

Reb Abram Ber Birenbaum z"l



Reb A.B. Birenbaum with his family

A great honour befell our city that, within it, were born, or came to settle, outstanding individuals, whose renown progressively grew, until they became famous worldwide - to our pride and glory.

One among this elite was the well-known cantor Reb Abram Ber Birenbaum, who had many extraordinary talents and who was already recognised in childhood as being destined for greatness.

Birenbaum was born on 3rd Shvat 5625 (30th January 1865¹), in the town of Putusk (*Warsaw Province*). His father, Reb Moszek Lajb Birenbaum, being a great scholar and a sharp *Kotzker chassid*, obviously desired to bring his son up in Torah and Chassidism, and there was no limit to his contentment upon hearing his son's praises from his teachers.

When Reb Moszek Lajb moved with his family to Łódź, he turned Abram Ber over to the best *melamdim* in town in order for them to teach him Torah. When he was already of *bar-mitzvah* age [13], he became a student at the study-hall, where he immediately gained renown for his great studiousness and his phenomenal perspicacity. All those who knew him prophesied that he would occupy an important place in the rabbinical world - among the greatest!

This "prophecy" could have been fulfilled but, together with his diligence in Torah study, a great desire for singing and music also prevailed within this gifted child, so that between lessons - and sometimes even in midst of a lesson - Abram Ber would lift his voice up in song, literally as a nightingale, astounding all his listeners.

There was in Łódź a man, a connoisseur in music, who perceived that, through his singing, this child would not only become a great Torah prodigy, but also a great singer. He brought him before the greatest musician in Łódź, Chaim Janowski, a founder of "*Ha'Zamir*" ["The Nightingale"; see earlier article], to sing before him.

That musician, after hearing the boy sing, took it upon himself to teach him to play the violin, free of charge. He received music lessons from him over three years, without his father's knowledge.

Whilst Birenbaum continued his musical studies, he also studied the laws of ritual slaughter - with the intention of serving in the future as ritual slaughterer and cantor in one of the Jewish communities.

¹ [TN: His date of birth on the JRI Poland database is given as Feb. 19, 1865.]

In 1888, when he was only about 23 years of age, he was engaged as cantor and ritual slaughterer in one of the small communities of Hungary, where he continued studying and developing his voice, as well as taking to writing and publishing different articles in "*Ha'Tzfira*".

In 1890, he returned to Poland and was immediately appointed cantor and ritual slaughterer in Przasnysz (Płock *gubernia*). He also continued writing articles and articles for "*Ha'Tzfira*", gaining renown as a talented writer, whose words made sense to his readers.

Three years later, once the New Synagogue building in Częstochowa had been completed, A.B. Birenbaum was invited to serve as Chief Cantor at this modern synagogue, a position which he held for about twenty years - until 1913.

This was the finest period in the musical artist's life. There, in 1906, he founded the cantorial school, which produced many renowned and talented cantors, who held cantorial positions in important communities in Russia and Poland, and even outside the [Russian Empire's] borders.

In 1907, he organised a nationwide conference of cantors, at which the world's first "Cantors Union" was established, of which he was elected Chairman.

At the literary and musical society "Lira" (which was founded in Częstochowa in 1908), Birenbaum organised a choir of men and women, which distinguished itself with its musical level. It often held concerts of Hebrew, Yiddish and Polish songs, which included a rich repertoire of diverse folk songs.

For almost three years (1909-1912), he worked on his great book "*Omanut Ha'Chazanut*" ["The Art of Cantorial Singing"] (in Hebrew), which was received with great enthusiasm by all music aficionados in the Jewish world.

He also continued publishing articles in "*Ha'Tzfira*" and "*Ha'Olam*" ["The World"], as well as in the "*Lodzer Zeitung*" ["Łódź Newspaper"] (in German).

In 1913, Birenbaum resigned his position and moved to Łódź and, although he was offered distinguished posts in important communities, he did not wish to continue with cantorial singing.

In Łódź, Birenbaum dedicated himself entirely to various literary matters. He did not limit himself merely to the fields of music and cantorial singing, but also published very interesting and valuable articles on Chassidism, Jewish folklore and various scholarly treatises on the differences between liturgical rites of Jewish communities in different lands.

Among the latter, he published a special research paper on the *Yom Kippur* prayers, as they are recited in each [parts] of the Jewish diaspora.

On Friday, 11th December 1923, Birenbaum came to Częstochowa to visit his married daughter, who lived in our city, and, in the middle of the night, he suffered a stroke. All the doctors' efforts were to no avail and the cherished cantor and artist passed away at just 58. He was laid to rest in our city, which he had graced with his abundant talent over around twenty years.

A large crowd of his supporters and admirers accompanied him to his last resting place.