

BIRNBAUM Abram Ber (1865-1922), cantor, *shochet*¹, composer, teacher and a *maskil*². He was born on 19th February 1865 in Pułtusk, the son of the Kotzk Hasidic Talmud scholar Mosze Lejb Birnbaum, known as “Pułtusker”, and Bajla née Wolf.

The Birnbaum family moved from Pułtusk to Łódź. There, Abram received a traditional education, studying in a Łódź *cheder*. From childhood, he exhibited extraordinary abilities. He was called *ilui* (genius) and it was predicted that he would become a great rabbi. He even studied with one of the rabbis in Łódź and at the *bet ha'midrash*³.

However, he was attracted to singing and music. He learned the basics of *chazanut* in the court of the Hasidim from Góra Kalwaria and Koca. At the court of the *Kotzker Tzaddik*, he soon became the favourite singer of *zemirot* (Shabbat hymns). He was taught to play the violin by Łódź *klezmer* musician Jarochowski.

He studied music with neither his father's knowledge nor consent. In 1886, he was excused from being conscripted into the Russian army. His father instructed him *shechita* (ritual slaughter), since classes in *chazanut* and *shechita* were traditionally combined. In a short time, he received his certification (*kabole*) from the rabbi and he became a *chazan-shochet*. At that time, he met Chaim Janowski, an outstanding music lover and patron, the founder of the “Hazamir”⁴ (Nightingale) music society, who had a great influence upon him.

In 1888, he accepted the position of *chazan-shochet* in the small Hungarian town of Héthárs (now Lipany in Slovakia), thus freeing himself from the supervision of his despotic father. Now he could develop his abilities. Independently, he learned the German language as well as the theory of music and composition. It was there that he wrote his first article for the “*Ha'Tsfira*” magazine. In 1890, he was appointed *chazan-shochet* in Przasnysz. There, he became known as an excellent cantor and writer. He attempted to free himself from his disliked responsibilities as a ritual slaughterer. Such an opportunity was created for him by a proposal (allegedly presented to him by → Henryk Markusfeld) that he become the cantor, in Częstochowa, in the newly-opened reformed synagogue⁵.

¹ TN: ritual slaughterer

² TN: a supporter of *Haskalah*, a movement which pursued two complementary aims. It sought to preserve the Jews as a separate, unique collective and worked for a cultural and moral renewal, especially a revival of the Hebrew language for secular purposes, pioneering the modern press and literature in the language. Concurrently, it strove for the integration of the Jews into their surrounding societies.

³ TN: A hall dedicated to Torah study.

⁴ TN: A Hebrew-language periodical published in Poland in 1862 and again in 1874-1931.

⁵ TN: known as the “New Synagogue” or “*Deutscher Shil*”.

Since, throughout his work there, the New Synagogue did not have a rabbi, Birnbaum stood at its head, being also a preacher and able to conduct his own independent activities. In 1893, he began teaching, by correspondence, music theory, harmonics and composition. In 1906, established a cantorial school in Częstochowa, which was popular in both Poland and Russia. Birnbaum's character reflected decency and good manners, honesty and openness, characteristics which he passed on to his students. Many of them became cantors and conductors. Amongst them, there were such notables as singer, music critic and collector of Jewish folklore Menachem Kipnis, cantor Pinchas Szerman, cantor and singer Eliahu Załudkowski.

In 1907, he organised the first convention of cantors in Warsaw, at which the world's first union of cantors was established. At the end of 1907, he was one of the founders of the "Lira" Musical-Literary Society in Częstochowa, becoming its musical director. He established both male and mixed choirs and was their conductor. The choirs performed in Polish and Hebrew (they were hostile towards Yiddish) and pieces from a world repertoire. Birnbaum was the organiser of and a participant in many musical events, directed also towards non-Jewish audiences. His daughters (a singer and a pianist) also took part. When, in 1912, the assimilationist-Zionist "Lira" combined with the Yiddish Jewish Literary Society, Birnbaum left, which resulted in a lowering of the range of musical activity and it weakened significantly.

While working in Częstochowa, in 1896-97 in Warsaw, he published a Hebrew-language specialised periodical, "*Yarchon Ha'Chazanim*" (Cantors' Monthly). He wrote for many periodicals, among them "Ha'Olam" (Wilno) and "Die Wahrheit" (Vienna). In turn, the publication of books made him a leading theorist and brought him fame as a composer, as he illustrated his theoretical considerations with the publishing of his works. His works comprised *Halel v'zimrah* (Częstochowa 1897), *Torat hazimrah haklalit* (General Theory of Singing) (Częstochowa 1902) and *Omanut hahazanut* (Cantorial Culture) (two volumes, Częstochowa 1908-1912, Nowy York 1954 – reprint). He also composed chamber music and songs to the texts of Jewish poets. His textbooks are still used today (e.g., *Omanut ha'Hazanut*). His pieces are still performed, the most popular being *Bame Madlikin*.

In 1913, an accidental and petty conflict with the Catholics, as well as the uncompromising attitude of the *Gmina* president, Henryk Markusfeld, prompted Birnbaum to hand in his resignation and quickly leave for Łódź. He never returned to his profession of cantor.

He became an educator and composer of musical works. He planned to again publish a music magazine, but the war and the post-war period did not at all favour such an undertaking. He began selling musical instruments. It was this business which brought him back to Częstochowa in 1922, where he unexpectedly fell ill with encephalitis. He died on 11th November 1922 in the Jewish Hospital in Zawodzie. He was buried in the local Jewish cemetery. (His grave was destroyed during the German occupation).

Birnbaum was married three times. Circa 1882, he married for the first time (due to pressure from his father). His second wife (wedding in 1884 in Łódź) was Chinda Gołda née Ejzenberg, whom he divorced circa 1898. In Częstochowa, he then married Małka Laja Leonora née Frenkiel (15th January 1867 Zduńska Wola -). He had five children with Chinda Gołda: → Stella Estera (1888-), → Mieczysław Markus (1889-1940), Stanisław Salomon (1891-1959), textile technician and senior sergeant of the 28th Kaniowski Riflemen (in 1920, awarded the Independence Cross), in 1949 changed his surname to "Pomianowski" (his son was the writer and translator Jerzy Pomianowski), Leon Lewi (1893 Częstochowa -), Róża (1895 Częstochowa -) and two daughters with Małka Laja: → Helena Gruszecka (1900 or 1901 Częstochowa - 1982) and Anna (5th March 1903 Częstochowa -).

Czenstochower Jidn, pp. 80, 82, 84, 108, 184, 216, 298, CXXXIX; Fater, *Muzyka żydowska w Polsce w okresie międzywojennym*, pp. 142, 178, 208, 209, 235, 236, 318; C. Kohn, *Der grojser negine-kinstler Abraham Ber Birnbaum* (Great singing artist Abraham Ber Birnbaum), in: *Czenstochow*, pp. 119–121; Malko, *Życie muzyczne*, pp. 80, 82, 83, 85. - APCz, Jewish community civil status records, marriage certificate No. 91/1898, birth certificates. No. 358/1898 (Estera's), No. 359/1898 (Markus'), No. 360/1898 (Salomon's), No. 361/1898 (Lewi's), No. 362/1898 (Róża's); USC Częstochowa, Jewish community civil status records, death certificate No. 255/1922.

Wiesław Paszkowski