Cantor Moshe Koussevitzky · Sabbath Morning

As the Nazis bombed Warsaw in 1939 and the city became more and more fearful, Koussevitzky conducted regular services in shelters and cellars. Practically his last act in beleaguered Warsaw before his surrender was to chant the Yom Kippur services underground. The congregation was even joined by some despairing Christians. Arrested by the Gestapo, he was scheduled to be sent to the awesome Treblinka prison. The Nazis even released a false report that he had been executed. However, he was rescued by non-Jewish members of the Polish underground who recognized his importance as an artist. Dressed in Nazi uniforms they appeared at the prison with forged orders and spirited Koussevitzky away over the River Bug to Byalystok in Russian territories. Happily, his family was rescued soon after and reunited with him.

Now began a second career, that of a Russian conductor and opera star, in a life literally snatched from death. Koussevitzky gave recitals of operatic and liturgical music in Moscow, Lenin¬

grad, Kiev, Odessa and Tiflis. As the war moved on to Russian soil, he travelled farther and farther eastward in Russia, almost to the borders of Afghanistan, giving stirring inspirational concerts to the troops under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Education. He received the Stalin Order of Merit for his contribution to war morale.

In 1944, after the German retreat, he became the principal tenor in the Tiflis (Georgia) National Opera Company in the Caucasus and sang there most successfully for two years. His repertoire included La Juive, Tosca, Traviata, Macbeth, Boris Godunov, Salome, Eugene Onegin and Mad Scene.

After the liberation of Warsaw, Koussevitzky returned to the heart-breaking ruins of the ghetto, where he conducted the Kol Mole Rachamin (God Full of Mercy) at a memorial service before the survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto. The chaos and destruction in the city that had once been the scene of his great triumphs filled him with despair for the future, which seemed hopeless. However, after a concert for the Polish Parliament, which was attended by many high-ranking dignitaries of the government and the diplomatic corps, he succeeded in obtaining visas for himself and his family, one for England, one for the United States.

In London in 1946 there was a Koussevitzky family reunion, for his three brothers, Jacob, Simha and David, who had begun careers as cantors in England, and his mother, had all safely survived the war there. He gave several concerts in England, concluding with a gala farewell appearance before an audience of ten thousand at the Royal Albert Hall in London, and finally came to the United States to settle in 1947.

Here began Koussevitzky's third rise to the very pinnacle of cantorial glory. His miraculous survival through the bitter war years enlivened great sympathy; he was met at the pier by a tumultuous crowd and his first cantorial appearances drew throngs of emotional worshippers who wept for him and with him as a remnant of the once great Jewry of Poland.

Soon after his arrival he made his first major appearance in Boston's Symphony Hall. The music critic of the Boston Advocate, commenting, "A voice of beauty and power intelligently used."

His New York debut before a sold-out house at Carnegie Hall on October 4, 1947 led Noel Straus, critic for the New York Times to write, "...he proved the possessor of one of the outstanding voices of the time...splendid quality throughout his wide range...powerful, resonant and rich...capable of the finest gradations and nuances...a beauty of timbre so pronounced that it could hardly be overpraised."

For the next five years he officiated for the holidays at important synagogues and gave concerts throughout the United States and Canada. At memorial meetings for Nazi victims his singing of Kol Mole Rachamin and Ani Maamin invariably moved his audiences to tears.

In 1952 he accepted a post at the Beth-El Synagogue in the Borough Park section of Brooklyn, New York. Here he officiated until his death in 1966. During this time also he made many concert tours to South Africa, Mexico and Israel, where he twice conducted Passover services. Though the reputedly-high fees he commanded for his appearances were much talked of, few knew of his charities and of his willingness to appear without fee for the benefit of a number of obscure Chassidic rebbes whose spirituality and scholarship he respected.

In 1953 he participated in an unusual recital with his three brothers at Carnegie Hall. Sholom Secunda, Jewish composer, conductor and critic, then remarked, "To my knowledge it is rare that four brothers should all become famous cantors. Too often they should appear together like this is a historic moment in Jewish music." Continuing the family tradition, his son Alexander has become cantor of the Utopia Jewish Center in Queens, New York.

Cantor Koussevitzky was doubly blessed in that his singing powers continued undiminished into the later years of his life, and that even in the last tragic months of his long illness he was still able to sing with rare and affecting beauty. His concert at the Brooklyn Jewish Center in May, 1966 was considered by his hearers to be the swan song of a glorious career.

Koussevitzky was a luminary who graced the Amud with a voice of surpassing loveliness in a career of dedication to a sacred office that lasted almost forty-two years. His passing leaves a unique void in Jewish life.

Cantor Koussevitzky's recordings also fall into three periods. In the late twenties and early thirties he recorded for the Syrena, Parnass and British labels in Europe. From 1947 to 1952 he recorded for RCA Victor in America and from 1959 to 1966 he made a series for Famous Records. Perhaps his most popular recording is Shemesh (Beit Hashem), a composition of Cantor Israel Schorr, which he embellished with his usual virtuosity and which became his invariable encore at concerts.

—Notes by S. H. Stalb

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