In the 1920's Mordecai Hershman, Zavel Kwartin and Joseph Rosenblatt were the idols of the Jews of America and indeed of Jews all over the world. Although each had his partisans, some critics accorded the highest place to Kwartin. He had, wrote Kurt List in Commentary, September 1946, "the best voice of the three and also best followed cantorial style."

Kwartin was the most widely recorded, having begun about 1906 with Pathé, for whom he made five records, among the earliest discs of cantorial music. This led to a contract with German G & T for one hundred recordings over a five year period. In the United States he appeared on major labels.

Unlike most cantors, who began their careers as boy singers in a choir, where they absorbed the music of the liturgy—nusach and choral compositions—from early childhood, Kwartin sang in public only once as a child and began his musical studies as an adult. Although his family realized that he had an unusual voice, the father was adamantly opposed to a cantorial career for his son.

When the lad was eight, Zavel (a diminutive of Zebulon) sang two solos with a group of Jewish villagers who gave a concert in the church courtyard in Chonodor (his birthplace) to show their gratitude to the local priest who had saved them from a pogrom. Not long afterward the chazan and choirmaster Getzel Balter passed through the town and was enthusiastic about the child's voice. Later the father took the boy to the famous Yeruchaim Hakaton, who also urged a cantor's career. However, the father would not permit it, regarding it as a low occupation, and persevered in his determination to make a business man of his son.

As a result, not long after his Bar Mitzvah, the boy was apprenticed first to a bookbinder and later to a locksmith. Eventually he joined his uncle in the grain and feed business, and later his father in textiles.

It was not until his marriage at the age of twenty-two that Kwartin at last found some practical encouragement of his musical gifts. In Yekaterinoslav, where he had gone to live with his wife's family, his brother-in-law strongly urged him to become a cantor. Zavel's business activities for his father-in-law took

They all discouraged his from considering a career as cantor and urged him to try training for opera and concert appearances instead. Only Winogradoff, a Russian opera star who still clung to his Jewish faith, and Nowakowski, the famous synagogue composer and chor director, approved of his cantorial ambitions. A year after his marriage Zavel made the decision to go to Vienna to study chazzanut and voice.

Less than a year later (1898), he took his first cantorial post in Yelisavetgrad and remained until 1903. From there he went to Vienna's Kaiserin Elizabeth Temple for five years and then to St. Petersburg, a post considered the best in Russia, perhaps in all Europe. After a year there, Kwartin, who lived comfortably under exemption from the stringent Russian restrictions on Jews, felt that he did not want to raise a family in this anti-Semitic atmosphere and left for the Tabac Temple in Budapest, where he served for ten years.

After a concert tour through the United States in 1920, he stayed on as cantor for Temple Emanuel-El in Brooklyn for six years, where Herman Zalis was his choirmaster. Zalis later assisted him in publishing three volumes of improvisations, Smirot Zebulon (1928, 1931, 1938).

Long interested in Zionism, Kwartin made his first trip to Palestine in 1926, returning in 1930 to live there for seven years. The last fifteen years of his life were spent in the United States. In 1951, at the age of 77, he published his autobiography, written in Yiddish.

Kwartin's was a lyric baritone voice, mellow and flexible, with a wide range. Gershon Ephros writes of him, "He was ... a veritable expert on the melodic traditions of Hungarian and Russian Jewry alike. His work is a blend of simple ballad-style melodies with expansive coloratura. His style is sui generis ... His diction is praiseworthy, his interpretation masterly and sincere.

While sounding on East European nusach, Kwartin's chazzanut was somewhat modified by the western ideas of the great synagogue composers of the nineteenth century.

Notes by B. H. Stambler
COLLECTORS GUILD

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