on. They implored him: "How can you find it in your heart to administer such a painful blow to the great masses of your admirers, who are idolizing you?"

Being essentially a softie he was deeply touched by the great outpour of love and appreciation and he began to have second thoughts about the advisability of exchanging such a prestigious position, as Wilna no doubt was, with a commonplace post in a city like Yekaterinoslav. Soberly weighing now the pros and cons, he already regretted his hasty decision. But how to get out of his commitment, that was the problem.

He repeatedly did put off, under one pretext or another, his departure for Yekaterinoslav, until that congregation became suspicious that the cantor is playing a delaying game in an effort to wiggle himself out of their grasp.

They countered by dispatching a committee of trustees including also a lawyer to Wilna for the purpose of finding out what the real reason for the cantor's stalling was and to get him to live up to the terms of his contract without further delay.

Upon arrival in the city they found their worst suspicions confirmed. They learned first hand the unpleasant truth. Wilna won't let the cantor leave and neither is the cantor very eager to depart. But of what account can all that be when they had a signed contract, black on white, which obligated the cantor to render his services to their congregation?

All their arguments having fallen on deaf ears, the committee felt

itself obliged to appeal to the rabbinical court to put the matter on the agenda of a "Din Torah" (law suit) to be decided in accordance with the tenets of the Torah.

Three "Dayanim" (religious judges) were designated by the Rabbinate of Wilna to hear the case. For three consecutive days they were grappling with the problem. After carefully weighing the evidence, Wilna seemed to be in the precarious position of having drawn the shorter end and the higher, lighter side of the scale.

Knowing full well that a decision in favor of Yekaterinoslav would infuriate the whole community of Wilna and evoke violent demonstration, the court, in case it were obliged to find agains Wilna was making ready to transfer the trial sessions to Yekaterinoslav.

The judges were in a quandary. Finally a way out of the dilemma was hit upon by one of the Rabbis. "Let's ask the cantor," he proposed, "what he would prefer. After all, it will be he, who'll have to live with what our decree will direct."

As expected, Sirota did cast his vote in favor of Wilna and the scale thereby having been tipped in its direction, so also went the verdict of the court. Needless to say that there was joyous celebration and dancing in the streets of the city as if they had scored a great victory over an enemy who tried to rob them of their most precious possession, as if the danger of a great disaster had been hanging over their heads like a Damocles sword and miraculously in the nick of time it had been averted.

As a consequence of the favorable judgement handed down by the court, the Jews of Wilna were destined to have the good fortune of enjoying the cantorial artistry of Sirota for an additional short period. After the hectic days of the Yekaterinoslav episode, he did not any more give even the slightest thought to the idea of leaving Wilna.

That Sirota chose to stay on in Wilna and refused to be tempted by much more lucrative positions that were offered him, was largely due to the great influence which Munye Soltz had over him. A deep intimate and abiding friendship bound him to that otherwise aloof, gruff and sour man and as long as Soltz was at the helm of the religious institutions, Sirota would not budge.

When Soltz passed away however, and another "Dozer" (president) was chosen to fill the vacancy, the magnet that held and bound him to Wilna was gone.

With Munye Soltz he had a unique, cosy father-and-son-like personal relationship. Toward the new administration he did not feel the same allegiance and obligation. Neither did they show him the same brand of tender consideration. Slowly but surely he began to get used to the idea that it was perhaps high time for him to make a change and when just at that juncture he happened to receive a call from the Tlomatzka congregation of Warsaw it found him in the right receptive mood, ready for a new adventure.

The Tlomatzka synagogue counted among its membership the elite Jewish 400 of the Polish capital, the "who is who" of Warsaw. Connected

with this religious institution were aristocrats, millionaires, bankers, great landowners, possessors of steel mills, of oil companies, coal mines, copper mines, factories and chain stores.

The synagogue was a citadel of assimilation, where reigned the motto: "MI ZSIDZSI TEGO KRAYU" (we are Jews of this fatherland). During the whole year these high stationed magnates could not be seen in the House of God. Only on the high holidays did they remind themselves, that they are "Israelites of the Mosaic persuasion" (so called).

They never had a great cantor and they did not even try to get such a one, not for the reason that they could not afford such a luxury, but because they wanted to have a "modern" religious service, without frills or artistic embellishing ornaments.

The people who regularly were attending the devotional sessions did not necessarily share the view of the big-shots. As a matter of fact the taste of the great majority of the congregants, who used to fill the sanctuary at the religious services, ran in just the opposite direction. They would've very much liked more traditional and artistic liturgical chants. But these were largely outsiders who were not even members of the congregation and had no say in the matter.

Characteristic of the attitude that was prevailing in the chambers of the high and mighty of the Tlomatzka bastion is the case of Yaakov Bachman, who once came to the great synagogue of Warsaw for an audition.

His graceful chanting of the prayers made a deep impression on the congregants, who vociferously demanded that the famous cantor be at once appointed to the post. But their clamor availed them nothing. The banker, Hendrique Nathanson categorically rejected their demand, giving as his reason for the rebuff: "The synagogue needs a cantor, not an acrobat."

Of course since that time conditions have undergone great changes. The great stream of exiled Russian Jews, who were uprooted from their well-established, long-entrenched homes near the Kremlin by the "Ukaz" (order) of "Banishment from Moscow" and were slung over by the capricious vagaries of fate to the shores of the "Wiszlo" (Vistula) where they pitched their tents to start a new life, have brought in with them a new vibrant spirit, infused new blood and a fresh breath, triggering a renaissance in the stagnant waters of the atrophied, jellied and anachronistic community life of Warsaw.

For several decades Gritzhandler occupied the cantorial "Omud" (altar) of the Tlomatzka synagogue. The ritual was set, standard and rigid.

No deviation from it was permitted without special Rabbinic and ritual committee approbation. Year in, year out, the same monotone, droning, church-like chants were the vogue in that house of prayer.

Now that he had become old and too feeble to continue in his post, he was pensioned and the search for a replacement was on. From among the aspirants the solons picked Cantor Saratov, who however did not last long.

With his Bohemian style comportment and his flashy attire of a sporty dandy he did not fit into the aristocratically proper, formal reverent atmosphere of the Tlomatzka synagogue.

He would arrive for the Sabbath services clad in a green jacket, white pants and red tie. The effect on the dignified trustees was not unlike that of the red cloth of the matador on the bull. It became increasingly evident that his days in the post were numbered. When on top of his unseemly conduct he also had a serious quarrel with the assistant cantor, Tchiz, whom in his rage he assaulted, and injured, his goose was cooked and he was summarily relieved of his position.

This was the signal for the newcomers, who in the course of the years had infiltrated from Russia and were generally known by the connotation "LITVACKES" (which in most cases they were not) to organize and set in motion a campaign with the aim of urging the leading lights of the synagogue to this time engage a great and famous cantor.

The people have had their fill of the Gritzhandler and Saratov brand "German" style dry and cut liturgy. They were sick and tired of the uninspiring church-like chants, that had been served up to them for so long. They wanted to hear a "heymish" davenen (a religious service like the one which they heard from the old fashioned cantor of their hometown) with fervor and ardor, with feeling and cantorial artistry.

Clear and loud rang out their voices, their piercing sound penetrating even into the paneled walls of the Tlomatzka edifice, where sat the policy makers. The "street" demanded a voice in the selection of the new cantor. What it longed for was a big-name "Chazzan" with a beautiful voice and tradition-true interpretation of the age-old psalms and prayers. A "leitisher" (prominent personable) Chazzon was needed for the very "leitish" (prominent) Tlomatzka synagogue.

By that time, twenty aspiring candidates had already auditioned for the post and all of them unsuccessfully. The reaction of the audience to their performances was in each and every case rather cold and negative. None of them evoked a particularly enthusiastic response. Then someone brought a phonograph record to Yan Berson, the president of the congregation, requesting that he listen to it. "Velmozni Pan Berson," he told him, "this is a recording of a young cantor, who is being lavishly praised by all who have heard him." The powerful head of the religious association nodded approval. The platter was turned on and a phenomenal voice issued from the grooves. The faces of all the listeners present in the room lit up. What they had just heard made a profound impression on them. "What a voice," someone said. "What an accomplished artist," was the opinion expressed by others. There was, however, also one dissenting note. "But Panye Prezeshe [Mr. President]", remonstrated a killjoy, "he is a Litvak [Lithuanian]." The Polish upper classes considered the Lithuanians an inferior breed, an undesirable caste.

"Oh, Bozse moy [my God]. What a pity! Na Chortom [to the devil]" the old Berson bemoaned this revelation with a crooked grimace and apparent disgust. "Isn't it terrible! Whenever you find something worthwhile,

upon scratching the surface and probing underneath, invariably it turns out to be of Lithuanian origin. Perchance we might still be able to find someone suitable, who would not necessarily have to be a Litvak."

The beautiful mighty voice, the artistic sound that issued from the record was forgotten. The assimilationist ruling clique tried their utmost to veto the selection of the young cantor with the sensational voice, but to no avail. The word got around, that the leaders were going to sabotage the acquisition of the best qualified cantor, purely on the grounds of his unpalatable (to their taste) origin. The common folk organized an opposition to the stubborn leadership that was so unresponsive to public opinion and lined up their solid support in favor of Sirota. "If he was good enough for Wilna, he will be still better for Warsaw" became their slogan. They were determined to make their voices heard and to push energetically for the serious consideration of their viewpoint.

A committee was selected, headed by the prominent communal activists: Joseph Levitte and A. Frumkin to push their demands, brook no delaying tactics and bring pressure to bear on the recalcitrant leadership to let the people hear Sirota and judge for themselves. They enlisted also the support of well-known public personalities like Yaacov Dineson, the prestigious writer who dispatched a letter to Sirota urging him to make public his candidacy for the post.

Regardless of their prejudiced private opinion, the high and mighty of the congregation were obliged to yield and extend an invitation to the chief cantor of Wilna. The rest is history. He came, he saw, he conquered. Well, it was not all that easy. In between seeing and conquering, he had to do some additional vocal exercises. But what did a little singing matter to that iron-throated Litvak. The sample which he gave at the altar of the Tlomatzka Synagogue was so convincing and overpowering, that even the Panye Prezeshe and his associates had to admit that he towered head and shoulders over every conceivable rival, with his breathtaking, heroic, vocal equipment and that it was no contest. He had won them over decisively and he was elected unanimously to the vacant post. The year was 1905 and the entire Jewish community of the Polish megalopolis joined in toasting and acclaiming the hero of the day, the newly elected chief cantor of Warsaw.

But while this was a red letter day for the Jews of the Polish capital, it cast a gloomy shadow over the mood that prevailed in the ranks of the staunch fans of Sirota in the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" when the news broke that their idolized "chazzan" was getting ready to desert them. They raised loud hues and cries demanding immediate action to prevent such a "Disaster," for that was what it amounted to in their view, a calamity of the first order. Taken aback by the surprising development, Wilna mobilized all its leading personalities, who enjoyed high standing in the councils of the Jewish community and in whom Sirota had full confidence, assigning to them the mission of intervening with the cantor and using their influence to make him give up the absurd idea of quitting his post.

When the highly-regarded laymen-confidantes of Sirota failed to per-

suade him to alter his course, they enlisted the help of the clergy to bring the weight of their authority to bear on their religious associate. The rabbis readily agreed to try to apply delicate pressure on their colleague in the service of the Lord. They invited Sirota to a conference. "We heard," they began the conversation, "that you contemplate leaving Wilna. What happened? What is the motive that would induce you to take such an illogical step? Is it a question of money? If so, maybe we could mediate in the matter. We are confident that we would be able to work out a settlement that would fully satisfy your just requirements." With all due respect to the rabbinical dignitaries, however, Sirota was noncommittal and skirted the issue. His meeting with the sages ended on an inconclusive note. They apparently had not succeeded in averting the impending "danger."

So other prestigious organizations took up the challenge. One after another they went to work, dispatching delegations and committees to their beloved cantor, importuning him: "Have a heart and do not break ours by deserting us." But there was nary an indication that Sirota was vacillating and might after all yield to the fervid appeals of the populace, that were bombarding him from all directions. His mind, it seems, was made up and all requests bounced off him without making a dent in the armor of his firm resolve.

Frantically they sought a scapegoat to blame in their embittered, resigned state of mind, someone to vent their anger on for the imminent catastrophe — someone to hang the "Cain" label on, for having had a hand in the machinations that resulted in depriving them of the services of their cantor. The Jews of Wilna thought they located the "satan" who did them in, in the person of Panye Mayer, the chief of police of Wilna, who was a frequent visitor to the great synagogue and an avid fan of Sirota's.

As chance would have it, at just that very juncture, this watchdog over public safety was appointed chief of police of Warsaw. Putting two and two together, the mathematicians of the Wilna grapevine circuit suspected, that this high official had seen to it that his favorite cantor should also be transferred to the capital of Poland so that he would be able to continue enjoying his marvellous voice and heavenly vocal talent in the new field of his activities.

But we cannot say that there ever was produced any authentic evidence to support this farfetched theory. For all we know it might have just been idle gossip pure and simple, and Velkomozsni Panye Mayer was most likely totally innocent of the whispered, malicious charge of any wrongdoing whatever, a harmless lamb, pure as an angel. Who can put any stock in baseless gossip?

True or false, and whoever was or was not responsible, what difference does it make? Evidently, nothing could change the "fait accompli." Sirota was lost to Wilna. He was received with glee and jubilation in Warsaw and he had every reason to be gratified with the turn of events that had catapulted him into the rarefied sphere of the exclusive circle of Polish high society.

Only one circumstance tempered his elation and marred somewhat his happiness with his newly acquired position and that was the unpleasant fact that he was obliged to separate from his choirleader, Leo Leow. He would have given anything to be in a position to take his friend and long-time associate along with him, but this proved to be impossible. The chorus of the Tlomatzka Synagogue had been for a number of years under the leadership of Professor Sterling. A Toscanini he was not and not even the equal of Leow, but he had seniority and you cannot just pension off against his will a musical director with considerably long tenure simply for the reason, that a new cantor has been appointed and he prefers his own choice of a choirmaster. So they were forced to part company and Leow accepted a call to Bucharest, Romania, where he became the choirleader of the aristocratic choral Reform Temple, the cantor of which was Bernard Wladowsky, who eventually settled in Toronto, Canada.

In his new post, Sirota with his phenomenal voice and with his entirely novel style of cantorial art brought new life to and caused a veritable revolutionary transformation in the religious services. A tenor was in general something unusual in the Tlomatzka Temple, especially after the several decades in which Cantor Gritzhaendler chanted the prayers at its pulpit in his monotonous bass-baritone. A standard long established routine was followed for many years. No changes could be made in the musical repertoire without consultation with and approval of the ritual committee and Rabbi Shmuel Avrohom Poznansky.So "Professor" Sterling (the title was self bestowed) had an easy time of it. His job was a "sinecure". He presided over an ensemble, which sang year in and year out the same familiar opuses, which every worshipper by then knew by heart. It had the one advantage that the congregants were able to hum along with the choir the well worn tunes.

However, with the advent of Sirota, changes were bound to be made. After all, a high tenor cannot possibly sing in the same key as a basso-baritone. At the very least, every composition in which the cantor had a part to play had to be transposed. This involved new, unforeseen tasks for the veteran professor — work for which, confidentially speaking, he did not possess the required aptitude. It was too much for the old "master."

But aside from this, the "Herr Professor Sterling" was too weak a hand for the new brand of orthodox, in-tradition-steeped, heartwarming style of improvisation and artistic heroic manner of musical interpretation and bravura presentation of the age-old psalms and prayers introduced by the new cantor. It was not his glass of vodka and he was unable to keep up the rapid pace set by Sirota.

It was evident for quite a while, that things were not going well between cantor and choir. Unavoidably the question of making a change was bound to come up on the agenda of the meetings of the high echelon. The easily foreseeable result was that Professor Sterling agreed to resign in return for a generous pension and Sirota got the green light to make whatever arrangements he found necessary to fill the thus evacuated post. Need I tell you whom he chose as his next choirmaster? In 1908, an urgent

S.O.S. call went out to Bucharest to Leow, who was just as eager to get back to the side of his former cantor, as Sirota was anxious to have him return. So it came about that the combination which had proven to be so successful and beneficial for both parties in Wilna once more was reunited and restored, this time in Warsaw.

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And now that we have, in the vanguard of Sirota's entourage, arrived in Warsaw, let's have a good look at the city and its history as it relates to it's Jewish inhabitants.

CHAPTER 54

WARSAW, THE GREAT CENTER OF TORAH, CHASSIDISM AND CANTORIAL ART

If there was another city beside Wilna in Eastern Europe that could compare with it in importance and prestige, it was unquestionably none other than Warsaw.

Warsaw or Warszawa on the shores of the Vistula (Wiszlo) river, the capital of Crown Poland was much more than just another big city. Its name conjured up in the minds of world Jewry the image of an illustrious phenomenon, a shining example of the outstanding creativity of the Jewish people and a glorious epoch in its four thousand year history.

Wilna and Warsaw were the prodigious focal points of the religious, cultural and social life of Eastern European Jewry, exerting powerful influence on its development and frequently even competing with each other in the export of their respective schools of thought, which differed in some respects from each other.

Staid, austere Wilna impressed the observer with its conservative dignity. It was the symbol of the pedantiç clinging to traditional usages. The typical individual resident of the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" was serious, bookish and idealistic with special emphasis on the singleminded pursuit of spiritual treasures mainly of ancient vintage.

Warsaw on the other hand, while also fondly cherishing the legacy of the past generations, lived at the same time very much in the present, with all the characteristic attributes of a bustling metropolis, inhabited by a multifarious, sophisticated and lighthearted populace, imbued with

modern-day ideas which had an appreciative eye and an inherent craving for earthly materialistic possessions, but it was also industrious in creating new intellectual and spiritual values of significant merit in various fields of Jewish arts and sciences.

The difference was not so much in substance and essence but rather in method and format. Wilna was simple, drab and purist while Warsaw was jovial, colorful and complex.

The rivalry between these two great centres was a most beneficial and fruitful one. For the competitive vying brought out the best traits, the most valuable and useful features of the contestants, with the resulting profit accruing to the communities of the hinterland and faraway places, whom both were wooing and who looked to them for guidance.

Notwithstanding their superficially differing outlook and complexion fundamentally they were sister cities, united by the common bond of genuine "Yiddishkeit" (Jewishness) that permeated all their institutions and all their religious, cultural and social activities and served as a model beacon light and exemplary pattern for a great many Jewish communities to whom following and adapting the lead of these authoritative, norm-setting centres was standard practice.

Warsaw was a large and important Jewish city, a great world metropolis, with a large and wonderful Jewish population, which had to its credit great accomplishments in all fields of Jewish culture and progress, from which world-Jewry even in the remotest lands drew inspiration.

Warsaw was J. L. Peretz, Nochum Sokolov, Yitzchok Greenbaum and Sholom Ash. Polish Jewry produced great rabbis, who with the glitter of their genius lighted up the religious life of Jews all over the world.

The Jewish Warsaw was graced by the presence in its midst of world-famous scholars and outstanding personalities, wonder-rabbis with the hosts of their chassidim, talmidey chachomim, maskilim of universal repute, elite magnates, aristocratic industrialists like the Priveses, Bersons, Nathansons and Eigers who dwelt in luxurious palaces on the elegant boulevards, on the one hand, and the proletarian laborers of the Nalevke's and Gzsibovka in the Reveer section, on the other.

The first Jews came to Poland from the different neighboring German dukedoms, where they were exposed to constant oppression and discrimination when the benevolent King Kazimierz the Great, first King of Poland (1040-1058) opened for these refugees from persecution the gates of his realm. At his invitation they settled first in Krakow, which was then the capital of Poland. In the history books it is expressly recorded that chiefly thanks to these newcomers with business acumen, was Poland for the first time in a position to begin commercial transactions with other countries.

And if in the necrologue of this enlightened ruler high praise was heaped on King Kazimierz for having, at the time of his ascendance to the throne, taken over a Poland of wooden shacks and at his demise left it behind a realm of brick buildings, the industry and effort of the Jewish mer-

chants contributed the lion's share of this achievement.

And how the Polish people rewarded the Jews for their blissful exertion in the promotion of the welfare of the State we have witnessed — with dismay and horror.

Jews lived in Praga, the suburb of Warsaw much earlier than in the Polish capital. The Jewish cemetery of Praga antedates by several decades the oldest "Beys Olom" of Warsaw.

The founders of the Praga Jewish community, the Zbitkovers and the Fliyatos were the forebears of the great magnates of Warsaw.

From the Zbitkovers (Shmuel) descended the aristocratic families Berson and Bergson of Warsaw as well as the famous French philosopher Henrique Bergson. And the Fliyatos were the ancestors of the greatest physicians of Warsaw by the same name. Most of them were holding high the flag of assimilation and some even denied their heritage and became turncoats.

One noteworthy grandson of Reb Shmuel Zbitkover was Mathias Berson (1826-1908). Son of Berke Yoselewicz and Temer'l, he was a member of a wealthy and prestigious family in whose firm he was a partner.

But he was also an amateur historian, a collector of Polish art objects and a student of Polish history and literature. He donated whole collections to the art museums of Warsaw and Cracow.

He was also the founder of the Jewish Religious Art Museum which was housed in the building of the Jewish Community of Warsaw, adjoining the Tlomatzka Synagogue.

Reb Shmuel's son was Berke Yoselewicz, the husband of the famous Temer'l, whose generous patronage and devotional support of Chassidic rabbis was legendary — The saintly Rebbe Reb Bunim of Pshichse was in their employ (before he was prevailed upon by his followers to become a Rebbe) in charge of transports of floating logs on the waves of the Vistula river on the way to Danzig.

At the end of the 18th Century, in 1794, Poland was once again in the throes of one of her numerous rebellions, this time against the Russian Tsar on the east and the King of Prussia on the west under the leadership of the Polish patriot Thaddeus Kosciusko.

Desperate for manpower, the Poles allowed Berel Yoselewicz and Josef Aronowicz to organize a Jewish brigade, a radical departure from past principle. Five hundred Jews took the field in the defense of Warsaw. Only twenty of them survived when the Russian Army crushed the uprising and triumphantly entered Praga in 1795. Reb Shmuel of Zbitkov stationed himself in front of his house with two barrels full of dinars placed beside him.

He offered the invading Cossacks three dinars for each and every live Jewish prisoner and one dinar for every dead one that they would deliver to him.

It didn't take long for the bulging barrels to become empty casks. But at the price of the thus paid out ransom the lives of many Jews had been

saved and the unfortunate victims, for whom the rescue mission of the Zbitkover had come too late, were at least not deprived of a dignified ritualistic burial.

With the precedent set, the Jews answered the call to arms in Poland's rebellions against Russian in 1831 and 1863. But as Russia gobbled up Poland and the state as a sovereign country disappeared from the face of the earth a huge land ghetto called "The Jewish Pale of Settlement" was formed. Beyond the Pale no Jew could live nor travel.

Despite their loyalty Jews were almost constantly discriminated against. True enough in 1264 Poland granted certain rights (Praves) to the Jews of the realm. But in 1527 the Jewish inhabitants of Warsaw were driven out and from then until 1796 when the ban on residence for Jews in the capital was lifted there did not exist any de jure Jewish community in Warsaw.

After the expulsion only certain privileged personages, like representatives of the "Vaad Arba Haaratzos" (Central Committee of the Four Provinces), agents for the royal court, "Pervi Gildi Kupecz's", high ranking foreign intermediaries and some workmen with specialized expertise, whose services were essential to the welfare of the Polish noblemen were given permission to enter the city.

But even these exceptional visitors were not allowed to take up residence in Warsaw. Their permit was a restricted one, good only for a temporary stay of several days, just long enough to wind up their business, and these privileged characters had to pay a head tax for each day spent by them in the city.

As an additional precautionary provision, to make doubly sure that they would not illegally remain dallying in Warsaw after the expiration of their permit, they were not allowed to bring along with them their wives.

But even though officially Jews were banned, a mere five decades after the expulsion was decreed, Jews began drifting back into Warsaw clandestinely and in no time several thousand Jews were residing in the city. The authorities were of course well aware of the fact, but looked the other way, because it suited their interest to let the interlopers carry on their productive activities.

In the middle of the 18th Century there were living in Warsaw oldsters who were born and had spent their whole life in the forbidden city. In 1813 the Jewish population of the Polish capital was 80,000, which by 1913 had grown to 300,000 and by 1920 to 350,000.

In 1649 a great calamity crushed the Jews of Poland. Cossacks of the Ukraine, aided by the Tatars and led by Hetman Bogdan Chmelnitzky, staged a revolt against the feudal "Pans" of Poland. In the wake of the gory savage fighting the Cossacks became obsessed with the idea of slaying every Jew in Poland, the Ukraine and the Baltics (Gezeyras Tach-Tat).

Poland with a prewar Jewish population of 3,250,000 (2,850,000 of them perished) had a centuries-long record of Judeo-phobia. It was fomented principally by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, which poisoned the minds of the Polish noblemen, townspeople and peasants

alike with the cry of vengeance against the Christ-killers and usurers.

The spread of anti-Semitic slogans like "Svoy do Svego" [you to yours] (boycott Jewish stores) was encouraged by the Polish governments for whom the "Parshivi Zsidi" served as convenient scapegoats whenever such were needed to blame for the chronic political and social crises in the country.

The representative Jewish leaders, and the rabbis in particular tried every means to mitigate the undisguised discrimination. Chief Rabbi Chayim Davidson of Warsaw passed away in 1854. As his successor was elected Rabbi Berish Meisels. Reb Yitzchok Meyer Alter (the Ger'er Rebbe and author of "Chidushey Harim") even though he didn't occupy any official position exerted great influence as the spokesman for the great mass of his Chassidic followers. His opinion was sought in all matters of community policy by the members of the authoritative commission, which included the Chief Rabbi Meisels, the "German" preacher, Rabbi Mordechay Yastrov, the radical "Maskil" Rabbi Yitzchok Kramshtchik, the banker Mathias Rosen and other notables. The Ger'er Rebbe's secret admirer the censor Yaakov Tugendhold informed him of any planned discriminatory ordinance against Jews and the Rebbe usually succeeded in foiling the "Gezeyreh."

The hostile attitude toward Jews is the more puzzling in view of the fact that the Poles would seem to owe a debt of gratitude to some members of that race, who in the dim past rendered invaluable historic service to their nation.

Case in point number 1: It has been rumored that a Jew had something to do with the founding of the Polish metropolis. According to this version, a Jew was the first on the scene and was allegedly responsible for the name given to the newly established city. "Shaaye" was his name, a native of Poltusk, and he was in the business of buying up forests for timber, cutting up the trees and shipping them with wires and ropes, fastened together "splaves" (floating logs) on the waves of the Wiszlo river to his customers in Danzig.

As chance would have it in one instance he happened to have acquired the site on which the future megalopolis of Warsaw was destined to rise. He and his hired hands went to work on the dense virgin forest with their pickaxes, saws and other tools. Once he had completed the clearing up of the acreage which he had contracted for and there were no more trees to be found to uproot, Shaaye prepared to leave for home, together with his group of lumberjacks.

But before starting out on his journey, he wanted to leave behind some token of his presence there, so that those who might come after him would know that it was he who did the pioneering work, the clearing of this tract of land for a new human settlement. So he hung up a marker in front of the shack, which served as a shelter for him during his sojourn, and he wrote on the sign plank the following inscription in German, "Da war shaaye" (Here was Shaaye), but he was not careful to properly separate the words and so it happened that the words were divided in the

wrong places reading thus, "Da warsha aye." When the first nomad Slav tribes in quest of a suitable site to settle down on arrived and read the words on the sign, they interpreted it as meaning; "this here is Warsaw, yes" and so the name stuck.

I cannot, of course, guarantee that this is exactly how it happened, but whether it is a fact or only fiction it may be useful as a basis for demanding full civil rights for Jews in Warsaw. But try and get them!

The high and mighty at the seat of governmental power never treated the Jewish inhabitants in a civilized, fair manner.

That Shoul Wohl was Poland's king for a day is no idle rumor and he allegedly did during his reign abolish the discriminating ordinances against his coreligionists. But did conditions change for the better? As Al Smith used to say: "Let's look at the record," and who can forget what happened in Warsaw?

Case history number 2: The story is told that in 1586, when King Stephan Batory died after a reign of ten years, the elite noblemen of Poland assembled to name a successor. The deliberations dragged on endlessly. One camp was in favor of selecting a certain prince of Saxony, another group proposed to put on the throne a Hungarian nobleman as was Batory. Others, as for instance the Radzivils and Zamaiskis, dreamed of themselves inheriting the crown.

The bickering and wrangling went on and on without any sign that the bigwigs were any nearer to an agreement regarding a choice than when they first gathered a year earlier.

Meanwhile in the absence of a ruler at the helm, the country was tottering on the brink of chaos. The landowning gentry, Pomieshtcheks, Liaches and Miestchanes, were riding roughshod over their bonded peasants and especially over the Jews of their districts. These tyrants would confiscate the possessions of concessionaires who were behind in the remittance of rentals and would have these indigenous Jews even dispossessed of their living quarters and often also jailed.

To put an end to the impasse and the woes of the interregnum, the Prime Minister Kniaz (Count) Nikolaay Radzivil of Niezwizs proposed that as a stop-gap measure the Council shall appoint as a temporary King his longtime secretary and confidante Shoul Wohl (Katzenellenbogen) whose devoted services and wise suggestions have invariably proved invaluable to him and the country.

This, he said, would give them time to consider the question at hand calmly. The delegates, tipsy from having reveled quite a bit, thought this to be a good joke and lots of fun. Hailing the Prince's idea they goodnaturedly nodded their approval voting hilariously to make the Jew king for as long as there won't be an officially elected ruler on the throne. And not wishing to let him stay on the throne any longer than necessary they quickly buckled down to find a common ground and pick a real King. It took them no more than a day.

Heeding the advice of "the King for a Day" they agreed to elect as the new king Zigmunt Waza, the son-in-law of King Batory and son of the

King of Sweden, who as King Zigismund III reigned for forty-five years (1587-1632).

That the recommendation of Shoul Wohl was a wise one soon became clear. Under the regime of Zigismund the Third, Poland made great strides on its march forward. It was this monarch who moved the capital from Crakow to Warsaw.

He had the old Royal Palace, a pentagonal structure situated on an embankment of the Wiszlo (Vistula) River and allegedly dating back to the end of the Thirteenth Century restored to its ancient splendour and historic role and was honored by a commemmorative monument of a tall marble column topped by a statue of his likeness holding a massive cross standing in front of the palace. It was erected in 1644, twelve years after his death and restored in 1949.

However, taking advantage of the power vested in him, the "King for a Day" declared all ordinances that had been heretofore promulgated against the Jews of the realm null and void. According to another version, the first stranger to hit the town was to be named King and he happened to be the Jew, Shoul Wohl.

One Polish king in particular evinced graciousness toward the Jews. He was Yan Sobieski III (1674-1696). Having at one time resided in Yavarov he had a synagogue built for the Jewish community of that town at his own expense. He also appointed Reb Simcha Menachem of Yano, Italy as his personal physician. This doctor of the royal court at one time also served in the capacity of "Parnes" (Chairman) of the "Vaad Arba Aratzos."

Another King who evinced a sympathetic attitude toward his Jewish subjects was Kazsimiezs the Great who was the reigning King of Poland in the Fourteenth Century. The great influence in his life was his deep love for Esther'ke of Kuzmir. As a token of his great affection for the "Second Esther Hamalka" as this Jewish woman was referred to, the King Kazsimiezs built in her hometown a beautiful synagogue in a most lavish style, dedicating it as a present to his beloved queen.

To be sure there were here and there, now and then, some other bright spots in the picture. But by and large, the thousand-year history of the Jews of Poland is replete with tales of woe and anguish.

* * *

It was in June, 1862 that the news broke, that Tsar Alexander II approved the decree proposed by the Polish governing body headed by the Regent, Count Alexander Vielopolsky, whereby the Jews of Russian-Poland shall be granted (obivatelio) full citizenship (in Russia proper the old anti-Jewish ordinances issued by Nicolaay the first continued in force).

The gracious act of the Tsar was cause for joyous celebrations and on the Shevuoth festival the Rabbis Yastrov and Kromshtick commented with gratitude upon the momentous event in their sermons in their respective progressive synagogues, that were located on Nalevki and Danilewitchowska Streets.

It was said that since the railroad catastrophe that occurred in Barky,

the Tsar Alexander II adopted a milder atttitude toward Jews.

At a station where his train halted in the course of his travels through the Caucasian province, a greeting committee of Jewish representatives presented the Emperor with a "Sefer Torah."

"What is the meaning of this?" asked the Tsar. "This scroll of the Bible" replied the head of the delegation, "on which are written the holy laws of the Lord in the original sacred language, will be Your Majesty's protecting spirit, the armor that will shield you from all evil and avert any danger that may threaten you!"

The parchment holy scroll was placed in the Tsar's private compartment of the royal train. And when after the tragic accident in the Kavkaz city of Barky, which claimed many lives the Emperor did emerge sound and safe with nary a scratch, he remembered the words of the Jewish delegate and attributed his lucky escape from harm to the holy scroll, that was reposing in his wagon.

It made him think and reassess the harsh course advocated and put into practice against the Jews by the Camarilla and his cruel predecessor Nicholas I. However, the happy frame of mind of the Jews turned out to have been a little premature and not quite justified, for the so warmly greeted "praves" (civil rights) were of very short duration and were soon abrogated. Conditions not only reverted to their previous status but became worse, following the assassination of Alexander II.

But amidst all the travails and tribulations, and in spite of all the discrimination to which it was subjected, the spirit of Polish Jewry remained unscarred, going its lofty way unconcerned and unimpaired by obstacles creating invaluable treasures of the mind and of the heart that served as beacon lights for their brethren throughout the Diaspora.

Synagogues and "Botey Midrash" sprouted all over the Polish realm like mushrooms after a storm.

The religious life flourished, dominating the Jewish scene. There were "Shtiblech" galore, in Warsaw, where the Chassidim of the various Rebbes forgot all their troubles, drowning them in their fervent prayers and the study of the Holy Scriptures and devotional dancing.

There were large synagogues: the "Nozsik" Synagogue of Twarda 6, the common folk's synagogue "Sinai" of Dluga 50, the National Religious Synagogue "Moriah" of Dzselno 5, the "Yeshurun" Synagogue and many others. The climate in the "Revere" section was definitely religious.

These were already more or less modern Orthodox houses of prayer with cantors of high caliber and choruses that presented liturgical chants of an elevated musical niveau. So were officiating great-name cantors like Aryeh Leyb Rutman in "Yeshurun," Eliyahu Zaludkowsky in "Sinai" and Moshe Levinson in "Nozsik" Synagogue. When Levinson left for Minsk, his place in the Nozsik synagogue was taken by Shlomo Hershman, brother of the famous Mordechay Hershman.

The Chassidic courts had their own brand of cantors whose lively rhythmic tunes (nigunim) brought the worshipers to ecstatic fervor. War-

saw also housed great choirs with outstanding leaders at the helm. To mention but a few there were functioning such masters as Leo Leow, Dovid Eisenshtadt, M. Schneyer and Avrohom Dawidowitz. For them nothing would do but perfection, and they worked unceasingly to achieve that goal.

When the High Holiday season rolled around music was in the air. All over town choirleaders were busy rehearsing with their "meshorerim," the voluminous repertoire of the services of the Days of Awe. The Chassidic composers were expected to come up every year with a few brand new tunes (nigunim), catchy melodies, that could instantly be joined in with by the (for singing) ever-ready devotees of their saintly "Rebbe." Some of these Chassidic tunesmiths, like Talmud, were quite adept in producing musical gems with ingenious turns and modulations, the proper execution of which required some nimble fancy footwork. But the perceptive folks' choir usually had no trouble in catching on to the drift of the song and chiming in with the Chassidic "Baal Tfilah" and composer.

There were, of course, other kinds of currents blowing also. At the Central Jewish Municipality Bureau (Gmineh) of Warsaw, the largest organized Kehillah of the world, which included elected representatives of all shades of movements from the Bund on the far left to the "Agudas Yisroeil" on the extreme right, quite frequently the leadership, dominated by the bourgeois element charted a course of closer adaptation to the Polish customs and liberal practices.

In 1871, for instance, the "Prezes" (President) of the "Kehillah" was Dr. L. Nathanson. His father, Henrick, a banker, was an assimilator, whose grandchildren became apostates.

The historian Hillary Nussbaum was the initiator of the proposition that the prayers shall be recited in the synagogues in Polish and in 1893 there appeared a report in the "Nova Reforma" according to which the "cultus presidium" of the Jewish community of Cracow agreed that the time to begin saying the religious ritual in the language of the fatherland was long overdue.

The bastion of the assimilationist circles was the Tlomatzka synagogue which was generally regarded as the snobbish bailiwick of the 400, the high-toned layer of the estranged Jewish social register set. For plain folks to get into that preserve of the rich and mighty on holidays or other important occasions was almost as difficult as "Krias Yamsuf" (the dividing of the waters of the sea).

That the sermons of the Rabbis Shmuel Avrohom Poznansky and his successor, Professor Moshe Schorr were delivered exclusively in Polish goes without saying. This was, by the way, also the case in the more traditionally oriented Nozsik Synagogue where the historian Professor Meyer Balaban functioned in the capacity of spiritual leader.

With the massive influx of the socalled "Litvak'es" this tendency to ape the ways of the goyim and their "mores" had lost much of the appeal which it had up to then possessed. The Nalevki's were not only the great Jewish business centre but also like one great "Beys Hamedrosh." There

was hardly a house where there was not a place for worship or Torah-study.

In Nalevki 19 there was at one time the largest and most beautiful "Ger'er Shtibel." Hundreds of young men were sitting day and night engrossed in the contemplation of the sacred folios. Warsaw became a breeding ground for Chassidism even as were the courts of the revered "Rebbes" of Kotzk and Pshichse. At both ends of Nalevki's were bookstores with "Sforim" of all kinds.

The "Valuvke" was a curious phenomenon. It was the Warsaw of the poor working class, the peddlers and the small storekeeper, merchant and the "luftmensch" (one who has no discernible occupation and lives by his wits).

It was the flea-market. The whole poverty-stricken layer of Warsaw habitually drifted to this bargain-basement kind of market to do business, buy, sell, exchange, order or cancel and somehow eke out a living.

Warsaw Jewry had in its midst a number of rich magnates but the overwhelming majority worked very hard to secure the bare necessities for their families.

Nonetheless there existed a very rich cultural life in Warsaw. Five daily Yiddish newspapers and tens of weekly and monthly journals with large circulations were distributed all over Poland. Several publishing houses printed new issues of the Talmud (Shass), all kinds of "Sforim" (religious books). At the same time they would also publish worldly, secular books of general interest as well as novels and other fiction.

The first Yiddish newspaper of Poland, which was published in Warsaw in 1823, was "Der Beobachter on der Weissel" (The Observer on the Vistula).

Every fraction in Jewish life had its central office in Warsaw and was employing all means at its disposal to recruit adherents to its political and social philosophy from among the Jews of Warsaw and the hinterland and particularly to attract the youth to their camp.

The advent of Sirota, the Litvack, did much to reverse the trend that had been prevalent in the Tlomatzka congregation during Gritzhandler's long tenure. He together with his assistant cantor and his choirmaster Leo Leow brought in a new spirit of "Yiddishkeit" into the sanctuary. This novel approach did not sit well with some of the bigwigs. The time-hallowed genuine, traditional Chazzonuth as dished out by Sirota was not their cup of tea, in their jaundiced eyes it was passe.

But the "street," the general public hailed the departure from past practices in the fortress of the assimilationists as a great victory. And seeing how completely the new cantor conquered the hearts of the worshipers with his different brand of Chazzonuth, even the diehard assimilationists eventually were obliged to suppress their own feelings and join the chorus of Hosannas.

The Tlomatzka synagogue at Tlomatzka and Marschalkovska, generally referred to as the "Deitshe shule" (German synagogue) was a veritable "Beys Mikdash M'at," a miniature "Holy Temple" (of Jerusalem)

built with lavish generosity and rarely equalled splendour. Even the outer facade of the edifice was quite impressive.

From the sidewalk three steps led up to a wide and broad landing. Another four steps brought one up to a still wider and longer platform at both ends of which estrada stretched colorful flowerbeds and stood guard statues of large formidable looking lions, over whom rose high, majestic, brilliantly illuminated menorah candelabras with four round branches each plus the central one which was straight. The large rounded cupola on top shone brightly as the rays of the sun bounced off from its surface.

Sirota officiated only once a month. On these Sabbaths admission was restricted to members and to nonmembers who had secured tickets of admission.

The Franciskaya, Delesh, and Bialanski Streets and the Nalevkis that adjoined the Tlomatzka Street would on such occasions have lined up on them equipages with liveried footmen. Nobody, not even the most assimilationist members would ever think of driving their carriages up to the immediate vicinity of the synagogue. On the other three Sabbaths of the month either the assistant cantor Pinchas Sherman conducted the service or invited young guest-cantors, ambitious talented starlets of liturgy, mostly from Wilna, were afforded the chance to lead the devotional sesion, so that they could show off their wares.

It was in the nature of an audition for any cantorial position that might have become vacant in Warsaw or in any other city of Poland.

Leaders of such congregations from all over the land used to come purposely to the Tlomatzka synagogue in order to listen to these fledgling cantorial apprentices in the hope of finding there a suitable cantor for their religious organizations.

The interior of the Tlomatzka Synagogue was impressive with its dignified aristocratic simpleness. There were no paintings, no excessive embellishments or rich ornaments in the sanctuary. The only beautifying touch was applied to the "Oron Kodesh," the Holy Ark, which bore engraved in golden letters the inscription: "Mah Tovuh Ohulecho Yaacov" (How goodly are thy tents Oh Jacob). Yet on entering one felt the holy atmosphere of a "Heychal," a house of God.

Tlomatzka 13, the building adjoining the synagogue was the cultural center of the Jewish community of Warsaw. On the first floor was the museum, the library of 30,000 volumes. One flight up was located the "Literaten Verein" (Association of Writers) and on the second floor was the headquarters of the "Mizrachi" (Religious Zionist) organization.

One of the favorite suburbs of Warsaw for Jews was Polenicz. It was only fourteen kilometers away and belonged to Prince Hanneman. It served as a summer resort, for the reason that it was surrounded by forests and it possessed cleaner air and a cooler climate than Warsaw. The Prince had a bazaar erected on the site with several buildings around it. There were also numerous villas strewn about for the comfort of the vacationers. It was only a short ride with the "Kaleyka" from the center of the capital. Rabbis, Rebbes, writers, cantors, choir leaders used to frequent the resort

in the summer months.

The Jewish population of Polenicz in the winter months was about two thousand families, which however swelled to six thousand with the advent of the hot season. Sirota, Sholem Aleychem, Sholem Ash, Nochom Sokolov, and many other notables of the Jewish Polish society came to the "datcha" to fill their lungs with the balmy air of the serene, unspoiled, bucolic atmosphere of Polenicz. Refreshed and invigorated, his voice rested and relaxed, Sirota returned to Warsaw, fully equal to the task of enthralling the worshipers of the Tlomatzka synagogue on the fast approaching High Holy days.

CHAPTER 55

WHEN SIROTA WAS CHIEF CANTOR OF WARSAW

For 19 years he officiated at the Tlomatzka Synagogue — The rush for tickets on the High Holy Days — The aristocratic worshipers of the congregation — The great qualities of Sirota at the pulpit — His only weakness

With "Mazel" Sirota finally arrived in Warsaw (whether it was indeed with Mazel [luck] we'll find out later). For the following three decades it was home for him, his wife and their nine children. It is 1905 and we have come to a Warsaw, whose Jewish community is in a festive mood, having just installed into his office the new Chief Cantor of the Tlomatzka Synagogue.

Sirota was only 31 years old when he took over his new post. There, at last, he was in the spotlight of the world arena. From far and wide the masses came to hear him. Counts, barons, princes, magnates, high government officials, even members of the royal family, and the great piano virtuoso and later Premier of Poland, Ignacz Paderewski, no great friend of the Jews, also came to hear him.

The first President of Poland, Mostchisky, generals, ambassadors of the United States and of other accredited countries, consuls, artists and opera singers were frequent visitors at the services of the Tlomatzka Synagogue. At the time of the German occupation of the country, during the first world war, the German governor-general of Poland, Von Bezeler, and members of his staff, could often be seen in the audience listening intently to Sirota's chants.

Slichoth was the only one of the High Holy Day Services to which admission was free (to all the other services a ticket was required). On such an occasion, the "chassidim" from all the "Shtiblech" (small, unpretentious places of worship) came in droves, garbed in their Kaftans, Kopotes and Bekeshes (typical long coats) and the rabbinical "Kapelyush" (velvet headgear), pushing their way into the overcrowded synagogue, intent on hearing the great cantor. They used to occupy every seat and the modern synagogue took on the appearance of the "Kloiz" of a wonder rabbi. On the High Holy Days, usually there were riots in front of the temple. To be able to secure a ticket was a rare privilege, and the chief sexton, Gonsher, used his office to great pecuniary advantage. Successful businessmen used to come from faraway cities purposely to spend the holidays in Warsaw. But they rarely succeeded in buying a ticket. Weeks before the High Holy Days there were already hardly any to be gotten for love or money. There was only one man to turn to: Gonsher. He was besieged by these anxious customers, who knew how to court his favor by bringing him expensive presents like fine Bielitz textiles, silver and gold goblets and other rare objects. In return, he secured for them the much coveted pasteboard that enabled them to hear the golden voice of Sirota in his High Holy Day prayers.

The superintendent of the synagogue, Frant, the deputy sexton, Rosenbehr, and the five assistant sextons were also in on the deals. All those who were active in some capacity around the synagogue had good reason to look forward to the High Holy Days season as the most lucrative in the year for each of them. People were ready to pay whatever they had to rather than miss Sirota's services on Rosh Hashanoh and Yom Kippur.

Here is an excerpt from a newspaper report picturing the scenes around the synagogue on the Holy Days, "Several hundred people besieged the building and repeatedly attempted to storm the entrance and force their way into the main auditorium. They met with strong resistance on the part of the police squads, both on foot and on horseback, who surrounded the building determined to beat back the onslaught and disperse the mob.

"Inside the temple the people were packed in like sardines. The stuffiness was unbearable. Over four thousand people stood one on top of the other; there was no air to breathe; many fainted, and were carried out into the street where efforts were made to revive them.

"The worst part of the resultant confusion was that a lot of pickpockets managed to get into the synagogue. Taking advantage of the overcrowding and disorder, they had a field day and were able to carry out their nefarious operations most efficiently. Several dozen worshipers went home much lighter than they were when they came. For they were relieved of their watches and wallets (if they carried any) and a great many women went home minus their handbags and their jewelry."

Why were these people ready to put up with all these inconveniences just to have the privilege of hearing Sirota? There must have been a potent reason and there most certainly was. His voice was one of nature's

wonders. It overwhelmed the listener with its "diapason," range and volume. It was as though his voice consisted of two or three voices joined into one, a true leonine voice, the color, quality and luster of which was like velvet, powerful yet mellow, full and soft. There was no parallel of such a high, dramatic, heroic tenor possessing such a dark-shaded baritonal-colored middle register, which sounded like a cello. In addition, his voice was evenly adjusted in all registers. He was blessed with a wonderfully agile, naturally flowing coloratura and he sang in the bel canto style. Some dissenting critics characterized it as "can belto." He was a warm, impressionable singer with such an effervescent temperament, that it seemed as if he wanted to infect and imbue everyone and everything about him with his own burning fire.

Leo Leow, his choir leader, characterized his voice as without a beginning and without an end. "His voice stretched over three octaves, and he traversed this range easily without strain. With a little effort, he could 'shoot out' an E and F above the high C. The latter was for him child's play and he could 'belt' it out immediately upon opening up his eyes after a night's sleep, while still lying horizontally in bed."

He was especially unparalleled in his High Holy Day prayers. His assistant cantor, Pinchas Sherman, wrote, "The prayers of 'Unesane Tokef', 'Berosh Hashono' and 'Ki Keshimcho' he sang with such bravura, that he deserved to be paid his whole yearly salary for them alone." While reciting the prayer "Ato Nigleiso", when he came to the words "Kolos Uvrokim" (thunder and lightning), Leow used to instinctively in a reflex motion duck his head as if to hide from being hit by the vocal bombs, which he knew were coming. The whole congregation trembled at the tremendous "staccatos", that sounded as if they were shot out from heavy Howitzer artillery, and the walls of the large synagogue shook and vibrated. Every brocho (benediction) at the conclusion of "Malchios", "Zichronos" and "Shofros" he used to end with a cadenza so high and mighty that it could have wakened the dead.

However, not always did his prayers consist of thunder, lightning and earth tremors. Where a different approach was called for by the text, he also could sing in a lyrical vein with touching soft feelings and sentimental intensity.

Another cantor in his place would after such an exerting tour de force be exhausted, fatigued and hoarse, but not Sirota. His stamina and physical staying power were remarkable. As if nothing had happened prior to it, he proceeded to the pulpit for the "Neilah" (concluding) service, fresh and unaffected, as if he were just about to begin "Kol Nidre." As if to show the congregation that they have not yet heard anything, he only now began to sing in earnest. With renewed vigor and inexhaustible power, he went to town showering them with the real atomic bombs, that made everything that went before look like child's play and he made the audience forget entirely that they were hungry after fasting for 24 hours. They could have sat there all night and listened to their wonderful cantor.

A special occasion to which his congregants used to look forward was

the Sabbath Rosh Chodesh (beginning of the month) when they had the privilege of hearing Sirota's "Ato Yotzarto" (Thou hast exalted). When he stormed "Chorvo ireyno veshomeym beis mikdosheyno" (our city has been laid waste, our sanctuary destroyed), it went through the souls of all listeners and broke their hearts, so that tears glistened in many eyes.

"Tisho beav" (9th of Ab), date of the destruction of the holy Temple in Jerusalem, at the Tlomatzka Synagogue was very impressive. The whole section of the Holy Ark and the pulpit was draped in black with only two lamps relieving the somber darkness with their faint, glimmering light. The assistant cantor (Tchiz, Hershman and later on Sherman) recited the age old laments, only the chapter "Eicho Yuam Zuhov" (how did disappear the gold) belonged to Sirota. He did not cry, he only recited the sad lament with resignation and deep feeling. His calm interpretation, nevertheless, was so full of meaning and so effective, that it penetrated deeply into the hearts of the mourning worshipers, moving to tears even the hardened assimilationists.

But the compositions that are most closely associated with Sirota's name are "Retzey" and "Odonoy Odonoy" (the 13 characteristics of God). Cantors all over the globe sing them today on all occasions and ascribe them to Sirota. But they are not his creations. "Retzey" was written for him by Yitzchak Shlossberg, the son of the famous Cantor Leibele Alukster. He was at one time Sirota's choir leader and later he was one of the musical directors of the Yiddish theatre of Warsaw. The "Odonoy, Odonoy" was composed by Cantor Bernstein of the choir synagogue of Wilna. But both these compositions became well known and popular all over the world thanks to Sirota, whose interpretation of them was admired by all music lovers.

Another Shlager or "knack" of his was "Mah Oshiv" (what shall I render unto the Lord) of the Halleil (adoration) prayer. When he came to the verse "Besheym Odonoy Ekro" (upon the name of the Lord will I call), he interpreted the word "ekro" (I call) in a fashion that made the whole synagogue tremble. It seemed as though he ascended up high into the seventh heaven to call the Lord, as if to make sure that he heard him.

Mr. Witkin, who went to school with Sirota's son, Yulek, relates that the Gabbay (trustee), David Pshevorsky, who later became a "Mechutan" of Sirota's (related through the marriage of their children), seldom missed a service, even though he was a diabetic with a weak heart. It was Sirota's habit before he started to say "Mah Oshiv" to look around to see whether or not Pshevorsky was present in the synagoguge. In case he spotted him, he felt obliged to forego the acrobatics, which he used to do with the "ekro," because he felt, that he could not risk the effect which this outburst of his would have on a man with a weak heart. On such occasions, all the worshipers used to pray and hope that the "gabbay" would be delayed so that they would be able to enjoy the great treat of Sirota's "Halleil".

Having up to this point enumerated only the good qualities and favorable points of my subject, I may now perhaps allow myself to balance

this off by pointing out also a defect of his. After all, nobody is perfect and Sirota was no exception to this rule. An artist of his stature can easily afford a few drawbacks. Where I find fault with him is in regard to his delivery. In his singing, one detected a kind of restlessness and occasionally even undue hurry, as if he was anxious and eager to get an unpleasant task over with as quickly as possible. In his style and execution, there was lacking the calmness and the purposeful, calculated sureness which is so characteristic of a truly great artist. His tones sounded as if they were belted and pushed out staccato in spasmodic bursts, thrown out with an expression of annoyance and chagrin on his face, which tended to convey to the listener the impression that he was perhaps angry at somebody.

Cantor Bloomin was present at a concert which Sirota gave in the city of Saratov. He had come to the hall, accompanied by Zelony, the conductor of the city opera. After the concert, the Russian director, who did not understand the hebrew words, whispered into Bloomin's ear, "You know what he meant to say?" "Well, you tell me. What do you think he meant to say?" "He threatened the Tsar. 'Wait! Wait! The day will come! Your end is near.' " And that was in 1901 when Nicholaay was sitting on his throne safely, strongly entrenched as iron, and there seemed to be not the slightest chance of ever dethroning him. The singer's demeanor was apt to leave such an impression on an unwary listener.

Sirota was by nature a nervous man. After a service or a concert, he used to be very careful not to go outdoors and expose his throat to the open air, without first putting up the collar of his coat so as to protect himself from catching a cold. He lived in constant fear of something happening to his voice. Once upon a time on a Rosh Hashonah (New Year) early in the morning, he breathlessly burst into the home of Leow with the "joyous" news that it would be impossible for him to conduct the services, since he seems unable to bring out a single tone from his throat. He asked the choir director to at once notify the second cantor and ask him to substitute for him in chanting the "mussaf" service and the third cantor, who also used to sing in the choir, should in turn be prepared to take over the "Shachris" service.

But Leow, in contrast to his impulsive cantor was blessed with the patience of an angel, was not excitable and easily impressed. Instead of hastening to do his cantor's bidding, he considered the matter calmly. He knew how Sirota always worried about his voice, and so he replied, "Take it easy, Reb Gershon. Sit down; have a glass of tea and then we'll see." The first thing he did was to get a few Schmaltz herrings for Sirota. This was the best remedy which he was in the habit of using, believing that it could cure any throat malady. Sirota finished them off in short order and then Leow persuaded him to try and take a few notes. He began to vocalize and would you chance a guess as to who it was that conducted the "mussaf" service at the Tlomatzka Synagogue on that Rosh Hashonah day? You are right, none other but the one who was scheduled to in the first place.

Sirota habitually used to vocalize almost daily but not at home — his

leonine voice needed a large auditorium so he used the sanctuary of the Tlomatzka synagogue for that purpose. He didn't have far to go, being that his home was located in the compound of the synagogue court — but before he began vocalizing he first made sure that nobody is around while he is doing his exercises.

However, the musicologist Yisochor Fater, the author of "Yiddishe Music in Poland," eager to find out the secret of Sirota's tremendous vocal prowess and surmising that it might be due to his particular method of vocalizing enlisted the help of the choirmaster of the Tlomatzka synagogue, David Eisenstadt, with whose assistance he one morning sneaked into the synagogue unobserved by Sirota, who stood at the Bimah belting out his choicest vocal bombs unaware of the presence of a listener.

Imagine how surprised Sirota was when he soon afterwards read an article by the musicologist describing in minute detail the manner of vocalizing practiced by the chief cantor of Warsaw.

At the beginning of his career, Sirota's remarkable voice was practically his sole and best asset, but he gradually became an adept, versatile, cantorial artist who later on could also impress his audiences with his improvisations and interpretations of the prayers. Pinye Minkowsky happened to be in Warsaw on a Shevuoth (Pentecost) holiday, and he attended the services at the Tlomatzka Synagogue. When Sirota found out that his bitterest adversary was present, he told Leow that instead of the choir singing certain compositions as was originally planned, he would recite them himself. He improvised so masterfully, that it was the talk of the town. All his critics had to concede that this time Sirota was superb and they heard an entirely new style of liturgy from him. Minkowsky was so surprised, that he went over to Sirota after the conclusion of the service and confessed that he had always considered him a "schreier," one of those cantors who shout, but that today Sirota convinced him, that he was mistaken in this estimate of him. Sirota invited Minkowsky to his home and taking advantage of the opportunity, he brought up the subject of the phonograph records. He tried to convince his visitor, that in his vitriolic attacks which he had leveled at him for recording liturgical prayers, he was even more unjust and mistaken than he was in his avowed false opinion about his cantorial ability, for it was a proven fact, that his records in many cases had a salutary effect. He showed him letters, which he had received from the war-front during the Russo-Japanese war in which the Jewish soldiers thanked him for the pleasure and joy which he brought to them by his recordings when, lying in the dirty trenches of Manchuria on the night of the "Seyder" (Passover), they were homesick for their families. In their loneliness, the writers attested, his voice was a great comfort and an invaluable morale builder to the boys on the battlefield. It was like a greeting from home.

He also cited the story related by the famous opera tenor, Davidow of the St. Petersburg Royal Opera House, at a banquet tendered in honor of Sirota in St. Petersburg. He once brought to a noblewoman of the royal household, who loved music, a few records of Sirota as a present. This high

ranking lady, who was never a friend of the Jewish people, changed her biased viewpoint thanks solely to the direct influence of his voice. She explained to Davidow that the profound change in her opinion has occurred as a consequence of her having listened to the laments in Sirota's prayers which sounded so sincere and convincing, that she felt instinctively, that his people suffered innocently.

A record of Sirota's also played a curious role at a gathering of Provoslavno priests in Saratov, which took place, when the newly appointed "Archirey" (archbishop) Germagen, a bitter enemy of the Jews, who spoke about them with poisonous froth in his mouth, arrived on an inspection tour after having taken over his post. He called together all the dignitaries of the "Tzerkve's" (churches) of his region to hear their reports about the situation in their respective dioceses and to infect them with his violent hate and give them instructions how to deal with the arch-enemy — the Jews.

One of the local priests by the name of Pontieletz, who was friendly to the Jews, and used to write Hebrew articles in the "Hameilitz" under the pseudonym "Pinchos Ben Elozor Hakohein" (he was the son of a priest) was well aware of the fact, that in spite of the general assumption that an archbishop is supposed to be well versed in Hebrew, the newly appointed "archirey" was actually an ignoramus in that respect. So he decided to show him up before all his subordinates.

As the host, he suggested to Germagen, "I have here a record of a Hebraic hymn, 'The righteous shall spring up like a palm tree. He shall grow tall like a cedar in Lebanon.' I think it would be very appropriate for the occasion." "Well, let's hear it," said the archbishop, and Pontieletz pretended to put on Sirota's record of "Tzadik Katomor Yifroch". Actually, however, the first words that came out of the gramophone were: "Ki-hiney oivecho adoshem Ki-hiney oivecho yoveyduh"; only later on broke forth the "Tzadik Katomor". All the priests present got the point which the host intended to convey to them. They enjoyed the singing and the trick played on the Jew-baiting visitor, who, not knowing Hebrew, was unaware of the difference. Relating the incident later, Pontieletz revealed how he managed to fool the archirey by putting on two records and he concluded the story by citing the meaningful passage of the hym which he had played first, "For lo, Thine enemies Oh Lord, for lo Thine enemies shall perish."

But whether or not all these arguments and cited instances of Sirota's had the effect of convincing Minkowsky that his attacks were unjustified and caused him to reverse his opinion is not known. Most likely they did not. At least there is no public record of such a change of heart by Pinye.

All the same, time and events seem to have completely vindicated him. Not only did Sirota accomplish a lot of good by means of his recordings, but his concerts, for which he was also constantly criticized, were an inexhaustible source of revenue and income for many important charitable purposes. He was not the dry businessman or the selfish, money-hungry person his enemies pictured and decried him for. He traveled at one time

on the train through which two citizens of Rovno went around soliciting contributions from the passengers for an orphan girl, who was about to be married. The collected money was to be used for her trousseau and dowry. When they asked Sirota to also contribute to this worthy cause, he replied, "What can I give you? You want a 'mincha [in Hebrew, a gift]?' I can donate a 'Mincha [evening]' service." The collectors retorted angrily, "Instead of giving 'Tzedokoh, [charity]' you make fun of us? A lot can your 'Mincha' help a poor bride!" But a Jew who stood nearby and had heard the conversation, observed that the passenger was a distinguished looking man and he had an inspiration. "Who knows? Maybe this man is a famous cantor." So he turned to the collectors saying, "What do you care? What have you got to lose? If the man wants to give you a 'Mincha', take it from him."

Upon arriving in Rovno, they all descended from the train and Sirota was recognized by the crowd which hailed him vociferously. When the money collectors learned who it was that had pledged them a Mincha service, they were overjoyed. When it was publicized in the city that Sirota would chant a Mincha, great masses of his admirers converged to the rare event and the result was that over four hundred rubles were netted for the charitable cause of "Hachnosass Kaloh." Not a bad contribution for a bride's "Nadan" (dowry) from one single donor. It was more than the total sum that was collected on the train.

Sirota, together with his daughter Helena, also gave concerts without any compensation at the time of the first World War, when the Germans occupied Poland and drove the Jews out of the border cities. From all parts of Poland came a steady stream of refugees to Warsaw. They had to be provided for — fed, housed and clothed. Especially was the need great to take care of the homeless children. To get the necessary funds and to handle the whole problem of the uprooted masses, committees were formed under the leadership of the writer and poet, J. L. Peretz. Leow was very active in arranging concerts with Sirota, Kwartin and other artists. He had the full cooperation of the chief of police of Warsaw, Count Lerchenfeld, in this endeavor.

Not only did Sirota never refuse to appear at the concerts, which were arranged for the noble cause in Warsaw, but he complied at all times with the requests of the directors of the committee like an obedient soldier. He also used to travel to the farthest cities at his own expense in his intense desire to do his part for the alleviation of the suffering of the poor, innocent victims of the war.

Minkowsky could hardly have had any objection to such concert appearances of Sirota and numerous other cantors which have, in the course of the years, been instrumental in raising many millions of dollars for important Jewish communal, humanitarian and charitable causes.

CHAPTER 56

SIROTA CONQUERS ALL OF AMERICA

Caruso was happy that Sirota was a cantor and not an opera singer — Leo Leow gets the great American artists bureau of William Morris interested and they bring Sirota over here — His last journey back to Poland.

It was inevitable and predictable. Clearly, sooner or later, it was bound to happen that Sirota, who by now was world-famous, would be heard also in the New World.

Tens of thousands who knew him in Odessa, Wilna and Warsaw had emigrated to America. Their admiration and veneration of Sirota had not diminished in the interim. On the contrary, absence caused their hearts to grow fonder of him and they were looking forward to the opportunity of hearing their former favorite again. Other tens of thousands of American Jews, who had never had the opportunity to hear Sirota in person, had heard about him and knew of his eminent reputation. They had become his fans by proxy, from having heard his recordings, that were by that time already pretty widely distributed throughout the American continent.

It was, therefore, reasonable to expect that one fine day he would at long last deign to appear in person before his dear American public, and it did not take long before that by so many Jews fervently awaited moment arrived. Sirota came, sang and won a host of new fans. It has been said long ago that whoever drinks once from the water of America remains thirsty for the same refreshing fluid all his life. As Mordechay Hershman used to sum it up so succinctly, "Once in America, always in America."

Sirota also became infected with the bug of an unquenchable thirst and unextinguishable preference for the tumultuous pace, the cacophony, the galloping tempo and freedom prevailing on the youngest of the con-

tinents. Once he got a taste of America, he could not any longer be content with the poverty, intolerance and backwardness that he saw and felt all around him in Poland.

He was almost always en route. If he had just been seen in Warsaw, soon afterward he was likely to be found once again in New York, and vice versa. He was the helpless, floundering target of diametrically opposed forces, that drove him around in a vicious magic circle. On the one hand, powerful family ties bound him firmly to Warsaw and drew him time and again back home. His professional and financial interests, on the other hand, pulled him like a mirage in the desert with irresistible magnetism and lured him with the spell of golden promises to America.

He was riding on the waves of the Atlantic Ocean constantly, either going east or west, back and forth, like a commuter. It is only a great pity that when he was crossing the ocean for the very last time, it was not to come over "here" but to go back "there," where a cruel fate was awaiting him.

When Yossele Rosenblatt was asked who among the famous cantors, in his opinion, possessed the most powerful voice, he replied, "Without any doubt, it must be Sirota and it is no wonder either. For it is written in a very clear sentence of the 93rd psalm, 'Mikolos mayim rabim adirim mishberey Yom.' If you mix up somewhat the words of the text [and cantors have the poetic and artistic license for doing so,] you'll get the answer clearly and explicitly, 'Mayim rabin mishberey Yom' — 'if one travels a great deal over big bodies of water, raging waves of the sea, then 'Mikolos adirim' he is sure to acquire the strength and power to belt out tremendously mighty sounds and who, I ask you, does use so frequently the big waterways of the ocean for journeys as does Sirota?"

* * *

The idea to go to America came from Leow, his choirmaster, who was also Sirota's friend, advisor and occasional impresario. He often used to bring up the subject in their conversations. He expressed the opinion, that it was high time for them to seriously consider a plan to make an excursion to the land where gold was lying in the streets and people were sweeping it up. Two outstanding artists, as they unquestionably were, could surely make there a fortune in no time.

Leow's words went in one ear of his cantor and out the other. He was somewhat skeptical of the alleged wonders. He did not put much stock in the stories that were circulated. The factual information which he was able to secure tended to discount a great deal of what the fertile imagination of the indigent Polish Jews was wont to magnify and blow up to giant size. At that time, America was not as yet the great preeminent pulsating center of Chazzonuth (Cantorate) which it became in the 1920's. Besides this consideration, which made him question the wisdom of undertaking such a trip, Sirota was by nature a not particularly ambitious man and also of a rather passive nature. He had to be pushed, persuaded, convinced and stimulated before he could be induced to take action and embark on any

novel, adventurous course.

Leow possessed just the opposite characteristics. He was always busy making new plans, constantly seeking and looking for new worlds to conquer, and he saw the great potentialities, the unlimited opportunities that were beckoning and which only America could offer them. His dynamic spirit, his persuasive powers and his readiness to take chances and set foot on hitherto untrodden paths finally managed to overcome and penetrate the phlegmatic indifference of Sirota and to bring him around to his way of thinking. Leow worked on Sirota with ceaseless determination until he succeeded, in making him consider the matter seriously, and the theme — America — began to interest the cantor. That was all Leow wanted.

From here on, it was smooth sailing. It was decided, that Leow should undertake a fact-finding expedition to the United States, to survey the terrain, to find out the true state of affairs in the golden land and to report back to Sirota whether or not America was ready for them, whether or not the people were interested and whether or not (financially) it would be worthwhile for them to go barnstorming.

It was toward the end of 1911 that Leow finally managed to get away. He applied for a leave of absence. The reason he gave to the Board of Directors of the Tlomatzka Synagogue for the necessity for him to make the journey to America was that he wished to visit his relatives in Bayonne, New Jersey, whom he hadn't seen for ages. The main object of his planned trip he wisely failed to disclose. His superiors granted his request.

After a thorough investigation, he found that circumstances were decidedly favorable. He thereupon contacted the reputable William Morris Agency and played for them some of Sirota's phonograph records, which he had brought with him. After the seasoned and experienced artists' representatives listened to the voice reproductions of the Warsaw cantor, it was not necessry any more for Leow to extol the virtues of the artist whom he was representing. The recordings were their own recommendation. The agency was convinced and closed a deal with him. The contract was for twenty-five concerts that were to be given by Leow and his choir, together with Sirota, in the principal cities of the American continent. With the contract in his pocket, the envoy of Sirota had fulfilled his mission. He succeeded in getting an agreement that exceeded his wildest expectations. He returned home in a deliriously happy mood and at once proceeded to make all the preparations for the American tour.

On an auspicious day in early February, 1912, Sirota, in the company of Leow, landed in New York. Several committees, representing American Jewish organizations and, of course, the heads of the William Morris Agency, as well as reporters and photographers, greeted him on the deck of the ship. Pictures that were taken at this reception appeared in the Jewish press. He also gave an interview to a reporter, which was printed in the *Jewish Daily Forward,* in which he confirmed the rumor that was circulating in Jewish musical circles, that an American Opera Company had offered him a five-year contract with a yearly salary of seventy-five thousand dollars. He admitted that as far as he himself was concerned, he

would've been inclined to consider seriously the acceptance of such a remunerative offer, but that his wife was not in favor of it at all. His mother too was against any such move on his part. She reminded him how determined his late father had been in shielding him against the lure of opera, and it was her objection that was the deciding factor. He had always been an obedient son and would not for the world ever even think of causing the slightest heartache to his dearly beloved mother.

It was noted by some eagle-eyed observers that besides the official personages who crowded around the celebrated visitor from aboard at the reception on board the ship, there was also a couple, who were almost lost in the melee of the aggressive, pushing mob of delegations, which vied with each other to get near the famous cantor and to get his attention. These two people stood aside modestly, waiting patiently for their turn. It was the brother of Sirota and his wife, who were residents of New York City and who had come to meet him on his arrival. It had been a long time since they had seen each other and this was indeed for them a happy reunion.

The preparation for Sirota's debut went ahead with feverish intensity. Leow was busy organizing a large choir, recruiting suitable singers, and rehearsing them in the special musical numbers of his repertoire, most of which he himself had composed.

In the interim, Sirota ran into an unpleasant and surprising incident. An unexpected visitor came to see him in his hotel room and handed him an invitation. At first, he thought that perhaps some organization was planning a reception in his honor, but on closer examination of the official stamp that the paper bore, he realized that it was a summons issued by a court clerk inviting him to pay a visit to the Hall of Justice and answer before a judge certain charges brought against him.

For such a "Boruch Haboh" (official greeting) by a branch of the United States government, he was hardly prepared. What crime could he possibly have committed in the short time that he had so far spent in the country? Well, he soon found out. Sirota's brother did not live in complete peace and harmony with his wife. They quarreled, intermittently reconciled, separated again, and so on, going around in circles.

When Gershon arrived in New York, they happened to have one of their tranquil periods of marital life and met him in the harbor together. But it did not take long and they were at it again. This time, they split up for good and the husband left home. Golda Sirota blamed the last fight between her and her husband on his brother. She charged Sirota with having used his influence on her husband to break up their marriage. Alleging that it was Gershon who persuaded his brother to leave her, she demanded twenty thousand dollars from him for having been the cause of the loss of her husband's love.

Sirota knew nothing about it. Where that woman got the notion that he had interfered in their squabbles was a mystery to him. He was as guilty in the matter as a newborn child. And it could not have happened at a more inopportune time. The worst thing about the whole messy affair was, that the newspapers got hold of the juicy morsel and, sensing a human inter-

est angle in the piquant item, smeared the story all over their pages.

You would like to know what the final outcome of this legal wrangle was? I would, too. But who has the patience to sit and wait for the long drawn-out trial session to be wound up and the verdict to be handed down? If you are like me, you, too, most likely hate the very sight of a courtroom. Heaven should shield and save all of our friends from having to sit and watch even under the best of circumstances as merely an interested onlooker, let alone as a defendant or even an accuser, the proceedings in a trial room of a court of law. Besides, we have much more important things to do. So let us get out of the dreary and depressing atmosphere of the courtroom, where the wrangling between the opposing counsellors makes the listener drowsy, and let's rush over to Carnegie Hall, where something interesting seems to be getting under way.

Things are really popping in front of that temple of music. What a gigantic crowd has converged there! But when you remember that this happens to be Wednesday, the 14th day of February, the hustle and bustle going on there is not surprising at all. It was the day on which the famous cantor, Sirota, from Warsaw was scheduled to give his first recital and the date for which all of New York had been waiting impatiently. Thousands of people were coming and going and roaming the streets around the hall. Those who were unable to get tickets to the great event were laying siege to the concert hall. A squadron of mounted police had to be hurriedly dispatched to the scene in an effort to stem the tide of the onrushing, disappointed, angry mob, that threatened to storm the entrance.

Inside the auditorium, there were great doings going on. When Sirota, clad in full dress and silk hat, stepped on the stage, the whole audience like one man stood up and gave the guest artist a deafening ovation, that lasted over ten minutes. Leow, too, decked out in vestments matching those of the star of the evening, looked like a fashion plate. The singers of the choir marching onto the podium in a steady stream and taking their stations in several rows were garbed in long, flowing, black cantorial robes and four-cornered high skull caps. The program consisted of "Tov Lehodos" ("It's Good to Praise"); "Rachmono Deoni" ("The Merciful One Who Answers"); "Kedusho" ("Holiness"); "Retzey" ("Accept"); "B'Rosh Hashono" ("On the New Year") and the aria "Celeste Aida".

Sirota was in excellent form. Leow, the master conductor, was in his element, bringing out the most and best from the chorus. The enthusiasm of the listeners reached a feverish point. The *Forward* wrote: "He came, sang and conquered. He was most impressive in rendering the prayer: 'Rachmono Deoni'. The *Sun* wrote: "The effect was greatest when Sirota, accompanied by the choir sang: 'Retzey'. The applause and the 'Hurrah' cries were deafening, and were kept up without letup for an even longer time than it took the cantor to sing the selection." There were cries for encores, but no matter how insistent the audience was, the hero of the evening failed to heed the requests. It seemed that he was determined to avoid straining his voice unduly. And you couldn't blame him. After all, he was scheduled for a second appearance four days later, on Sunday, February

18th, 1912, which was to be held in the Hippodrome. This time an added attraction was the appearance of the well-known soprano Lucille Rabinoff. The program of the cantor and choir also included new numbers, the most notable among which was the rendition by Sirota of a brilliant aria from the "Huguenotten." Notwithstanding the fact that the hall where Sirota's second concert was held was larger than Carnegie and that in addition 500 extra seats were placed on the stage of the Hippodrome, the scenes that took place in the streets adjoining the hall closely resembled those that necessitated the interventions of the watchdogs over law and order some days before at Carnegie Hall. Here too the police had a hard time controlling the lovers of music who could not anymore gain admission to the hall.

Seeing how great was the interest in the visiting celebrity and the demand for tickets to his guest-appearances, the William Morris Agency scheduled three more concerts in the New York area. One was given at the Academy of Music of Brooklyn and another one again at the Hippodrome. The latter in particular was a grandiose affair, made memorable by the fact that the whole ensemble of the "Cantors Association of America," consisting of one hundred members of the fraternity, took part in the program. It represented a gracious tribute by the cantors of America to their famous European colleague.

Sirota's last appearance in New York occurred after he returned from a concert tour that took him to a number of selected cities, where the Jewish population was considerable, and it was in the nature of a farewell concert that took place on March 13th, once again, as did the very first one, at Carnegie Hall. In the publicity announcements of the musical event, the William Morris Agency made a point of stressing the fact, that at the general request of the public, Sirota would also sing the popular melody of "Kol Nidrey". Such a request must have come from gentiles, whose knowledge of Jewish liturgy is confined to the chant which launches the ritual on the eve of the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, and many of whom also came to hear the famous cantor.

The guest appearances of Sirota, both in New York as well as in the provincial Jewish centers, were crowned with extraordinary success. The press printed long reports with laudatory comments crammed with superlatives. The music critics compared him to Caruso and Tamanya. Some of them pointed out certain flaws in his control of his voice and were critical of his mannerisms and deportment on the stage.

But all of them agreed, that he possessed a golden voice, the equal of which was hard to find. The news media were also full of pictures and sketches of Sirota in different poses. Much space was also devoted to photos of Leow and his choir outfitted in their colorful exotic costumes. Even cartoons depicting the visiting, by now popular musicmakers in caricatures and captioned with funny snide remarks at their expense, made their appearances in the periodicals, that were in the habit of looking at public figures from the lighter side. In short, the only, or at least dominant item on the "Tagesordnung," the agenda, was Sirota. He was the sensa-

tion of the day. The *Forward* wrote, paraphrasing Caesar, "He came, he sang and he conquered." The headline in the *New York American* read, "Warsaw Cantor As Competitor of Caruso." In similar vein wrote the music critics of the *Evening World, Musical America, Musical Courier,* and many others.

Among the notables who came to his concerts were the Mayor of New York, the Governor of New York State, senators, congressmen, city officials, the Russian Consul, Baron Schliffenbach, the renowned priest Dr. Parkhurst, Rabbi Stephen Wise, Supreme Court Judge Newburger. The most famous opera singers headed by the universally beloved diva Alma Gluck filled an entire row.

Caruso was also very curious to hear for himself the cantor, who supposedly was getting set to steal his crown, which had generally been conceded to him for many years. After he heard him, he was quoted as remarking with a deep sigh of relief, "Oh, if I had such a voice! Thank God, that he has chosen to employ his heavenly gift in a different field and I do not have to compete with such a formidable challenger in opera." The great *Kunduss* (Kibitzer, mocker), however, could not withstand the temptation to get in a wisecrack. It printed a sarcastic caricature and kidded the visitor by heading the cartoon with the taunting comment, "Caruso cannot "daven" [chant the prayers] and Sirota cannot sing."

Said in fun and meant in earnest, the *Kunduss* gave expression in its own characteristic joking manner to the dissatisfaction of a great many Jews of the New York community with one aspect of the arrangements of Sirota's American visit. They wondered why the great cantor of the Tlomatzka Synagogue of Warsaw on his first visit to America did not even deign to set foot in a synagogue. All he did was to sing for the gentiles in the large concert halls and at that, mere fragments of liturgy and secular songs. They believed that a cantor's place was at the "Omud" (prayer stand).

That these complaints of the public and their urgings to heed them and make the suggested corrections were effective and brought about the desired results is proven by the fact that when Sirota several months later returned for another round of appearances in the United States, he changed course and made his initial appearance not with a recital, but with a Sabbath religious service, even though still not in a synagogue, but on a stage. However, the stage for this special occasion was fitted out like a sanctuary with a holy ark and the other paraphernalia and accessories of a house of prayer. Another big difference in his second visit was that this time he came by himself without his close associate: Leow.

He acquired the services of a local choir under the direction of Jacob Margolis and conducted his first Sabbath service in America with the assistance of this ensemble in Kessler's Theatre on Second Avenue in downtown New York. The date of that appearance of the famous cantor was January 24, 1913. He followed up this ritualistic service with another religious devotion for the benefit of the Harlem Jewish community on the eighth day of February. It was a festive Sabbath, on which the prayer for

the new moon was recited. This second religious service was held in the "New Star Casino" located on 110th Street.

There were numerous other festive events presided over by the celebrated cantor. Several of them were held at the "New Palace Garden".

His second concert, the program of which was planned to please primarily the devotees of liturgy was no less a triumph than the first one, and as far as public interest was concerned, his stay in America could have been extended considerably.

But Sirota's leave of absence was almost over and it was time for him to bid good-bye to his new-found friends and admirers in America and sail for home. So a farewell concert was scheduled for May 24th, 1913. On the posters, window cards, and in the advertisements in the press, it was announced that in taking his leave, Sirota was going to give a bonus to his faithful followers by presenting excerpts from the "Jewish Trilogy" by Hemmerick, and again as a particular inducement he would also sing Bruch's "Kol Nidre."

What was so special about this traditional chant, that his impresarios found it necessary to repeatedly underscore it with such emphasis, escapes us. What kind of wonderful feats Sirota was capable of performing with that solemn melody, we cannot imagine. Surely, and this we can state without fear of contradiction, he had much better and bigger specialties with which to excel, masterpieces that had become his trade-mark. But impresarios have their own way of figuring and assessing matters and determine the preferences of their public and who are we to question their methods? There was another promise made by Sirota's managers in those advertisements. All and sundry were assured that the Warsaw cantor, who was such an unqualified hit, would return to the scene of his triumph not later than in 1916.

There is an old German proverb, "Der mensch denkt und Gott lenkt" and the same eternal truth is expressed in the English saying, "Man proposes and God disposes." That he did not come back in 1916 is quite obvious. He couldn't have taken into account one picayune matter, which he could not of course foresee, to wit, the breakout of World War I. But even that universe-shattering explosion merely considerably delayed his third excursion to America, it was by no means able to cancel it definitely and altogether. Like McArthur he vowed: "I shall return" and eventually return he did.

Not for one moment did our Reb Gershon give up his plan. The lure of America was too great for him to withstand. It held him firmly in its grip; he was caught up in its net without the possibility of escape.

Everything must eventually come to an end and that goes even for a world war. As a result of this conflagration, that enveloped most of the globe, Poland once more, for the ninth time in its history, became a sovereign country. The Polish legionnaires celebrated the newly-won independence and freedom of their homeland with renewed atrocious attacks and raids on the helpless Jewish minority. They roamed around in

organized bands with other civilian marauders, killing and maiming indiscriminately Jewish men, women and children, and plundering their homes and putting to the torch business places. Keltz and Cherson and dozens of other cities bore the brunt of their excesses. They harassed and libeled the Jewish communities with trumped up charges while the Polish government and its satraps looked on with folded hands.

Leow felt that the bottom was dropping out from under the feet of the Jewish population and he decided that it was time for him to get out, before the roof too would cave in. There was only one place for him where he wanted to go and since Sirota at that time was not as yet ready and able to leave with him, Leow got another partner for the journey and took along with him to America one who was ready, willing and able, the chief cantor of Wilna at that juncture: Mordechay Hershman.

Leow, who had a sharp eye and an uncanny knack for recognizing a winner when he saw one, this time, too, had discovered and left for the United States with an ace in the hole. He was convinced that the young man, whom he was taking with him was a "hot property" and destined for big things. This consideration was probably the reason, why this time he did not woo Sirota too strongly to join him. He most likely preferred to be able to present a new face to the fickle American public.

That his assessment of Hershman was accurate was proven soon enough. He was also proven right in his appraisal of the American Jewish scene, as it had unfolded since the bloodshed had been halted by the Armistice. America had become the promised land, to the shores of which were streaming hundreds of thousands of uprooted European Jews. The newly-arrived immigrants brought along with them their favorite native cantors, and due to this infusion of new red blood into the hitherto stagnant, anemic body of American "Chazzonuth" by the transplanted liturgical greats from abroad, a new epoch of blooming creativity and of a lively, strong upsurge in the cantorial art had begun in the new world.

Sirota too soon learned of the radically changed situation in the golden land. He also heard the reports of the great successes of Hershman and other colleagues of his, who were making hay, while the sun was shining and he was sitting in Warsaw twiddling his thumbs. He was getting restive. For him to be left out when things were popping all over the place was unthinkable. He had to be where the action was. He made contact with New York and succeeded in closing a deal with the concert bureau of Jonas Brothers. The arrived at arrangements were for him to come to America, together with his daughter Helena, a soprano, who had by that time also earned a fine reputation as a concert singer. His son Naftali also tagged along as his father's business manager and accompanist.

On arriving in New York, Sirota would have wanted very much to renew his old partnership with Leo Leow, but the latter was not available any longer, having had already tied the knot with his new protegee, whose Svengali he had become. The young cantor from Wilna, whom he had brought over and promoted, was now under contract to Boris Tomashevsky and so was he. Under the provisions of that agreement, Leow was to

conduct choirs exclusively for Hershman and was not at liberty to take on any assignment to appear with any other cantor.

Sirota sought out Cantor Nathan Abramson, who at one time was his choir leader in Wilna. He solicited Abramson's help in getting him a suitable leader. As they were discussing the available candidates, Sirota suddenly had a bright idea and turning to Abramson said, "Get me Meyer'l, the soprano."

He recalled that in that chorus there was a very talented boy, a soprano, who later became a well-known choir leader in America. And so it came about that Meyer Machtenberg was summoned and given the assignment. He gathered together a gigantic chorus of nearly one hundred voices and appeared together with Sirota and his daughter at their seasonal debut on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House, which was held on Tuesday, March 13th, 1921.

It must be noted that this time the circumstances were much different from what they were in 1912 when he first visited America, for now he was not the only one on the market as he had been nine years ago. Then he did not have to contend with the competition of colleagues of the calibre of a Rosenblatt, Kwartin or Hershman. Still, such was the magic of his name, and he still possessed such tremendous drawing power, that people flocked in droves to the Met from all corners of the city, when they heard that Sirota had returned for another round of professional appearances.

Not only was the big opera house packed to capacity, but additional hundreds of people milled around on Broadway and the adjoining side streets bemoaning their inability to gain admission. The box office had been drained of every pasteboard days before the concert. Arturo Toscanini, Joseph Schwartz, and other opera singers, were in the audience, not to speak of the biggest names in the liturgical field, including Yossele Rosenblatt. His faithful fans gave their favorite guest cantor a reception in the grand style. *Musical America* in describing the scene wrote, "The stage looked like a garden of flowers, transformed by the countless wreaths of flowers and bouquets of roses that his admirers presented to the hero of the evening and his daughter in advance of their appearance. With such cantorial concerts Gatti-Casazza could easily eliminate the chronic deficits at the Met."

When Sirota stepped out on to the stage, he was greeted with a deafening burst of applause. But when he began to sing, the audience, which had just been demonstrating with their enthusiasm at the boiling point cooled off somewhat. Things did not seem to go exactly the visiting artist's way for some reason or other. Somehow it was not like old times. The singing of the celebrated guest fell short of the mark he had set during his previous visits. It was not up to expectations of the public and what they were used to hearing from him personally or were led to believe that they would hear judging from listening to his records.

His voice did not have the brilliant sheen, the mellowness, and flexibility, which used to be its characteristic qualities. The listeners were at the point of becoming disillusioned and disappointed. Some lifted eyebrows

and shrugging shoulders seemed to be asking and wondering if this was in fact the celebrated Sirota. Yossele allegedly left in the middle, smiling and stroking his beard. They were about to draw the conclusion that his once glorious voice was no more. But to jump to such a conclusion was not only premature, but completely unwarranted and unjustified.

Such was by no means the case. He proved it with the eighth number on his program, "Av Horachamim" ("Merciful Father"). In this composition, written by Joseph Brody and arranged by Machtenberg, Sirota was once again his old self. He sang this prayer with his usual fiery brilliance and characteristic verve and temperament. His voice, which up to that point had been rather stiff, heavy and clouded, more baritonal and unviable, by now had become again as bright and soft as ever. It was once more the velvety, easy-flowing heroic tenor with the Caruso timbre and the mighty golden sound. In the initial numbers he warmed and tuned up his coated, phlegmatic vocal chords and when it came to the "Av Horachamim," he had regained full control over his voice, playing with the marvelous instrument that was lodged in his throat at will. He tore with gusto into the meat of the composition that suited his style perfectly and soon sparks were flying.

A very talented young alto, Michael Polyakoff, sang the duets with Sirota, and their voices blended into an enchanting harmony that made a deep impression on the entranced listeners, who became electrified and when Sirota topped it off with a thunderous cadenza at the finish, broke out in a stormy orgy of applause, that stopped the show. As an encore, he sang his ever popular "Retzey" with which he had been identified as closely as are Siamese twins, and he put over this composition in a manner that squashed any doubt that could have still remained in the mind of anyone in the audience about his being the "same Sirota."

From here on, he handled matters with gusto and the greatest of ease. The cantor solo of "Adon Olam" ("Lord of the Universe") went over so big, that yielding to the insistent public demand, he had to repeat the finale. He also sang "Ah Din To-Yre Mit Gott" ("A Lawsuit Against God") and "Ah Dudele" ("Here, There and Everywhere"). His son Naftali accompanied him on the organ. His daughter Helena sang several operatic numbers and duets with her father — "Ahavtich," "Baran-Yoo" and "Amol is geven a pastuch."

The presentation of secular classical musical works were in this instance entrusted entirely to his daughter. Sirota himself did not attempt to sing any operatic selections, as he did in 1912 and in 1913. It was a wise decision on his part not to venture into strange fields. He would have also been better advised to omit the Yiddish numbers too. A whole year earlier, Hershman had introduced these very same songs to the American public, and with Jews who had heard the latter's masterful rendition of these folk tunes, Sirota hardly could have expected to make a hit singing them. But even with these reservations Sirota's return was a triumph for the cantor of Warsaw.

At long last, Sirota undertook for the first time in America the step

which had been urged on him all along to wit, to mount the shtender (podium stand) of a synagogue and chant an entire religious service in a regular house of worship.

The first synagogue that had the privilege to see him ascend its pulpit was the old "Ohab Zedek" (later called "Slonimer Shool") on Norfolk, corner Houston Street. Again it was Machtenberg who directed the choir that assisted Sirota. The ice was now broken and several other congregations vied with each other for the honor of having Sirota officiate in their synagogues. He obliged by accepting a number of invitations for Sabbath devotions. At the same time, he did not neglect his favorite concert halls either. One guest appearance in Carnegie Hall was followed by a gala affair in the 71st Street Armory, which was given for the benefit of the "Warsaw Relief Fund." Another round of Sabbath services in different sections of greater New York were topped off by religious devotions on the last days of Passover in the "Hunts Point Palace" of the Bronx.

After a clean sweep of New York, Sirota began a concert tour throughout the length and breadth of the American continent. After the Shevuoth (Pentecost) holiday, he was about ready to end his tour and sail for home.

He had promised his congregation that he would come home for the Passover holidays, but business was so good and the demands for his services so great, that it seemed a shame to have to miss out on such fat offers. So he requested an extension of his leave of absence, and it was grudgingly and not without misgivings granted by his Warsaw congregation.

But now he really had to go home. He began packing, determined that this time nothing could change his mind. Well, almost nothing. But a contract for ten thousand dollars is something else again. That's what some of the agents, that were hanging around Sirota like bees around flowers, offered him for the three days of Rosh Hashono (New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). It surely was not something to be dismissed lightly and turned down out of hand. It made Sirota sit up and ponder. He thought of how many zlotys that would buy. He hesitated, pleading for more time to think it over.

He had a struggle with his conscience, which warned him that he was sure to incur the wrath of his superiors in Warsaw and would probably even lose his position. "But how can I let 10,000 dollars slip through my fingers?" he countered. It was no contest. His conscience was silenced after only a brief token resistance. The lure of ten big ones proved irresistible and Sirota signed up to conduct for the first time in America the high holiday services at the New Kalvarier Synagogue, which only a short time before had moved from its downtown location to Harlem into a former church on 118th Street, which they had bought and remodeled.

That feelings ran high in the councils of the Tlomatzka Synagogue at the news that their chief cantor, after an absence of more than a half a year, was still not even thinking of returning to his post, and to add insult to injury had in his defiance even gone so far as to leave his congregants flat on the holiest days of the year, is putting it mildly. Hot heads urged that he

be instantly dismissed, but wiser counsel prevailed. The matter was held in abeyance for the time being, to be taken up again after the holidays.

Laden with honors and also with a bulging pocketbook almost bursting at the seams, Sirota at long last boarded the liner that carried him back to his anxiously awaiting congregation. His angry trustees put him on the carpet, but after heated debates he was let off with merely a reprimand and censure. They reproved their cantor for his constant barefaced flirting with America and for neglecting his duties at home. They berated him for trying to serve two masters at the same time, and unequitably at that, thus causing Warsaw to get the short end. However, being realists, members of the Board of Trustees had to face up to the fact, that they could not compete in regard to financial rewards with the golden land of the dollar banknotes.

They did, however, hope that Sirota by now was already becoming tired of his constant wanderings, and would henceforth be more inclined to be contented with serving just one master and stay at home.

But if they had any such illusions, they were only deluding themselves. It would seem in retrospect that Sirota had some vague instinctive feeling, something akin to a foggy, indefinably foreboding vision of the future, of the dismal fate that was awaiting him in Warsaw, and he was desperately trying with all his might time and again to run away before it would become too late. He must've felt an irresistible urge to go far, far away, from the place which was destined to become a pyre of fire and a scene of inhuman destruction, to get out from the convicted, doomed city where destiny had prepared for him and his family such a cruel and tragic end.

Too bad that all his efforts were in vain. Fate, it seems, will not be cheated.

CHAPTER 57

THE TRAGIC END OF THE GREAT SIROTA

He and his family perished in a cellar in the Ghetto of Warsaw during Hitler's persecution of Polish Jews — His quarrels with the trustees of the Tlomatzka synagogue — His last High Holiday services in the doomed city.

When Sirota returned home from America, the talk in Warsaw was that this time he had come back with a great deal of money. His cronies had it all figured out. They based their calculations on the time he had spent overseas, and by multiplying it by the alleged fee which he allegedly was able to command per appearance, they arrived at an astronomical figure. As a rule when neighbors and acquaintances estimate the wealth of their friends, the sum total of their arithmetic is pretty generous, at least double or triple of what it in reality is. But even if you discount the exaggerations, there usually still remains a grain of truth in the appraisal of outsiders and so it was in this case.

Sirota did not become a millionaire overnight, still his American tour did yield him a pretty nice nest egg. But the trouble was that it did not last long. Money, in general, had a habit of slipping out through his fingers before he even had a chance to count it. The reason was that he had too many partners who helped him in disposing of it. The members of his large family, who had little or no earning ability, were accustomed to lean heavily on his broad shoulders, and they saw to it that the American bundle of greenbacks should get into circulation without undue procrastination. They were experts in giving funds the widest possible distribution and soon there was nothing left.

In the Bible, it is related that when the grain in the sacks brought home by the brethren of Joseph was exhausted, their father Jacob asked them to go down once more to the land of the Pharoahs and purchase a new load of produce. In the household of Sirota the procedure was different. When the reserve of dollars became exhausted, it was not the sons who went out in search of some kind of employment with the object of replenishing their funds. They reversed the example set by the patriarch Jacob, who sent out his sons for provisions. Sirota's sons entrusted the noble mission to their father, asking him to make ready for another expedition, to take off for another American tour, with the object of securing and bringing back a new supply of fresh fodder, with which to refill their empty and bottomless sacks.

It reminds one of the story of the father, who awakened from his sleep at night, felt very thirsty and, rousing his sons who slept in the same room, he asked that one of them bring him a glass of water.

Here was an opportunity to fulfill the commandment of "Kibbud Ahv" ("Honor thy father") and the privilege could only fall to one of them. But who shall be the lucky one to get the chance of performing the "mitzvah" ("good deed")? A contest ensued, each of the sons pretending to be eager to do this service for his parent and to have the most just claim to the task.

The bickering was of course only a put on. In reality none of them relished the prospect of having to get out of the warm bed. To break the impasse they began to auction off the right and by means of that procedure determine which one of them should be given the coveted honor of rendering this service for his father.

The highest bidder, who bought the "mitzwa" (deed of piety), then in a most generous gesture, which is a time-honored Jewish custom, transferred the honor to the father himself, letting him perform the "mitzwa" of going and bringing the water. Sirota's children, too, generously and unselfishly, let the old man have the "mitzwa" and ceded to him the honor of procuring the wherewithal with which to finance their expensive tastes. Wasn't it most nice of them to let their father get all the credit?

* * *

Ever since he had returned to Warsaw from his extended tour of America, he continued to maintain contact with managers and various institutions in the United States, who made him all sort of propositions. But knowing full well that it would not be easy for him to secure once more a leave of absence from his jealous trustees, he paid no serious attention to any of the plans submitted to him from abroad.

But as the economic situation worsened day by day and due to the growing inflation, prices skyrocketed, Sirota too felt the pinch in his pocketbook. The ever-increasing drain on his meagre resources compelled him to reassess his position under the changed circumstances and to find ways and means to remedy it.

In 1924, he received an offer of ten thousand dollars for the High

Holidays from the Congregation "Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol" of Harlem, New York. When he figured out how much this sum amounted to when translated into zlotys, he found it impossible to withstand the temptation. Here was the answer to his problem. Opportunity was knocking on his door. To ignore it would be sheer folly, an unforgivable blunder.

But how to get around the clearly foreseeable resistance, he was bound to encounter? How to overcome the almost certain unwillingness of his superiors to grant him another leave of absence. That was his problem.

By a lucky coincidence, he had just received a summons from an American court to appear as defendant in a civil action brought against him. It is not clear, whether it was still the old case of the charges of alienation of affection brought against him by the wife of his brother or some other new court action by a cantorial manager. He now had in his possession official documents to prove that judicial authorities desired his presence in America. Armed with this evidence, he applied for a leave of absence, so as to be able to defend himself in the pending suit overseas. He coupled his request with the assurance that he would without fail return in time for the High Holy days.

But the trustees of the congregation, as was to be expected, were skeptical. It was the end of June and the whole setup and timing looked quite suspicious to them. It seemed highly unlikely that Sirota would make a hurried trip to the United States for the sole purpose of putting in an appearance in a court of law, and particularly so close to the holiday season. They suspected that the court order was just a smoke screen.

Convinced that their cantor was once more planning some extracurricular activity and taking his assurance that he would be back for Rosh Hashonoh with a grain of salt, they put off a definite decision. Trying to gain time, they let the matter drag on, giving Sirota an evasive answer, neither granting nor rejecting his request. They pretended to be still considering the matter. Realizing after protracting stalling by his bosses that he was waiting in vain for the desired permission, the cantor decided to take matter in his own hands. Without as much as a good-by, he took off and left for America.

According to some sources, he had the signed contract for the High Holy days already tucked away in his pocket before boarding the ship, although Sirota himself denied this. It is also quite possible that both versions are right, namely, that the "Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol" of Harlem had sent a signed and sealed contract to Sirota to which he himself had not as yet affixed his own signature at the time he set out on his journey. If this was so, it is conceivable that his pledge to return to his pulpit for the oncoming holy days was given by him in good faith, and if the trustees had granted his request readily and willingly, he might have kept his word. But having been compelled by their negative attitude to act on his own responsibility, he knew very well that he was in trouble with the trustees, and their strained relations, in his estimation, could hardly become much worse.

And as the saying goes, "If you already are eating ham or bacon, let

it, at least, drip down the beard" — that is, you might as well get enough of it." Sirota also reasoned that since he undoubtedly would be put on the carpet anyway on one count of misconduct, he might as well compound the "sin" by committing an additional transgression and at least make it worthwhile. So they would try him on two counts and if he had to take his medicine, he would at least have something to show for it. As he said, "I'll get the onus, so let me get also the bonus."

After he landed in New York and had taken the final irrevocable step arriving at a definite agreement with his American sponsors to officiate under their auspices on the High Holidays he advised the officials of the Tlomatzka Synagogue that the court hearing had been postponed and set for a date between Rosh Hashonoh and Yom Kippur, which circumstance compelled him to prolong his stay in New York until the trial was held. He expressed his profound regret that factors beyond his control prevented him from being at his post on the holy festivals.

Warsaw Jewry reacted to the news with a violent outburst of public indignation and indictment of the unheard-of behavior of a religious dignitary. The entire city was in an uproar. There was general condemnation of Sirota for deserting his pulpit on the days when he was most needed, with an absurd, trumped-up excuse, to which nobody gave any credence.

There were many among the members of the congregation who demanded the immediate ouster of his family from their residence, which was community-owned property. But the execution of this drastic, hasty step was vehemently opposed by the hosts of Sirota's friends, and wiser counsel prevailed. Such precipitate action was ruled out, at least for the present. The most important, immediate task was to find a suitable substitute to fill the unexpectedly created void. Cantor Tchipook, an import from Kurland, was at last chosen on a temporary basis. In his favor was the fact that his powerful tenor voice was somewhat reminiscent of Sirota's.

Rosh Hashonoh came. All was quiet on the synagogue front. There was not the faintest sign of the usual hustle and bustle, the pushing and fighting, the customary scenes of masses storming the entrance and the police repulsing the attacks. This time calm and tranquility reigned around the Tlomatzka holy edifice. The yawning sextons walked around with bored expressions with not a stitch of work to do.

Inside the sanctuary, the scene was dominated, curiously enough, by the spirit of the absentee: Sirota, who was practically a Warsaw landmark to the Jewish inhabitants of the city. It was he and not the cantor who happened to stand at that moment at the altar, who was on everybody's mind and around whom the discussions of the congregants centered. The cantor who abandoned the ship, which was entrusted to his care, was the theme of heated debates that went on even during the services between those, who condemned Sirota's unforgiveable action and those who sided with him and defended his conduct.

On one point, however, there was agreement in both camps. They all

missed him on these holiest days of the Jewish calendar. As one of them so poignantly expressed his chagrined feelings, "You feed a turkey all year round in the expectation of feasting on it on the holiday and just when you are about to reap the reward for your efforts, lo and behold, somebody comes along and steals the fattened-up bird from under your nose." They talked so much about him in Warsaw that Sirota in New York must have had a severe case of the hiccups. Or is it the burning sensation of his ears that the much-talked-about individual is supposed to feel?

The congregants were talking more than praying. Two people were discussing the officiating cantor. "He doesn't take me." "Not my cup of tea," remarks one. "What do you know?" retorts the other, "bist a meyven vi a katz of heyven." (In Yiddish it rhymes — "you are an expert on singing like a cat is on yeast.") "Don't you hear how he shakes the 'Umaazin troouh' (givest heed to the trumpet blast)?" (This sound of the "Shofar" [ram's horn] is supposed to be a tremolo, go zig-zag rapidly up and down).

A third worshiper vows that he is determined to travel to America to attend Sirota's services, for nobody can execute the "shalsheles'lech," the winding coloratura passages, in his inimitable style.

Another congregant whispers into the ear of his neighbor and calls his attention to the fact that the "Oshamno" (We Have Trespassed) just recited by the cantor is stolen from Roitman.

"Well," replied the other, "still this Cantor Tchipook seems to be an honest man. Listen to him admitting immediately 'Oshamno, gozalno' (I stole the Oshamno)."

That Cantor Tchipook had bitten off more than he could digest, taken on too big a task and that he was at a great disadvantage in trying to live up to the long established, great reputation of his predecessor was beyond question. Starting out with little chance of success, he was also plagued by bad luck. Trying to show off with the power of his lungs and to outdo Sirota, on the first day of Rosh Hoshonoh he performed with such bombastic, forced and overdone vocal antics that he overstrained his chords. On the second day, he was already hoarse and barely able to get through the service.

On Yom Kippur during the concluding service, he fainted, apparently from the strain of chanting the services and the long fast, and he regained consciousness only after they revived him, by special dispensation of the rabbi, with a glass of milk. He then caught such a serious cold that he was unable to officiate at all on the Succoth festival. That marked the end of the Tchipook episode, as far as the Tlomatzka Synagogue was concerned. (He later came to America where a brother of his was the president of the Park Place Synagogue of Brooklyn, and by whose pull he was engaged to officiate in that house of worship on the high holy days).

And what about the prodigal son? As is usual in the sequences of similar stories, in this case, too, he returned all right. After he chanted the High Holy day services for the Harlem religious institution, which were held at the auditorium of the "Star Casino" of New York and collected

the handsome remuneration, Sirota, as if nothing untoward had happened, came back to Warsaw, ready to reoccupy his pulpit which, he was quite confident, nobody else but he could possibly fill adequately.

But as it turned out, he had made his calculation without the boss. Who was the real de facto boss of the organization? The whole power in the presidium of the congregation lay in the hands of the president and his clique who formed the kitchen-cabinet, where the decisions and policies were made. The other trustees and members of the board did not count for much. Not only were their opinions not followed, they were usually not even asked to express them. The actual, all-powerful bosses treated them like "headshakers." Their role was to nod approvingly and to sing "amen" to what was dished out from the kitchen cabinet and put on the table for them to consume without asking questions. The verdict of the dictatorial moguls was that a sin of such gravity, as was committed by Sirota, called for a minimal punishment of three years of shooting and four years of hanging. But even treating him with the utmost compassion, failing that, the punishment of removing him from his post was the very least, that could be meted out.

The general opinion among the populace on the other hand, was that he ought to be given another chance and reinstated into office. But who pays any heed to the will of the common masses? The competent leaders had issued their incontrovertible decision. They constituted the supreme court, from which there cannot be any appeal. They even rejected a suggestion, that at the least they ought to hear, what Sirota had to say in his own defense, before stripping him irrevocably of his incumbency.

The arbitrary procedure of the stubborn heads of the community evoked rumblings of discontent and stormy repercussions in wide circles all over the city. A veritable shower of abuse, indignation and angry expressions of protest were heaped upon the heads of those who were responsible, by their dictatorial edict, for depriving the people of their beloved cantor's cherished services. The air of communal politics became saturated with explosive fuel. Heated dissensions and bitter, fiery quarrels broke out between the admirers of Sirota and his adversaries, a controversy that smoldered for two long years.

The unbending attitude of the high and mighty magnates who held the reins and were determined to have their way brought in its wake serious and quite expensive consequences for the Tlomatzka Congregation. Pursuing relentlessly the ruinous course which they had adopted, they appointed Cantor Helfand to the vacant position of chief cantor. Albeit he inherited one of the foremost and fervently coveted cantorial seats extant, his lot was by no means an enviable one. The adherents of Sirota took out their chagrin on him. He became the convenient target of their poisonous arrows.

Matters went from bad to worse. The synagogue, even at the height of the High Holy day season, was half empty, as if the public had gone on strike. This undeclared, silent but effective boycott made itself felt and made deep inroads into the treasury of the congregation. Revenues had

fallen off sharply and the trend was toward still lower levels.

And how was the ousted cantor doing amid the controversy which was raging around his person? Well, if any unemployed cantor would only do half as well as he was doing, he would, I can assure you, rather remain unemployed. For one who had just been sacked from his job, he was a pretty busy fellow. Only now that he was not tied down to any particular congregation was he really able to accept engagements for concerts and guest-appearances in synagogues, which poured in from all over the globe. He was constantly on the road, officiating every Sabbath in another place and in addition he also gave concerts on weekdays. Needless to say, that on festivals he had several offers to choose from. For the oncoming High Holy days, he again accepted a call from New York. This time his services were for the benefit of the "Old folks home of Harlem" and they were held at the "Hunts Point Palace" located in the borough of the Bronx.

But notwithstanding the fact that financially he was better off as a freelancer, he nevertheless kept up his campaign for the vindication of his honor and did not cease to demand that the trustees of the congregation join him in submitting the case to a court of arbitration and/or honor and give him a chance to present his side of the controversy. His avowed goal was not so much the regaining of the cantorial chair, as rather the clearing of his name, character and reputation.

Instead of the passing of time resulting in the lessening of the tension, in this instance it had the opposite effect of widening the gap between the quarreling parties. The fight gradually grew hotter and bitterer, culminating finally in a showdown which broke up a meeting of the board of directors of the Tlomatzka congregation. A delegation of the enraged populace stormed into the chamber, where the assembled cream of the Jewish high society was deliberating, and formulating their demand in strong, forceful, unceremonious language, stating in essence that the people were getting sick and tired and would brook no more delaying tactics, they wanted to see Sirota reinstated and they expected positive action at once.

The big powerful solons woke up to the realization that public opinion is also a factor to be reckoned with, and one who tries to ignore it does so at his own peril. They found out that they had by their own folly gotten themselves into a tight corner, from which it was high time to try and extricate themselves. They were compelled to swallow their pride and make a strategic retreat from their untenable position. It did not take long and there was proclaimed a complete reconciliation between the congregation and its former cantor. The meeting at which the new agreement between Sirota and the committee of the synagogue was ratified took place on the 13th day of June 1926 under the chairmanship of Shabsay Bregman. Peace reigned at last. The divorced couple was reunited. (Prezes Bregman was caught on a business trip away from Warsaw at the outbreak of the World War in 1914 and was unable to return home in the interim. Michael Bergson functioned as Prezes and Stanislaw Nathanson as Vice Prezes.) When the joyous news was announced, there was general jubilation throughout the city. On Friday evening, a few days after the Tlomat-

zka armistice was signed, Sirota once more stood at the altar which had become so familiar to him in the course of the years. It was a very festive, warm and sentimental return home. After Pinchas Sherman, the assistant cantor, had concluded the recitation of the Mincha service, the two chief trustees entered the sanctuary with Sirota, flanked by them on both sides. After leading him to the pulpit, they retreated to their respective seats. As soon as Sirota hove into sight, the choir intoned in his honor "Boruch habo" (Blessed be the one who enters in the name of the Lord).

That the synagogue was packed to the rafters goes without saying. Neither could it have come as a great surprise to anyone that in the surrounding streets the scenes so reminiscent of the good old times were once again replayed. It was the familiar story all over again. Policemen, some on horses, others on foot, assisted by the seven sextons, pushed back and drove away the sinful creatures whose only crime was that they too wanted to hear again a bit of "Kabolos Shabos" (chants of greeting the entry of the Sabbath) from Sirota's mouth.

Quite understandably, he tried his best to satisfy the public, and to compensate them for the two years of his absence. He gave generously from his God given, bountiful talent. He threw his mighty voice about in careless abandon, belting out the highest imaginable tones with ridiculous ease, and in a sudden change of pace toning down his voice to the softest, whispering pianissimo with such masterful skill and artistry, that it took the enthralled listeners' breath away.

It was all very spectacular — the intricate, impressive feats of vocal gymnastics were very effective in evoking the admiration and acclaim of the crowd — but less likely to win acclaim from the experts, some of whom became critical of the "new Sirota," expressing the opinion that his presentation this time was more in the nature of a mere exercise in virtuosity, than a religious service. They thought that he placed more emphasis on the brilliant facade, the artificial glittering embellishment of the superficial form of his chants rather than on the essence, the inner content, the heart of the prayer.

To the experts in liturgical music, who had followed closely the evolution of Sirota's career, it became clear that his style had in the years since his absence undergone a marked transformation. It was also evident that this new development came about largely because of the influence exerted on him by his experiences in America.

Under the long reign of Gritzhendler, the worshipers of the Tlomatzka Synagogue had become used to a stereotyped form of service, which followed essentially the dry, plain, choral lines of Zultzer and Lewandowsky.

With the arrival of Sirota on the scene, a shift toward a more traditional East-European style of worship occurred. Having come to Warsaw from Wilna, he brought with him the liturgical usage of that region, which put more emphasis on the artistic aspect of the cantorial chants, than on the cold dignity and modern sedate church-like form of the service.

Sirota succeeded in infusing some warmth and traditional content in-

to the liturgy at his new post and in putting the stamp of his own individuality on the musical interpretation of the prayers. But it was only to a certain limited extent that he was able to change the trend. In many respects he adapted himself to the more modern ways of the then prevailing repertoire of the Tlomatzka religious service codex, so that in the final analysis it was still far from the Wilna style.

The assistant cantor, Pinchas Sherman, related that when he on one occasion attempted to go beyond the usual routine of reading the service and tried to employ some vocal stunts and a more elaborate, emphatic musical interpretation of the prayers, the Rabbi, Dr. Shmuel Avrohom Poznansky, called him into his office and lectured him, saying, "Our Torah is so beautiful only because it is simple, straightforward and without artifice and stunts. A service can also be beautiful only if it is plain and dignified."

In America, Sirota encountered the criticism that he was too dry, that there was not enough heart and feeling in his chanting, that there was lacking the Jewish sigh, cry and lament. His brilliant, colossal voice shone with its might and bright, blinding color, but it failed to stir and move the heart. To these reproaches, his answer was, "The crying with crocodile tears, the sighing and the artificial moaning and tear-jerking sobbing I leave to the Yossele'ch, the Berele'ch and to the Moyshelech. I prefer to pray and chant in a dignified manner, as befits a modern, cultured man of the cloth."

But notwithstanding this disclaimer, certain typical American mannerisms did unbeknownst creep in and influence him. His repeated contact with American audiences could not fail to leave at least some of its characteristic marks on him. In his understandable desire to win over public opinion, he unwittingly drew nearer to the style which was then in general vogue and he gradually adopted more and more of the methods which proved to have wider popular appeal in the Jewish musical circles of the New World.

When he was reinstated and returned to his former pulpit in Warsaw, a new Sirota was unveiled before his Polish followers. However, the American imported goodies, which he bagan serving up in ever-increasing does, did not impress very much the devout of his congregation. The "American Way" was not very popular with the leaders of the Tlomatzka Synagogue. Their taste ran in an opposite direction. They deprecated and shunned what they called "the vulgarities" relished by their co-religionists overseas.

The way Pinchas Sherman tells it, there began to arise criticism of the "new look" introduced by Sirota. He was taken to task for his frequent use of banal and chep effects and for his sudden outbreaks of unrelated, stunt-like roulades and coloratura acrobatics. He also incurred the displeasure of the authorities for his latest innovation of whistling in his falsetto, which he had never possessed naturally and which was patently artificially contrived; they looked also askance at his too frequent repeating of the text and his lately adopted habit of throwing around the

words in arbitrary disorder, in utter disregard of the sequence in which they appeared in the prayer book. Critical words were heard for his unnecessary dragging out of the musical phrases and high cadenzas, and for in general praying too "chniokish" in the fashion of the ultra-extremist chassidic sects.

In essence it can be summarized that for America he was too choral, too dry, too modern, and for Tlomatzka he had become too old-fashioned, too traditionally Jewish. The outsiders, the general public, the plain folk not only did not object to, but on the contrary appreciated and enjoyed the new features, the breath-taking stunts, the more fervid, sentimental laments. But the conservative trustees of the congregation looked askance and with definitely disapproving eyes at the intrusion of the imported fashions, which they considered a menace to the decorum of their sanctuary. According to this version, as related by Cantor Sherman, Sirota, with his new style, could not in the long run fit in anymore with the atmosphere of the Tlomatzka spirit and point of view. Enraged by the denigration of his art he slammed the door for the second time, pulled up stakes and left.

Let us hear what Sirota himself had to say, "I was compelled to carry on a continuous, incessant battle with the assimilationist bosses of the synagogue, who would have liked to have a cut and dried 'Obercantor' for their temple, rather than a simple Yiddish, traditional 'Chazzon,' and a 'Litvak' [Lithuanian] at that."

Well, there you have the two versions, both of which might very well be true.

Well, as you yourself might have deduced from the storm signals that have appeared on the horizon, the peace pact did not stay in effect very long. It endured for not more than one year. If we are to accept the definition and version of Sirota, it had never, not even at its inception, had the earmarks of a really effective peace pact. It was merely an armistice, a temporary suspension in the series of hostilities. But from certain straws in the wind, we must conclude that the main underlying reason for the resumption of war was none of the above-cited spiritual differences, but rather a very prosaic, pedestrian consideration: money.

On a sunny day in the month of July of 1927, Sirota left for Cherbourg without any of the congregational officers having an inkling of his plans and as they claimed, without his giving any of them notification of his departure. To be sure, a letter from the cantor did arrive by mail in the office of the congregation, addressed to the president, Bregman, but by that time Sirota had already boarded the liner Aquitania, bound for America. In the letter, he complained that simultaneously with the written agreement signed at the time of the reconciliation, he was verbally given additional promises, which he accepted at their face value, but which failed to materialize. They were forgotten or deliberately ignored and shelved. Particularly did rankle their failure to settle the matter of his pension status, which, they had assured him, would be favorably acted upon.
We shall cite two paragraphs of the long lists of recriminations in

which the letter of particulars did abound. "Aside from my fixed salary, I have no other income. I have to marry off a daughter and this extra expense I'm unable to bear by relying only on my bare compensation from the congregation. Because of the widespread overestimation of my income, the internal revenue office has levied high taxes on me, which I'm unable to remit. My requests for an increase in my salary have consistently met with a refusal and as a consequence I am deeply in debt.

"The prevailing general opinion is that Sirota is wealthy enough and does not need any of the customary side incomes. The lowly intrigues, jealousies and fights that are everyday occurrences among the functionaries of the synagogue make my work difficult and my position untenable, and have caused me unbearable anguish. For the enumerated reasons I am hereby compelled to tender my resignation."

Well, how do you like such a confession of near bankruptcy? Did it ring true to the addressees? After so many years in the limelight of world fame, after having allegedly garnered in so many legendary honoraria in the course of his tours, which took him to the farthest corners of the globe, after earning the fabulous royalties, which his best selling records had yielded, he professes to be at the brink of insolvency? Is it conceivable that there really was nothing left of the bountiful treasures, the rich fruits of his lifelong toil as one of the top men in his profession? Where had these colossal sums gone? How could they have disappeared into thin air? If indeed such was the case, it remains an unsolved puzzle.

But putting aside conjectures, let us deal in facts and return to Sirota's resignation, which was a black-on-white fact in the hands of the trustees. Did he mean it seriously? Had he really decided to sever all connections with his congregation and to write "finis" to the Warsaw chapter of his fabulous career?

From all available evidence, it would seem that one might be justified in drawing the conclusion, that he had no such intentions. Rather does this move of his appear to have been a tactical maneuver, a repeat performance of the modus operandi, the cat-and-mouse play, in which he made his debut in 1924.

He hoped to be able to accomplish the same feat once more. He was once again ready to take a calculated risk. His plan was to make a flying trip to the golden land, to grab there a three-day High Holiday engagement, garner the rich harvest and return home to once more reoccupy his position, as if nothing untoward had happened. He figured that the congregation would never be able to find a worthy successor to fill the vacancy and would have no other alternative, but to take him back when he'll be ready. Wasn't that the ultimate outcome the last time? He was quite confident that the result in this second round could not possibly be any different.

But one precaution he nevertheless was careful enough to take, having learned his lesson from his experience in the similar previous case, when his family was almost put out into the street. In that instance, his friends barely succeeded in preventing their ouster from the apartment,

which was the property of the congregation. To save them from any likely embarrassment, in case the congregation should this time in a nasty mood be bent on taking revenge on him and go to court with a petition of eviction, he decided to evacuate his family voluntarily and transfer his residence to an apartment in a house which he owned. Unbeknownst to even his closest friends, he proceeded to have the furniture hauled away piecemeal under the cloak of the darkness of the night. All preparations were made in the strictest secrecy.

I was told by Moshe Koussevitsky, that he happened to pass through Warsaw at that very time. Being obliged to spend a few hours in the city between trains, he decided at the suggestion of a friend of his, to pay a visit to the home of his colleague. Upon entering the residence of Sirota, they were surprised to find the apartment almost completely bare, to the extent that there was not even a chair to sit down on. The host was naturally greatly embarrassed and apologized to his unexpected guests for the great disorder in the house, mumbling some trumped up reason for the unusual chaotic sight. When his visitors, to make conversation, asked him the customary question, "What's new?" he replied with an enigmatic smile, "Oh! God willing there will be some good news." But he did not elaborate.

Several days later, the bombshell exploded and Sirota disappeared. The story went that like a thief, he made his getaway at midnight, without saying good-bye to anybody. Warsaw was agog. It was the front page sensation of the newspapers, which even editorially commented on the portentous occurrence, which was the talk of the town. "Why did he have to run away in such a secretive way?" wrote one commentator. "Warsaw is not in the habit of holding anybody by force."

When Sirota arrived in New York, he was besieged by reporters, who wanted to know his version of the flight. "The rumor that I ran away is false," he indignantly claimed, "I had no reason to flee. I resigned my position for good and sufficient reasons and I left like a gentleman. I made no bones about my dissatisfaction and no secret of my plans. I said goodbye and took leave from many of the congregational members and from Rabbi Perlmutter. They thought I was joking, that is why they were caught with their guards down when I followed through."

Warsaw was in a quandary. The High Holy days were imminent and the urgent question was where to get a suitable replacement quickly. Professor Moshe Schorr, the Chief Rabbi, as well as practically all the trustees were away on vacation. This was indeed a bad time for a community to be left in such a predicament by the sudden defection of the cantor. In the emergency, a group of members of the congregation took matters into their own hands and on their own responsibility contacted Moshe Koussevitsky, who was at that time chief cantor of Wilna, and they invited him to officiate on the following "Shabos Mavorchim" (Sabbath when the blessing for the new moon is recited). He had made an enviable reputation in the Polish metropolis by two successful guest appearances, one of which was a Sabbath service at the congregation "Sinai" for the benefit of

the "Tomchey Aniyim" (supporters of the needy) organization, and the other at a concert in the "Tzirk" (circus) Hall. Thus he had gained a host of admirers.

There were put forward other propositions as well. One newspaper reported, "Some of the members are letting their imagination roam and are talking about Yossele Rosenblatt. It would be a fair exchange and a just retribution. America took away our cantor, so let's bring over here the famous American cantor.

"They point with pride to the fact that such a prominent Jewish community as Warsaw could very well afford the luxury of acquiring and luring away from the boastful rich Americans their cherished possession — Yossele. It's worth the effort to show those arrogant nouveau-riche that the Old World still retains the upper hand in cultural matters. Others are discussing the possibility of inducing Mordechay Hershman to accept the post."

But all these suggestions were of no immediate merit. There was scant likelihood of being able to complete arrangements with any of the above-mentioned great cantorial personalities in time for the oncoming High Holiday season.

So as a stopgap measure, a provisional cantor was engaged. He was Aaron Zelig Altshool (a son of Yoshe Slonimer, the famous cantor), who conducted a music school for the training and coaching of opera singers in Berlin. On the first day of Rosh Hashonoh, things did not go well for him at all. On the second day, matters improved somewhat, but of course it was still a far cry from what the worshipers of the Tlomatzka Synagogue had become accustomed to. The tense situation was alleviated to a large extent by the special efforts made by the choirmaster, Eisenstadt, to compensate the congregants in some measure for the defection of Sirota by presenting a marvellous alto, who charmed the listeners with his solos, in which he revealed exceptional virtuosity.

After the conclusion of the holiday season, a flood of candidates descended on Warsaw for auditions and after listening to about two dozen applicants, the trustees made their choice and Moshe Koussevitsky fell heir to the mantle of Sirota.

Wilna, which thus for the second consecutive time lost her cantor to Warsaw, became enraged."What kind of business is this?" was the furious reaction of the Jews of the Lithuanian city, as expressed in their press. "Has Wilna become a factory of cantors for Warsaw? Do we raise masters for it to grab our best product?" Well, without prejudging the question of whether or not it was right and proper for Warsaw to lure away repeatedly cantors from Wilna, one fact can be stated without fear of contradiction. The Wilna factory produced first class merchandise, which was the envy of all her sister cities.

Well, what about the prodigal son? How did he fare in his adventurous undertaking? Sirota, according to his plan, officiated at the High Holiday services, which were held at the newly erected "Winter Garden" of the Bronx for the benefit of and under the auspices of the "Beth

Hamedrosh Hagodol of Harlem." Pocketing the respectable compensation, he made haste to rush back to Warsaw in the confident hope, that with nothing more serious than a mild reprimand, the matter would be settled and things would once more return with him again at the helm of the Tlomatzka Synagogue.

However, contrary to his expectations, this time his well-laid strategy backfired. Sirota squared away for a determined fight to regain his post. For long months, the weary, interminable sessions of the court of religious law and the arbitration courts dragged on until finally the verdict went against Sirota. He never again prayed at the altar which he had occupied for nineteen years.

A new chapter had begun in the colorful career of Gershon Sirota. Another round of wanderings, but with the noteworthy difference, that in the past, when he went on a tour of guest appearances, it was as the chief cantor of Warsaw. Now, however, he was constantly on the road like a nomad in the desert, shlepping himself around the world, dangling, without being securely tied to an anchor on which to lean, and without the prestige, which his position had formerly given him. With the best years of his life behind him, this surely was not a very desirable state of affairs to find himself in. New York, Chicago, Montreal, Buenos Aires, Tel Aviv, all played host to the ex-cantor of the Tlomatzka Synagogue. Countless other communities were on the itinerary of his concert tours. Wherever there was a remote corner on the globe where Jews could be found, there he gravitated to and dispensed the pearls of his God-given talent.

Particularly gratifying for him was his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1928. He was the first cantor to lead divine services in the Allenby Avenue Great Synagogue of Tel Aviv, when it was still in the process of being constructed and before even the roof of the new sacred edifice was completed.

The enthusiastic response of the worshipers to Sirota's artistic reading of the Sabbath ritual was so warm, that after the conclusion of the religious service his fans hoisted him up and carried him on their shoulders in a procession of triumph.

But in the long run he found the traveling around to be too taxing and not very lucrative. The accolades were music to his ears but the rewards fell far short of expectations and were not commensurate with the expended efforts. He got tired of this gypsy-like existence and was glad to accept a call from another Warsaw congregation, agreeing to occupy the cantorial pulpit at the "Nozsik" Synagogue.

This position, to be sure, did not carry with it the great prestige of the Tlomatzka Synagogue, but it provided Sirota with a passable home base, from which to operate and with an opportunity to stay at home for extended periods. He enjoyed the peace, rest, and the companionship of his dear ones, which he had missed for so long and, therefore, now desired more than anything that he could gain by hopping around the wide world.

Sirota became a homebody, which was an unfamiliar role for him to accept. In June 1934, Warsaw celebrated the 30th jubilee of Sirota's toiling in the vineyard of the Lord. A grand concert was arranged in honor of

this occasion, which took place at the Coliseum of the Polish metropolis. Among the performers were the famous opera star Tito Ruffo, Cantor Moshe Steinberg who had succeeded Moshe Koussevitsky as chief cantor of Wilna, Cantor Helfand of London, who on one occasion had served on a provisional basis at the Tlomatzka Synagogue, Sirota's eminently talented daughter Helena, and the choir under the leadership of Davidowitch.

The affair drew a tremendous crowd, which was particularly representative of the musical world and which turned out en masse to honor enthusiastically its revered dean. Neither did any of the main Jewish organizations of the city fail to participate in the great event. It was an evening of glory and well-earned homage for the veteran celebrity of the cantorial world, which compensated him for all his heartaches, troubles and tribulations.

That same year, on the eve of "Zchor Bris" (Remember the Covenant) preceding the inauguration of the High Holiday season, he sang on the radio the two prayers of the New Year service "Unesane Tokef" (Let's celebrate the mighty holiness of the day) and "Ato Nigleyso" (Thou has appeared) with the assistance of Davidowitch's choir. This program was also beamed to America successfully.

However, the feat did add few laurels to the crown of Sirota. That he was not at his best is putting it mildly. The voice had all the remarkable attributes that had been his trademark all along. But the manner and pace of the presentation left much to be desired. The trouble seems to have been that he attempted to do too much in the limited space of time, which had been allotted him. The way it came across the air channels on this side of the Atlantic, it sounded as if Sirota was jumping headlong over mountains and valleys with his characteristic staccatos, trills, roulades, and coloratura passages at such a hurried pace that the tail end of the "Ato Nigleyso" composition dissolved itself into a wild "bravura-allegro tempo" with the result that the words became undistinguishable and all that the listener was able to hear was mighty cannon-ball-like Sirota notes.

Running true to form, he could not stay for any length of time at his new position either. He felt out of place at the Nozsik Synagogue. To play second fiddle was humiliating for his ego. In 1935, we find him reunited with his former choirmaster Leo Leow, and this time they met in Tel Aviv, where Leow directed a choir for him at their High Holy day services, which took place at the Mograbi Theatre.

His next stop was Buenos Aires. When I was there I learned from authentic sources that his success in the Argentinian capital was less than overwhelming. The Days of Awe of 1936 and 1937 saw Sirota chanting the services in the Symphony Hall of Lodz assisted by the "Hazomir" ensemble.

He gradually drifted down the rungs of the ladder of fame. In 1938, he appeared again, in America, this time in Chicago, where he was engaged to conduct the Rosh Hoshonoh and Yom Kippur services at the Mariampol Congregation "Anshey Sholom." On the following festival of Suc-

coth, he officiated in the nearby city of Milwaukee. This was his last visit to America. He managed yet, to get in a guest appearance in Winnipeg, Canada.

No sooner was the holiday over, than he and his son Naftoly, who was his steady companion, departed in a great hurry. The reason was that they had received word from Warsaw, that Mrs. Sirota had been taken ill and was in a very serious condition. They sailed for home and there they remained. Fate had made an appointment for them with the angel of death. They were to meet him in the doomed city of Warsaw.

His devoted friends warned him and urged him to run for his life before the German hordes who were poised to overrun the city came into view, but he preferred to remain with his sick wife, his family and his people and to share their lot. Furthermore, he feared no evil at the hands of the occupying alien troops. Remembering the days of the previous German rule during World War I and recalling the respect and courtesy with which the occupation forces had conducted themselves toward him then, he was not unduly concerned or frightened at the prospect of having to go through another such experience. By the time he found out to his surprise and confounded sorrow, that these invaders did not in any sense resemble the humane and cultured Germans of the good old days and that this time wild beasts in human form had burst in on them, it was too late to do anything about it.

The feeble efforts which he made to extricate himself from the trap, into which he and all his dear ones had fallen were fruitless. On the first day of April 1940, he succeeded in dispatching a plea for help to the American cantorial manager, Yehoshooah Wallach, in which he requested him to send American visas and affidavits for him, his son Naftoly and his daughter Yenta. A few days later, probably taking into account the possibility of one of the letters failing to reach its destination, he sent another missive, this time a postal card, in which he repeated in even more urgent language his desperate plea for rescue from the pit of the German Gehenna. He also wrote to his Chicago manager J. Hyman, and to his one-time associate Leo Leow.

(Let it be recorded that from these last communications of Sirota we learn that his full name was Yitzchock Gershon, inasmuch as he asked that his visa be made out in that name).

The way Wallach tells the sad story, he immediately upon receiving the letters contacted some of the most prominent personalities of the liturgical profession, wealthy colleagues and friends of Sirota's, urging them to join him in a determined effort to respond to the call of the incarcerated great singer of Israel. But nobody showed the slightest interest in the cantor's plight. He by himself was in no position to accomplish anything constructive on behalf of the languishing cantor by his own efforts.

It speaks volumes for the ungratefulness of human beings. Sirota at the height of his career was the toast of the scores of professionals, whom he befriended and helped in their climb to prominence. But Sirota in trou-

ble had nobody to turn to. His fair-weather friends, several of whom he similarly contacted, deserted him in the hour of his greatest need. On soberer thought, though, what could anyone have done?

His fate was sealed. The last sign of life from him was dispatched from the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto on the 24th of April 1941. It was a postal card sent again to Wallach. Although he must have sensed that it was all in vain, he seemingly rationalized that perhaps his previous letters had been lost. Clinging desperately to his last ray of hope, he begged pitifully for mercy, for a last minute reprieve for him and Naftoly. He made no mention any more of his daughter, who by then probably had already succumbed to the unbearable tortures.

After that nothing but total deadly silence. It was learned later that in the year 1941, Sirota still led the imprisoned Jews of the Warsaw ghetto in the prayers of the Day of Atonement. This was his swan song. He was fully aware that he was caught in a trap without any hope of escape, all paths of rescue were closed and tightly sealed up.

In order to free him from the threat of being commandeered for forcible labor duty or perhaps even to be sent away to an annihilation camp, Abraham Ganzweich, the founder of the "Quick Help" (officially it was called "Board to Combat Speculation" and since it was located at number 13 Leshno Street the general public referred to it as "Dreitzentel" [13th]) appointed Gershon Sirota as honorary chairman of the organization, His oldest son as chief doctor inspector, another son of Sirota administrative director as well as his youngest son to the post of manager of the bureau. Ganzweich, originally from Chenstochov and later of Lodz, on arriving in Warsaw became some sort of grey eminence, an influential "Moshke" in the circles of the Nazi brass. He knew where a door can be opened and often he was successful in having a harsh decree of the occupation force rescinded.

The organization which he headed had no connection with the officially recognized institutions that had been in existence and were functioning long before his, like the "Yudenrat" (Jewish Council) and "Self-Help." The drawing to his side and enlisting as co-workers into his newly created bureau the famous, and by the whole Jewish community, highly esteemed cantor together with his sons was a clever, cunning chess move on his part, with the well-founded calculation and expectation that their identification with its activities would lend respectability and prestige to the "Dreitzentel" in the eyes of the ghetto population and perhaps also facilitate his task in his negotiations with the military authorities.

There were various differing opinions among the ghetto dwellers regarding Sirota's association with the enigmatic individual patronized by the Nazis, who eventually was also liquidated by the murderers whom he served. Some people were sympathetic, but there were those who looked askance at the way the whole Sirota clan was parading around in the red headgear of the "Instant Help" group with two, three, and four stars, signifying the rank of the wearer.

They were clad just like the "Yudenrat" police with the difference

that instead of blue stripes their hats were bordered with green velvet stripes — and instead of the brass buttons of the "Yudenrat" plainclothesmen, they wore silver stars like the high officers of the "Yudenrat." And the high officers of the "Dreitzent'l" had golden stars on their hats. They also wore armbands, which served as their identification as the authoritative representatives of the occupation bureaucracy.

The fact that they were garbed with richer paraphernalia than the "Yudenrat" was intended to signify to all and sundry and to be interpreted by the Jews of the ghetto that the "Instant Help" occupies a higher status than the "Yudenrat" and ranks nearer to the Nazi hierarchy.

But if Ganzweich and his associates thought they were privileged characters, toward whom the Nazis will act with exceptional consideration, they were in for a sobering awakening from their illusions.

No sooner did the Nazis find that they can do without the collaboration of the "Giche Hilf" than they issued an order to dissolve it.

For a little while Ganzweich and his hangers-on were yet allowed to function under the title of "Zonderdienst" (Special Service) but in a considerably reduced capacity and with hardly any authority. The green stripes of their caps were changed to brown color. The "13th" was composed of old bourgeois leaders and worked on the theory that hard work and bribery would enable some of the Jewish inhabitants to survive somehow. One of the leaders of "the dreitzent'l" coined the phrase: "Oneg Shabbath is more important than fighting."

Their relationship with the German brass had undergone a radical change. There was no more vestige of the former silk-glove treatment. It became clear that their day of reckoning had arrived. The Moor had done his job, the Moor can go. The shrunken group which was left from the "Giche Hilf" huddled in the house Wolynska 6 under the leadership of Dr. Shtarer (Ganzweich had already been liquidated).

According to an eye witness, the engineer David Efross, who was engaged in building underground bunkers for a group of well-to-do inmates of the Warsaw ghetto and who was living close to Sirota in the so-called "small ghetto", Sirota officiated for the last time on the high holidays of 1941 leading his fellow incarcerated Jews in prayer. The synagogue of the ghetto, a converted hall in a factory, was filled to the rafters. In the words of Efross "those who had for many decades had occasion to attend his religious services in the Tlomatzka synagogue and subsequently in the Nozsik synagogue and were knowledgeable in the appraisal of cantorial art declared, that never before had his voice sounded as mighty and brilliant as when he chanted his swansong. With superhuman effort and searing passion he implored the Lord to rescue his flock from the trap, in which they were languishing."

Together with Sirota in their bunker in the "small ghetto" was also his son, a dentist, two well-known physicians Pshevotsky and Kadishewitch, and the secretary of the "Keren Kayemeth" of Poland, Radunsky.

The small ghetto was liquidated by an assault led by Sturmfuhrer Brandt on the 10th of August, 1942 and in that assault by the Nazi mur-

derers Yitzchock Gershon Sirota cowering in the cellar of the house on number six Wolynska Street died from suffocation in the flames that enveloped the house. His earthly remains were buried in the Gensher cemetery.

With his passing, one of the greatest and brightest stars on the liturgical horizon disappeared from the scene of his blessed activities.

As a somber foot note to the grim tale let it be recorded that the great landmark of Warsaw Jewry where Sirota reached the zenith of his career shared his tragic fate even earlier.

Even though the Tlomatzka synagogue was not located within the confines of either the large or the small ghetto, it succumbed to the vagaries of the war. One of the very first bombs dropped by the Nazi Luftwaffe on Warsaw scored a direct hit on one side of the pride of the Jewish community, the magnificent Temple, demolishing one half of the holy edifice, leveling at the same time the ferocious lion and the menorah. The razboynicks desecrated it and robbed it of all valuables. Its doors and windows were subsequently boarded up by the Nazis. Yemach shemom.

* * *

What a pity that the first volume of my narrative has to end on such a tragic note. What a shame! Words fail me . . .