

Dr Zvi Cohen

## The Great Musical Artist Abram Birnbaum (Head Cantor at the New Synagogue for Twenty Years)

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Jewish Częstochowa was always proud that the world-famous musician and singer Abram Ber Birnbaum had stood at the head of its New Synagogue for over twenty years - from its foundation in 1893 until 1913. It was in Częstochowa that the great artist composed the majority of his works. It was also here that he established the world's first cantorial seminary to train new cantors both in singing and in culture. And it was also in Częstochowa that he established the first cantors' association, laying the foundations for a cantors' union in Poland and, later, also in other countries.



*Abram-Ber Birnbaum and his family*

Abram Ber Birnbaum was born on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1865 (3<sup>rd</sup> Shvat 5685) in the town of Pułtusk, Poland, in the house of a sharp *Kotzker Chassid* and great scholar, who was known by the name Mojsze Lajb *Pułtuser*. Already as a small child, Abram Ber exhibited genius-like capabilities and, at the age of seven, became known as the child prodigy of Pułtusk. Later, his father moved to Łódź, and Abram Ber studied at the local *cheders* and, later, also with one of the rabbis there. Following his *bar mitzvah*, he studied at the study-hall in Łódź's Old Town and became known as "the

young man with the sharp head". Everyone now prophesised that he would become a great rabbi in Poland. This could well have been Abram Ber's calling in life, had he not possessed another power, which drove him in a completely different direction - namely, his talent for singing.

Already in his very young childhood years, Abram Ber began singing like a little bird, right in the middle of study. He would already do so in *cheder*. All of a sudden, when his *Rebbe* [viz. schoolmaster] Reb Simcha Majer, with the long white beard, racked his brains over a segment in the Talmud, and furrowed his brow to grasp its meaning, Abram Ber would promptly begin to trill like a little bird, causing all the pupils to start laughing and the vexed *Rebbe*, himself, would break off from the complex treatise and listen to Abram Ber's singing. In place of the heavy mood that had prevailed in the *cheder*, there was now a much more cheerful state of mind.

But, along with this, Abram Ber also aspired to learn to play [an instrument]. He makes a connection with the great musician Reb Chaim Janowski (one of the founders of Ha'Zamir [The Nightingale\*]), for whom he sings various pieces. Whereupon [Janowski] agrees to teach him to play the violin for free. For three years, Abram-Ber clandestinely studied the art of playing the violin, without the knowledge of his parents, until he gained renown as a good violinist. [He] told this in secret to a few of the young, Chassidic men. Eager to hear him play the violin, they convince him to play several pieces for them at a *Melave Malka* [Escorting the Queen; banquet celebrating the close of the Sabbath], that is to be held at the [local] *Kotzker shtiebel* [small study-hall and prayer room]. He agrees to do this, but only on the condition that they should not tell his strict father who, on that Saturday night, is not going to come to the *Melave Malka*. For them, Abram Ber plays the melody of *Askini Seidusu* [also pronounced *Atkinu Seudata*; Prepare a Banquet], and also other *zmires* [*Shabbes* songs]. Suddenly, Abram Ber's father Reb Mojsze arrives at the *shtiebel* most unexpectedly and,

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\* [TN: A Jewish choral ensemble founded in Łódź, in 1899.]

upon seeing his Abram Ber playing the violin, he runs up to him, shouting, “*What is this? When did you learn that?*” – with stern eyes.

To appease his agitated father, Abram Ber calls out with a smile, “You see, Father, the tune I know – and passing the bow over the chords is nothing. Anyone could do it”.

The congregation now laughed and the irate father now expressed his wonderment at his son, who had managed to learn how to play the violin without his knowledge and was already able to play with such finesse and mastery.



In 1886, after Abram Ber had been exempted from military service, a new era commenced in the young musician’s life. Abram Ber’s father tells his son, who is now completely devoted to developing his voice, to also study ritual slaughter, so that he should be able to become a cantor-slaughterer. He does so and, in a very short time, receives a certificate from a rabbi stating that he knows ritual slaughter. Before long, he receives an offer from a small *shtetl* in Hungary to assume such position, and he travels there. This was in 1888. There, in that *shtetl*, freed from the supervision of his stern father, he develops his skills. He studies music extensively and also begins developing his literary talents, which were no less than his musical [ones]. Thus, he begins writing an entire series of articles for *Ha’Tzifira* [The Siren] and gains renown as a writer.

In 1890, he returns to Poland and becomes the cantor-slaughterer in the *shtetl* of Przasnysz. His name becomes very popular, both as a great cantor and as a fine writer.

In 1893, when the New Synagogue was completed in Częstochowa and an appropriate chief cantor was sought, musicians who knew him made the President of the *Gmina [kehilla]*, Henryk Markusfeld, aware of Abram Ber and he invited him to come to Częstochowa, where he was then engaged as cantor of the newly-built synagogue.

It was in Częstochowa that Abram Ber first truly developed the forces raging inside him. Here, he creates the famous [book of] compositions for receiving the Sabbath, entitled “*Hallel W’simrah*” [Praise and Song], a romance for violin and piano, as well as many other pieces. He now translates the lessons of harmony, counterpoint and instrumentation into Yiddish and Hebrew, in the form of a letter, to which hundreds of young people subscribe. He [also] publishes a journal in Hebrew entitled “*Yarchon Ha’Chazanim*” [Cantors’ Monthly].

In 1902, he published the letters in form of a book in Yiddish and Hebrew, under the title “*Torat Ha’Zemer Ha’Klalit*” [The General Theory of Music]. An entire generation of young Jewish musicians were educated with this book and, thus, he indirectly became the father of dozens of cantors, conductors and choirmasters. He now occupies a foremost position in the world of Jewish music and his word is heeded everywhere.

So we see Abram Ber Birnbaum rise to ever greater heights. In 1906, in Częstochowa, he creates a “Cantorial Seminary”, the first [of its kind] in the world, where he strives to unite cantorial singing with worldly musical instruction. In this seminary, he educated dozens of young cantors, who later came to fill important positions throughout Poland.

At this point, with the Russian authorities, he makes attempts to gain a permit to hold the first convention of cantors in Warsaw which, after much effort, he receives. Such a convention of cantors

does indeed take place in 1907. The foundation for a Cantors' Union in Poland was laid at this convention. Incidentally, this was the world's first cantorial union.

In the years 1909-1912, he revises his monumental cantorial work in Hebrew entitled "*Omanut Ha'Chazanut*" [The Art of Cantorial Singing] which, when later published, generated a storm of approbation among all music lovers.

A.B. Birnbaum now popularises Jewish folksongs, Chassidic melodies and new musical pieces in this same style. He also writes extensively about music in Hebrew in *Ha'Tzfira*, *Ha'Olam* [The World] and in other Hebrew periodicals, as well as in German, in the Yiddish-German press and, especially, in the German *Lodzer Zeitung*, which appears in Łódź.

In 1913, he happened to be in the street when a Christian funeral passed by. Out of respect for the deceased, even if not Jewish, he took off his hat. This was noticed by two religious fanatics who, at once, construed that he had removed his hat before the large crucifix which one of the leaders of the procession was carrying. The zealots began fierce agitation against him and demanded that, for this, he be dismissed from the position.

The *Prezes* [President] Henryk Markusfeld thought too highly of Birnbaum to do this. He also assured him that the entire congregation at the New Synagogue wished to retain him. But A.B. Birnbaum felt sickened by the attacks on him and, being a proud man by nature, he tendered his resignation, whereupon he at once travelled to Łódź, as he did not wish to be persuaded to continue to stay in Częstochowa.



Abram Ber Birnbaum made a great name for himself in the Jewish world, because it was he who focused on Jewish music and created a theory defining its essence. In this respect, he showed the way for those who came after him. He laid the foundation for what Jewish music consists of and what sets it apart from general music.

A.B. Birnbaum was also a distinguished author and, had he devoted his prowess to writing instead of music, he would have been one of our greatest essayists. Besides his writings on music, in general, and Jewish music, in particular, he also wrote works on Chassidism, of what it consists and how the Chassidic movement differs from all the other movements which have been in Jewish life. His articles on Reb Mendele *Kotzker*, in which he provides, for the first time, an idea of who he was and what his teachings were, made a particularly huge impression. It may well be said, that it was he who popularised the *Kotzker* [*Rebbe*] and his way in Chassidism, as well as his general philosophy concerning life and death. These were profound treatises which were spoken about in the *Haskala* [Enlightenment] world of Poland for a long time. These articles caused people to start regarding the *Kotzker* in a completely different manner.

A.B. Birnbaum was also a great scholar of Judaic Studies [*Wissenschaft des Judentums*] and published important treatises in various Hebrew periodicals regarding the origins of our liturgy, the differences between the Ashkenazi and Sephardic rites and an entire series of articles on liturgical poetry. He published a separate work on the *Yom Kippur* prayers, from *Kol Nidrei* to *Neilah* [viz. from the first prayer to the closing one].

But, above all, he was, and has remained, a great Jewish musician. He was the *Rebbe* [i.e., mentor] and teacher, guide and leader of a whole generation of Jewish men of music, whom he trained to

become cantors, directors [of choirs] and conductors of orchestras, both in the Jewish religious world and in worldly undertakings, such as concerts, celebrations, etc.

After coming to Łódź from Częstochowa, he no longer wished to accept any position anywhere, although he had many offers. He was weary of all the different *gaboim* [sacristans; synagogue managers] and *kehilla* leaders, who knew nothing of cantorial singing and music, yet desired to voice their opinions, to make others think that they were great experts. He now lived a quiet, peaceful life and continued walking the path he had marked out for himself.

He died suddenly in Częstochowa and was brought for burial there. He had arrived at his daughter's [house] in Częstochowa on Friday 11<sup>th</sup> December 1923, but he felt unwell during the night and died. It was the fate of the Częstochowa community that its beloved cantor came to rest in its own cemetery.