

Abram-Ber Birenbaum z''l

When the New Synagogue - the so-called "German" one - was built in 1907 [sic 1893], Abram-Ber Birenbaum was hired as the first cantor. He embodied all the unique qualities which a cantorial artist is required to possess. He was proficient in Ivri¹ and [Hebrew] grammar and was musically gifted to such an extent, that he can be equalled with the masters of Jewish music.

He composed a entire series of musical pieces, such as the Talmudic rhapsody *Ba'Meh Madlikin*², *Min Ha'Meitzar*³, *Ya'ale*⁴, *Ki Hinei Ka'Chomer*⁵ and many other melodies and musical works. He performed his masterpieces during the holidays.

It once happened that, when the cantorial artist Abram-Ber Birenbaum was in the street, a Catholic procession passed by with crosses. In a show of respect for the Catholic religion, he took off his hat. This caused great opposition towards him, as a result of which he left Częstochowa and settled in Łódź. Once, Abram-Ber Birenbaum was passing through Częstochowa and stayed for the night in a hotel. He suffered a heart attack and died instantly. Rabbi Nachum Asz eulogised him and he - Abram-Ber Birenbaum, the "Master of Jewish Music" - was interred in the Częstochowa cemetery.

Zyskind Rozental was one of the first City Cantors, and he occupied this position for thirty-three years. He was of noble features and with musical education. He played both the violin and the piano. He composed many melodies, thus enriching artistic singing in the cantorial world.

He arrived in Częstochowa at the end of the 19th century with his four sons and a whole choir of sixteen singers. He began his audition with [the liturgical poem] *Yigdal* [*May He Be Magnified*], and he had a distinct tune for each [of the thirteen] verses. Immediately following the audition, he was appointed City Cantor.

Cantor Zyskind Rozental was popular within all circles. He lived at Old Market 9. At the close of every *Shabbes*, he gave a concert in his home, together with his daughter [Brajna] and the choir. The cantor played the violin, his daughter (who was married to [Abram] Szlezynger) the piano, and the choir sang. The whole surrounding area was full of people who listened to these concerts.

Before the High Holidays, Częstochowa's well-known prayer-leaders, such as Szyja *Błaszker*⁶ (Srebrnik), Herszel Wolhendler and Mordche Wajnsztok soaked up Rozental's new compositions.

¹ [TN: Not to be confused with modern-day Ivrit (Hebrew), the term "Ivri" was used in Yiddish in ref. to the correct reading and pronunciation of the Hebrew in the Jewish liturgy.]

² [TN: "With what do we light (the Shabbes candles)"; an excerpt from the Mishna (Shabbes, Ch.2), which is recited at the beginning of the Shabbes prayers on Friday evening.]

³ [TN: First two words of the verse "I called upon the Lord in distress: the Lord answered me, and set me in a large place." (Psalm 118:5)]

⁴ [TN: Heb., "Ascend"; prayer in the liturgy of the High Holidays.]

⁵ [TN: Heb., "For as Material (in the Hands of the Craftsman)"; from the High Holidays liturgy.]

⁶ [TN: Possibly from the locality of Błaszkowa.]

Cantor Zyskind Rozental appeared twice a year in public concerts. He himself was the conductor and [also] played the violin, wearing a black top-hat and a white scarf. To the last minute of his life, he did not part with these two items - the top-hat and scarf.

Cantor Rozental possessed many characteristic features in his prayers, expressing emotion and pleading. Particularly well-known were his melodies for *Ki Hinei Ka'Chomer, Omnan Kein*⁷ and *Ya'ale*, which became like folk tunes. The Cantor would travel to the graveyard to listen to the lamentations of those visiting the tombs and, in this manner, he came up with ideas of various lyrical, sentimental compositions.

Cantor Rozental led prayers for the last time when he was an old man of seventy-three. His energy, power and prayer were wondrous. People said that he was moving heaven and earth, because he probably felt that this was the last *Yom Kippur* in which he would be leading the prayer. On *Shemini Atzeres*, he did not attend the *Hakufes*⁸, and his last wish was that they should sing his composition *Enoish Ke'Chutzir Yumov*⁹ for him. His wish was fulfilled during his eulogy at the Synagogue where he had prayed and sung for thirty-three years.

After Cantor Rozental's death, it took a long a long time before Częstochowa was able to choose a cantor for itself. Various auditions were held, until two relevant cantors were found: the sixty-year-old cantor from Piotrków, Kamieniewski, and the thirty-year-old cantor Josef Badasz.

Josef Badasz, the younger cantorial artist, was the one given the position. With his arrival in Częstochowa, there appeared a new world of compositions and song. He was noted for his superb, lyrical voice and his [rendering of] *Riboino Shel Oilom [Master of the Universe]* upon the opening of the Holy Ark, and on *Yom Kippur* with *The Ten Martyrs*¹⁰. He was not only revered by the men, but by the women as well, which in their attending his prayers *en masse*. After being in Częstochowa for ten years, he was invited [to work] in London. From there, [he moved in 1935] to Johannesburg, South Africa, where he is the cantor to this day.

After the cantor Badasz, the cantor **Cholewa** from Włoszczowa was engaged, who was a masterful singer. He managed to organise a permanent choir in the municipal synagogue.

[When] the War broke out, he suffered, along with the others, all the calamities under the Nazi regime. He went through the suffering in the "Big Ghetto" and the "Small Ghetto". He was then sent from the Częstochowa "Small Ghetto" to Bliżyn, from where he was evacuated to the Oświęcim death camp. Even in the camp, he [led the] prayers for his tortured brethren, but was unable to withstand the pain, and perished in the German concentration camp.

⁷ [TN: Heb., "Indeed it is So"; also from the High Holidays liturgy.]

⁸ [TN: Heb., "Circles"; on *Simchas Torah*, the custom is to take the Torah scrolls out of the Ark and to encircle the reader's platform with great joy, singing and dancing. All those present are called to the Torah for a short reading, by their name and father's name.]

⁹ [Heb., "As for man, his days are as grass" (Psalm 103:15); pronounced "Enosh Ke'Chatzir Yamav" in Sephardic Hebrew.]

¹⁰ [TN: Ten rabbis who were martyred by the Roman Empire in the period following the destruction of the Second Temple; a dramatic poem is recited in their memory on *Yom Kippur*.]