

For the love of music Tikvat Israel cantor emeritus helps save Jewish music

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ROCKVILLE, MD — At 92, Cantor Mark Levi has a new profession: zamler.

That's Yiddish for collector, explains Levi, who was cantor at Beth Tikva Synagogue (today, Tikvat Israel in Rockville) from 1962 to 1984, then at Beth Ami in Boca Raton, Fla., 1985-95. Both shuls named him cantor emeritus.

Before moving back to the area last year ("The children and grandchildren are here," he says), he saw a notice in the local Jewish newspaper and decided to donate his Judaica musical collection to the Judaica Music Rescue Project of the Judaica Sound Archives at Florida Atlantic University.

After the donation, Nathan Tinanoff, director of JSA, convinced Levi to become an official "collector" or point person for Jewish sound recordings to be donated.

"I am a cantor, still singing, and love music," says Levi about his new job.

The Silver Spring resident is one of about 60 zamlers throughout the United States and Canada, says Tinanoff, who also has local roots. Before retiring, he lived in Silver Spring and Reston. "They help spread the word about what we are doing, they're goodwill ambassadors," he says.

Beginning in 2002 with fewer than 1,000 78 rpm recordings, the collection has reached some 50,000 items, including 78 and 45 rpm records, LP albums, cassette tapes and a small CD collection.

About half are in Yiddish, with the remainder divided into cantorial selections, Hebrew language, Sephardic, and non-Jewish content recordings by Jewish composers, artists and conductors.

Stored on a half of a floor of the FAU library and taking up some 5,000 square feet, the recordings are catalogued and digitized by a staff of eight. JSA also has 20-30 volunteers.

"We are trying to preserve a cultural heritage," Tinanoff says of his project. "People were throwing the records away, but now are thrilled to find a home for their records or those of their parents or grandparents." — Aaron Leibel

For more information, go to www.fau.edu/jsa. To make a musical donation, call Cantor Mark Levi at 301-598-0282.

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