ASHREI
KORUTZ M'CHOMER RIBONO SHEL OLOM
(Yom Kippur Koton)
RAHAMONO
UNSANET OKEF
B'ROSH HASHONOH
OVINU MALKENU
UMIPNE HATOINU
HATEH
Moshe Koussevitzky, (June 9, 1899-August 23, 1966) the only
cantor of our day to be ranked with the great names of the
Golden Age—Breslau, Sirota, and Kwart—has been dubbed the
Hazzan Hador (Cantor of His Generation) and Prince of the
Anud (prayer-stand) by his fellow cantors. His life falls
into three separate periods, each crowned by triumphal success.

Koussevitzky's first career, in the pre-Nazi period of European
history, followed the traditional pattern of cantorial biography.
Born into a family of hazzanim in Smorgon, a small town on
the Russo-Polish border in 1899, the boy early displayed a fine
alto voice and a sharp ear for music. His father, recognizing the
child's gift, allowed the eight-year-old to join synagogal choirs
of Cantors Shimon Alter, Girovich and particularly, Ephraim
Shliapok. A typical old-style patriarchal choirmaster and a dis-
tinguished cantor in his own right, Shliapok had a deep influence
on the boy, and was his first teacher of solfeggio.

When World War I broke out, young Moshe went with his
family to Rostov. Here he continued his vocal studies with Cantor
Eliyahu Salutkowski and his religious training at the Ramallah
Yeshivah. Here also in Salutkowski's Hazamim Singing Society
he met a young soprano whom he was to marry (1922).

In 1920 he settled in Vilna, continuing his studies both in the
humanities and in music. During this period also he revealed a
gift for painting, drawing, and sculpture. Cantor Nathan Stolin-
itz, reminiscing in his book Music in Jewish Life remarks, "In Moshe
Koussevitzky, the world-famous singer, was dormant a potentially
great painter and sculptor. I think of this especially when I re-
member the masterpiece among his remarkable drawings and sculptures
created among his young friends." Many years later Stolinitz saw
hanging in Koussevitzky's home in New York drawings he had
somewhat been able to preserve through all of his wanderings
during the tumultuous years of World War II.

Koussevitzky resolved the conflict between his artistic and
musical ambitions by becoming a cantor in Vilna, first at the
Sawel Synagogue and in 1925 at the Great Synagogue. He fol-
lowed many eminent cantors in this post (among them Rottman,
Hershman and Sirota), but his real triumph was to come in 1928,
when the great Gerson Sirota left the renowned Tomacki Syna-
gogue of Warsaw. When auditions were held for the post, more
than two hundred cantors appeared. Koussevitzky was heard
first, asked to sing again as the last, and was then awarded the
coveted position.

In Warsaw, Koussevitzky achieved his first real greatness. His
voice reached its full power and brilliance as he continued his studies
with such teachers as Professors Bazylnsky (mentor of
Jan Kiepura), Libiva and Magnes. His artistry and virtuosity en-
couraged his listeners. Having four months free each year, he was
able to concertize throughout Europe, traveling to Paris, Vienna,
Budapest, Brussels, Antwerp, and London. He was especially be-
loved in England, where he appeared frequently in 1935, 1937
and 1939.

He made two trips to Palestine in 1934 and in 1936. His de-
barcations there were like national holidays. In his honor people
played the phonograph records at full volume by their open
windows, so that wherever he went on his arrival, he heard his own
voice! His debut in the United States came in 1938 at Carnegie
Hall, to resounding critical acclaim. Many American synagogues
sought his services, but despite all offers, he decided to return to
Warsaw, and thus was caught up in the overwhelming Nazi holocaust
in Poland.

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 beloved Warsaw
before its surrender was to chant the Yom Kippur services
underground. The congregation was even joined by some despair-
ning 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 uni-
forms they appeared at the prison with forged orders and spirited
Koussevitzky away over the River Bug to Bialystok in Russian
territory. Happily, his family was rescued soon after and reunited
with him.

Now began a second new career, that of a Russian concert
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 con-
certs to the troops under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Edu-
cation. 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, Rigoletto, Boris
Godunov, Sadko, Eugen Onegin and May Night.

After the liberation of Warsaw, Koussevitzky returned to the
heart-breaking ruins of the ghetto, where he sang the Kel Mole
Rachamin (God Full of Mercy) at a memorial service before the
survivors of the Nazi horrors. 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. How-
ever, 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 precious 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, Shabbetai, Shime 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 enlisted great waves of sympathy; he was met at the pier
by a tumultuous crowd and his first cantorial appearances drew
throngos 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
commented, "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 out-
standing 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 pro-
nounced that it could hardly be over-praised.

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

In 1952 he accepted his post at the Beth-El Synagogue
in the Borough Park section of Brooklyn, New York. Here he offici-
ated 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 yeshivas whose spirit-
uality and scholarship he revered.

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. That
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 grace the Anud with a
voice of surpassing loneliness 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,
Parlophon and Cristal labels in Europe. From 1947 to 1952 he
recorded on RCA Victor in America, and from 1959 to 1966 he
made a series for Famous Records. Perhaps his most popular
recording is Sheyboneh Boys Hamidkesh, a composition of Cantor
Israel Schorr, which he embellished with his usual virtuosity
and which became his invaluable encore at concerts.

—Notes by B.H. Stambaung

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