Gershon Sirota

'Celebrated Cantor of Warsaw'

Sings a Holiday Service

Choir & Alto Soloists Included

Volume 1

- Unsane Toikef
- K'vakoras
- B'rosh Hashonah
- Odom Yesodo Meofor
- U mipne Chatoeinu
- Hayom Horas Oлом
- Havein Yakir Li Retzei
- V'Seorev
- Kol Nidre
- V'Shomeru
- Yaale Tachanunainu Hashem, Hashem

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Cantor Gershon Sirota sings a Holiday Service

More than two decades have passed since the brutal murder of the world-renowned cantor, Gershon Sirota. His phenomenal robusto tenor voice of extensive range and facile coloratura won him acclaim as one of the greatest voices of the twentieth century. Critics considered him the only cantor who could be compared with the famous opera soloists. Indeed, he was often compared with the great Enrico Caruso. Typical of the comments that were often made of Sirota's powerful, operatic tenor voice is how the noted music critic Arthur E. Knight described him twelve years after his death. He wrote in the British 'Record Collector' of January 1935 as follows: "He was one of the most highly trained tenors of all time — his octave leaps, perfect three note runs up the scale, fabulous trills... his facile coloratura are unrivaled by any other recording tenor."

Gershon Sirota's numerous phonograph records and extensive concert appearances made him a well known figure in the field of music early in his career. Cantors and Jewish newspapers often said that a 'chazan' with such magnificent vocal powers is born only once in a hundred years. Non-Jewish critics who heard him officiate at services in the synagogue described them as "outstanding musical events conducted on a high level, showing the Jews' great cultural background and rich musical heritage." These comments which often appeared in the secular newspapers encouraged royalty, heads of state, army officials and patrons of the opera to often attend his concerts and synagogue services. The good name and world famous reputation that Cantor Sirota established in the field of music will never be forgotten.

Gershon Sirota was born in Podolia Gubern in 1874. When just a young child, he was already helping his father, a noted cantor, to conduct services in the local synagogue. Soon his parents moved to Odessa and Gershon's wonderful voice began to become well known. Yakovkin, Cantor Yankel Seroka's choir director at the Shalashner Shul immediately offered the young Sirota a position in his choir. Shortly afterwards, Sirota was introduced to Baron Kalhos, the director of a Music Conservatory, and admitted on a scholarship. Gershon quickly made great strides in his musical education, and, as a result, was assigned larger solo's in Yakovkin's choir. One Shabbos morning Sirota was asked to serve at the Oneg at the Shalashner Shul. After his magnificent performance he was appointed Assistant Cantor, with the salary of 100 rubles a month. It was not long before Yankel Seroka came complaining to Gershon's father that his young son was trying to take away his position Sirota resigned and accepted the Cantorial post at the Priashchik Shul in Odesa.

In 1890, Sirota became Cantor of the famous Vina-Shtat Synagogue, where he remained for nine years. There his choir directors were Yitzchok Schlossberg, Nathan Ilmarazyen and later Leo Low. When Leo Low became choir director, he arranged for a special concert, in which Cantor Sirota sang with the accompaniment of a large, newly founded choir. This concert was a tremendous success and the newspapers wrote enthusiastic reviews. He and Leo Low began to receive invitations from Białystok, Grodno, Minsk and other Russian cities to make new concerts. Sirota's appearances were so well received and praised by Svatopolak-Mirska, the Russian Auditor General decided to visit the Vilna-Shat Synagogue to hear Sirota. A few days later, the General sent a letter to the Czar's wife, Maria Feodorovna, highly praising the young cantor's talent. She requested that he perform at a concert sponsored for the benefit of the Vilna Institution for the Blind. As a result of Sirota's appearance, a sizable sum was raised for the Institution. Shortly afterwards, Gershon Sirota was called to St. Petersburg to give a series of concerts before Czar Nicholas II. He was then asked to give yearly concerts in St. Petersburg and Moscow by Imperial Command.

The publicity of Sirota's name soon came to the attention of the major recording companies of Europe. In 1909, twelve records of Sirota's liturgical selections were released. This event achieved for him the great honor of being the first Cantor to record his voice on phonograph records. His recordings were distributed throughout Europe and later appeared in America. The medium of these records soon made Sirota's name world famous, even though he had not yet appeared in many of the countries which his records had already reached.

Meanwhile, in Warsaw, the directors of the Tomatska Synagogue were looking for a new Cantor, Grettzhand, who had held the Cantorial post, was now old and the Synagogue needed a fitting successor to take his place. They offered Sirota the position, because of his great popularity and Cantorial ability. He was thirty-one years old when he accepted this position, which he held for nineteen years.

In February 1912, Cantor Sirota made the first of what was to be many concert tours to America. He appeared at Carnegie Hall, The Hippodrome, and The Academy of Music in New York before making tours of the other large cities. During 1913 he returned again on another concert tour appearing at Kessler's Theatre, The New Star Casino, The Palace Garden, and Carnegie Hall. His third American visit in 1921 began with an appearance at the Metropolitan Opera House, accompanied by Meyer Machienberg's hundred voice choir. Arturo Toscanini and the famous Opera Star Joseph Schwartz were among the prominent celebrities who attended that concert. He then conducted services in many famous Synagogues, singing for the High Holy Days at the Kalvariah Shul in Harlem. During the seasons of 1924, 1925 and 1927, he also officiated in New York for the Yomim Noraim. When he returned to Europe (after conducting services at the Bronx Winter Garden for the benefit of the Bais Hamachshor Hagadol of Harlem in 1927), the Tomatska Synagogue had already chosen a Cantor to replace him. They took this action, because they were very disturbed about his constantly leaving them to 'daven' elsewhere in America for the High Holy Days.

In 1933, Sirota became Cantor of the Norzik Shul. That same year, a concert was held in his honor at the Warsaw Coliseum and he also made a trip to Israel. There he conducted services for the High Holy Days at the Magrabi Theatre. His last trip to America was made in 1938, when he davened for the Yomim Noraim in Chicago and during Succoth in Milwaukee. He then returned to Europe, after receiving a telegram that his wife was critically ill in Warsaw.

With the outbreak of the war, Sirota was imprisoned in the Warsaw Ghetto with his family and the other Jews of the city. He conducted High Holy Day Services in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1941. Two years later, Cantor Gershon Yitzchok Sirota was murdered with his entire family during the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto on the last day of Passover.

This recording is the first of a series of long playing records presenting the complete recorded works of Gershon Sirota.

Special thanks go to the Bloch Publishing Co., for allowing us to use excerpts from the English translation of their Standard Machzor. The picture of the Tomatska Synagogue of Warsaw appears through the courtesy of the Yivo Institute of Jewish Research.

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