THE COMPLETE RECORDINGS

CANTOR JOSEF ROSENBLATT

SABBATH PART ONE

JEWISH MUSIC ARCHIVES

COLLECTORS GUILD

CG 650

COMPATIBLE (MONO OR STEREO)

HASHEM MOLOKH
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YISHTABAH
ZOREA TS'DOKOS
ROM V'NISO
TSUR YISROEL
YAALEH V'Y'YOVO
Y'KUM PURKON
MI SHEBERAKH

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Cantor Josef Rosenblatt
1882-1933

As a “boy wonder” of nine, Rosenblatt, together with his seven-year-old brother, was taken on his first concert tour by his father, a baal t’fillah (precentor). Thus began a career that was eventually to make him the most popular cantor of his day, the beloved “Yossele” of the multitude.

Brought up in the Ukrainian Chassidic world of Byela Tzerekov, where he was born in 1882, the lad absorbed both Chassidic music and Chorale chant from his earliest days. His father held choir rehearsals in his home, and by the time he was only four years old, Yossele was already able to sing whole passages from the liturgy, and began to assist his father at services. Gradually the roles were reversed and Yossele became the acknowledged star of the trio. The boy prodigy, however, received no formal musical training. Though the father engaged a tutor in Hebrew subjects to travel with the two little boys, he refused to allow Yossele to attend a conservatory of music, fearing that he would be turned away from Chasidic prayer by exposure to the secular world. He did teach the boy to read and write music.

By the time Rosenblatt undertook his first full-time cantorial position in Munkacz, Hungary in 1900, though he was only eighteen, he had already had many years of experience before the Amud (reader’s desk). Everywhere he appeared, the serious little boy with the golden throat

had been received with enthusiastic acclaim. Indeed anecdotes are told of how the police had to be summoned in many a town to keep the milling crowds in order, and how more than once, the raising of the Almemar (reading platform) was broken by the pressure of the multitude packed into the synagogue to hear him.

Rosenblatt moved on from his first position in Munkacz, where he had come as a newly-wed with his bride, Taubele Kaufman, to Pressburg, Austria, a city renowned for its Yeshiva and fine Chassidic music. He had won the coveted position in auditions over fifty-six rivals. In Pressburg his talents blossomed, as he began to study voice culture in Vienna, not far away, and to compose, publishing Shirei Josef, a collection of recitatives and choral pieces. Here too, in 1905 he made the first of many recordings, in this case for the Edison Company of Vienna.

The following year, 1906, marked his move to the Kohlhofen Synagogue in Hamburg, Germany, and his introduction to the world of Western European orthodoxy, so different from his Chassidic boyhood. Here, too, he became acquainted with opera, and first heard Caruso. Interestingly enough, Caruso seems to have visited the synagogue to hear a most unusual cantor – Rosenblatt. The two singers were later to know each other in America. During the Hamburg days, Rosenblatt published three other books of compositions - Tiferes Josef, Z’nitros Josef and Shiv’ah Ofenei Haktiddush - and saw his family grow to number seven children.

In 1912 he was invited to sing in New York at Congregation Ohab Zedek, where, after two guest appearances, he was elected to serve at the highest salary ever paid to a cantor in the United States. So began an American career that was to take the one-time boy wonder over the length and breadth of the United States in appearances for war bonds and charities, to bring his voice into every Jewish home on phonograph records, and to make his reputation as great as that of Caruso.

To clear a debt of honor caused by the failure of a Jewish newspaper he had sponsored, Rosenblatt in 1925 undertook a strenuous national tour on a vaudeville circuit, and a world tour thereafter. While working on a Jewish film being made in Palestine in 1933, he suffered a fatal heart attack and was buried on the Mt of Olives in Jerusalem. He was only 51 years old. Cantors Mordecai Hershman and Samuel Kwartin, who were in Palestine at the time, chanted prayers at his funeral.

Cantor Rosenblatt’s voice was remarkable for its large, two and a half octave range, with a brilliant falsetto, handled with unparalleled sweetness and technique, and for his graceful improvisations.

The selections here presented were made by old acoustical and electrical techniques, hence a sound equaling modern high fidelity is obviously impossible. However, no engineering technique has been spared to remove surface noise and distortion, reproduce each selection at the proper pitch, and restore the fullest possible brilliance of tone.

Notes by B.H. Stambler

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Printed in U.S.A. (FA74)

For Complete Catalog write Record Collectors Guild, 507 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

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