

A TALE OF TWO CANTORS: PINHAS MINKOWSKI AND YOSELE ROSENBLATT

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Shortly after the Eldridge Street Synagogue opened in 1887, visitors came not only for its visual splendor but also for auditory inspiration. This came primarily from Cantor Pinhas Minkowski, then one of the most famous cantors in the world and, thanks to the Eldridge Street Synagogue, one of the highest paid. The congregation's leaders lured Minkowski from his synagogue in Odessa by making him a financial offer he couldn't refuse, including a \$2,500 annual salary (at the time, the average New York City worker earned less than \$450 a year).



Pinhas Minkowsky was the Eldridge Street Synagogue's first cantor.

Minkowski was not the first cantor to be lured to America from Eastern Europe with a large salary. In fact, he arrived during the height of what was subsequently termed the "cantorial craze" of the 1880s, when New York congregations vied to see which could employ the most renowned cantor for the largest sum. Being a craze, this phenomenon began suddenly and didn't last long—and, as the term also implies, there was something less than rational about it, at least in retrospect. Brief though it was, the cantorial craze of the 1880s offers revealing insights into Jewish religious life on

the Lower East Side during this first decade of large-scale immigration from Eastern Europe.

Amid immigrants' encounters with manifold disparities between the life they had led in the Old World and their new life in America, cantors epitomized the religious experience these Jews had left behind. The emotional power of the cantors' performances not only carried the congregation's prayers to heaven, but also bore the affective charge of immigrant longings and uncertainties. These immigrants may have prized the sound of *khazones* (the music-making of the cantor) that much more because of its relative scarcity. During the 1880s few Jewish men who were trained as cantors came from Eastern Europe to America. More established American Jewish communities had their cantors, of course, but theirs was not an East European sound. The concentration of new Jewish arrivals from Eastern Europe in the immigrant neighborhoods of major American cities—none more concentrated than the Lower East Side—intensified the sense of scarcity of talented cantors who sounded "authentic" to immigrant ears. This new cultural marketplace was, in effect, a sellers' market.

Celebrity cantors like Minkowski played an emblematic role in immigrant life. Historian Jonathan Sarna argues that, for these immigrants, the celebrity cantor represented "the ultimate synthesis of the Old World and New...: observant yet rich, traditional yet modern.... He personified the great heritage of a European world-gone-by, yet succeeded equally well in Columbus's land of the future. In short, a cantorial performance simultaneously served both as an exercise in nostalgia and as living proof that in America the talented could succeed handsomely." Significantly, Sarna notes, this was "a synthesis most immigrants sought to achieve but few succeeded" in realizing.



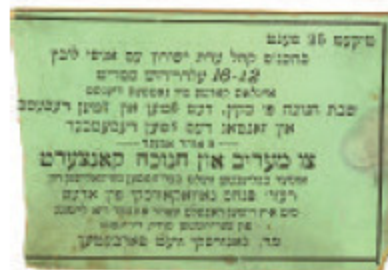
The cantor's stand at the Eldridge Street Synagogue had a ledge, with saw-tooth hinges, that adjusted according to the cantor's height.

Minkowski seemed to exemplify this synthesis. Born in the Russian town of Belaya Tserkov in 1859, he was the son of a cantor and, as a boy, sang in his father's choir. The younger Minkowski had a traditional Jewish religious education. In addition, he had something of a modern education, learning both Russian and German as a young adult. His musical education also expanded beyond traditional training in *khazones*, culminating in travel to Vienna. There he studied voice under the director of the Conservatorium, from which Minkowsky obtained a diploma. His cantorial career included positions in major cities in the Russian Empire, eventually in Odessa, from which he was lured to Eldridge Street. Indeed, Minkowski's artistry was the musical equivalent of this building: grand, showy, costly, rooted in European tradition and enhanced by a modern aesthetic sensibility, whether state-of-the-art notions of sacred architecture or au-courant musicology.

However, this match of synagogue and cantor did not last long. At first, the congregation was so taken with Minkowski's success as *the* star cantor of the Lower East Side that they offered him an annual bonus of \$500. But by 1891, the synagogue's leadership found themselves financially unable to offer the cantor this bonus. The following year, as the congregation was considering renewing Minkowski's

contract, they received a letter from him stating that he had decided to return to Odessa. Beyond financial disappointment, it appears that Minkowski felt personally slighted by the congregation. Moreover, he wished to return to the much more established religious culture in Odessa. There he not only continued to lead his congregation in worship but also composed and published sacred music and wrote works of modern scholarship about Jewish liturgy.

After Minkowski's departure, the Eldridge Street Synagogue did not pursue another celebrity cantor. The cantorial craze of the 1880s had waned, reflecting the dynamics of religious life in this rapidly expanding immigrant community. In the 1880s, skilled cantors who knew the East European style of *khazones* were in short supply and great demand. A decade later, as greater numbers of Jewish immigrants arrived in New York, men with the requisite musical knowledge and talent were more readily available. The expense of star cantors also proved difficult for immigrant congregations to sustain. What had been a sellers' market quickly became a buyers' market. Rather than seeking out major cantorial talents in Europe, immigrant congregations took their pick of local talent. Thus, after Minkowski's departure in the summer of 1892, the Eldridge Street Synagogue held auditions and hired



This 1910 ticket advertised a special Hanukkah cantorial concert at the Eldridge Street Synagogue.

Yehezkel Borenstian, who was engaged only for the High Holidays. For several years the Eldridge Street Synagogue hired cantors on a short-term basis.

Meanwhile, Minkowski might have spent the rest of his life in Odessa, were it not for the Bolshevik Revolution. Russia's new communist government made it increasingly difficult for religious institutions to continue to function, and in 1922 Minkowski decided to return to America. However, he found it difficult to find a permanent post and instead

performed special services in various American cities. This phase of Minkowski's career did not last long; in 1924 he died at the age of 65.

Memorial services for the cantor were held in several American cities; over 1,000 people attended the service held on the Lower East Side. His funeral included a performance by "two hundred cantors and one hundred choir singers," all under the leadership of Cantor Yosele Rosenblatt, who epitomized a new generation of celebrity cantors that flourished in America in the early decades of the 20th century.

In some ways Rosenblatt's celebrity resembled Minkowski's. Rosenblatt was born in 1882—by coincidence, in Belaya Tserkov. He also began his career in Europe before coming to America, with much fanfare, in 1912, having already achieved acclaim as a cantor in Munkács, Pressburg, and Hamburg. But Rosenblatt's fame was configured differently, thanks to an array of new vehicles for cantorial stardom, including expanded press coverage, publishing of sheet music, elaborately promoted concert tours, and the new media of sound recordings and, later, talking motion pictures.

Sound recordings perhaps played the largest role in establishing Rosenblatt as the most famous cantor in America during the 1920s and '30s, not only among Jews but the general public as well. Rosenblatt made several dozen recordings of cantorial music and other musical selections—Jewish art music, Zionist anthems, Yiddish songs, and Tin Pan Alley Judaica ("My Yiddishe Momme"), and recital standards such as "The Last Rose of Summer" and "Song of the Volga Boatman"—mostly for Victor and Columbia. Several of Rosenblatt's recordings were issued to mark special occasions, such as a version of the memorial prayer "El Male Rachamim" for victims of the Titanic, released in 1913; Massenet's "Elegy" in 1917 for victims of World War I; and "Onward, Jewish Legion" in 1919, honoring Jewish soldiers who fought in the British army during the war.

By contrast, Minkowski never made recordings—not because of a lack of opportunity, but rather as a matter of conviction. When the first commercial recordings of cantorial music were made, Minkowski denounced the phonograph as a "disgraceful screaming instrument." He also expressed outrage that in Odessa, cantorial recordings could be heard through the windows of prostitutes' rooms in the city's red-light district. Minkowski's outrage may seem peculiar today, but it demonstrates his awareness that a recording of a performance of sacred music didn't simply document or

preserve it, but transformed it. Sound recordings are what R. Murray Schafer calls *schizophonic* phenomena—that is, they separate sound from its original source. In the case of *khazones*, recordings remove cantorial singing from the synagogue and the specific occasion of worship. By separating these performances from their original sacred intent—addressing God within the rubric of communal worship—recordings situate cantorial music in a new listening context. Cantors, record producers, marketers, and audiences have all demonstrated their awareness of this transformation. For example, many recordings of *khazones* feature instrumental accompaniment that would not be heard when this music is performed in those synagogues where playing instruments is forbidden on the Sabbath and holidays. The shift away from worship is also signaled on many (though not all) recordings, in which cantors substitute the words *Adoshem* and *Elokeinu* for names of God traditionally uttered only when actually praying. Thus, within the protocols of *khazones* itself performers marked their recordings as being something other than worship.

Whereas recordings marked a limit beyond which Minkowski would not venture as a celebrity cantor, violating his sense of propriety as a pious Jew, opera marked the same limit for Rosenblatt. Among the most significant episodes in his career was a performance he chose *not* to give: In 1918, the Chicago Opera invited Rosenblatt to sing the lead role in Halévy's *La Juive* for \$1,000 per performance. Rosenblatt's eventual refusal—despite assurances that he would not have to perform on the Sabbath or cut his beard—received national attention. The *New York Times* even reprinted a letter from the Chicago Opera to the president of New York Congregation Ohab Zedek, which then employed Rosenblatt as its cantor, stating that Rosenblatt had agreed to sing in *La Juive* only if the congregation would permit it.

Despite rejecting opera, Rosenblatt gave recitals in concert halls and even performed in vaudeville in the 1920s. He undertook the latter in order to wipe out debts from bad investments he had made in a Yiddish newspaper and a ritual bath, projects intended to enhance Orthodox Jewish life in New York. In Rosenblatt's biography, written by his son Samuel, the cantor's concert and vaudeville appearances are characterized not as compromising his commitment to *khazones*, but rather as an extension of his values as a pious Jew and a Jewish artist. Indeed, the cantor's son championed

his father's touring the vaudeville circuit as an opportunity to perform religious ideals quite apart from his musicianship:

His very conduct on the variety stage and the demands he made from the managers to satisfy his religious scruples were an ideal medium for teaching the non-Jewish masses of America something of the tenets of the Jewish faith while acquainting them with Jewish music. The announcements on the billboards that Josef Rosenblatt would not be heard on Friday evening or Saturday matinee, because he was observing his Sabbath, constituted a real *Kiddush Hashem*, a glorification of the Jewish religion.

With the advent of talking pictures in the late 1920s, film became another important medium for cantors to test the limits of modernity. Several cantors appeared in American-made films in the '20s and '30s. Typically, the plots of these films addressed the Jewish struggle between tradition and modernity, in which the cantor figured as a strategic example. The most famous of these films is the 1927 feature *The Jazz Singer*. Today best remembered as the film that marks the transition from silent to talking pictures, it is also a remarkable artifact of American Jewish culture and includes Rosenblatt's first appearance in a film. *The Jazz Singer* chronicles the career of vaudevillian Jack Robin (played by Al Jolson)—born Jackie Rabinowitz, the son of an immigrant cantor—as Jack struggles between his professional ambitions as a jazz singer and his obligations to family and community as a cantor. At a strategic moment in the film, Jack, while on tour with his vaudeville act, attends a recital by Rosenblatt. This scene prefigures later scenes in the film in which Jack's devotion to the theater reveals both its tension with and its indebtedness to *khazones*.

Rosenblatt's biography claims that Warner Bros. originally approached him to play the role of cantor Rabinowitz, Jack Robin's father, who, committed to Old World values, denounces his son's stage career. Rosenblatt reportedly rejected the offer (the part was eventually played by Warner Oland). Once again, Rosenblatt affirmed his status as a celebrity cantor by discussing a role he chose *not* to perform (while identifying himself as that role's ideal performer).

In what would prove to be the final journey of his life, Rosenblatt traveled to Palestine in 1933 to appear in another film, *The Dream of My People*. This hour-long Zionist travelogue offers scenes of Jewish life in Palestine together with performances by Rosenblatt, hailed in the opening credits as "The Greatest Omed Singer In His Last Song."

Rosenblatt sings six solos at different sacred sites, including the Western Wall and Rachel's tomb.

While filming at the Dead Sea, Rosenblatt died suddenly of a heart attack. Remarkably, his passing is incorporated into the film's penultimate sequence. After the narrator announces that Rosenblatt "saw the land and died," a collage of notices of Rosenblatt's death appears on screen, followed by footage of the crowds attending his funeral in Jerusalem. The film then ends with a sequence on Tel Aviv, the "city of youth and gaiety." Rosenblatt is positioned in *The Dream of My People* at the juncture of two contrasting narratives. In the film's tourist narrative of Palestine, the cantor seems the embodiment of the diaspora Jew, who has come to venerate the old and admire the new but is ultimately unable to engage with the Zionist project. At the same time, *The Dream of My People* offers a counter-narrative that centers on the sacred, more so than on the secular, and on Rosenblatt, rather than on Palestine, in which the cantor figures as a modern-day Moses, a venerated Jewish leader who comes to see the "promised land" and then to die. Read this way, *The Dream of My People* becomes a vehicle for telling the final chapter of the cantor's life as the culmination of a sacred journey. Samuel Rosenblatt writes in his biography of his father that the cantor had long wished that "his last pulpit might be in the Land of Israel."

WORKS ON WHICH THIS COMMENT DRAWS

Part of this essay is drawn from the first chapter of Jeffrey Shandler, Jews, God, and Videotape: Religion and Media in America (New York University Press, 2009).

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