

**AN ANNOTATED TRANSLATION OF PINCHAS SZERMAN'S *POILISHE  
KHAZONES IN FARGANGENHEIT UN TZUKUNFT* [THE POLISH CANTORATE IN  
THE PAST AND THE FUTURE], 1924<sup>1</sup>**

Benjamin Matis  
(University of Kansas)

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**Abstract:** A translation of a Polemic essay by Cantor Pinchas Szerman, second cantor at the Great synagogue of Warsaw. The essay discusses the many difficulties experienced by cantors in his time, especially the ones who had not be educated. In Szerman's opinion, the only way to ease the burden – especially the financial burden – was to create a class of educated and professional cantors. The many customs of Polish Jewry that are forgotten today have been annotated as well as basic biographical data on highly influential earlier cantorial masters.

## Introduction

The role of the cantor, or khazan in Hebrew and khazn in Yiddish, is to recite the often very lengthy and rather wordy liturgy. The cantor essentially prays on behalf of the congregation (the Hebrew title Shliach Tzibbur means exactly that), many of whom cannot read Hebrew, and before the printing press even fewer had a prayer books at all. The worshiper needed only to respond “Amen,” to the blessing recited by the cantor to have fulfilled the mitzvah (commandment) of prayer. Unlike a Catholic priest, a cantor or rabbi need not be of some special category: anyone with a decent moral character, Jewishly literate, and had a pleasant voice can serve as khazan.

Unfortunately, there were issues relating to the cantor that had to do with showmanship as well as mangling the liturgy with constant Hebrew mistakes:

All complaints on this score, however, were of no avail.<sup>2</sup> Cantors were continually censured for vanity and according to Asher ben Jehiel they sang only what was most likely to win ap-

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<sup>1</sup> Szerman, Pinchas, *Poilshe Hazzanus in Past and Future*, in: A. Rosen (ed.), *The History of Hazanuth*, 1st ed., NYC: The Jewish Ministers Cantors Association of America 1924, 49-51 (in Yiddish).

<sup>2</sup> See “Bet Yosef” on Orah Hayyim, 53; Moses Minz, *Res ponsa*, No. 87; Judah b. Moses Selichover, “Shire Yehudah”; Isaiah Horwitz, “Shene Luhot ha-Berit,” section “Tefillah”; Solomon Lipschütz, “Te’udat

plause. Their singing was sometimes too loud, and their frequently incorrect pronunciation of Hebrew [text] ... [was] constantly a subject of complaint.<sup>3</sup>

From this passage one can determine that the need for “applause” outweighed all other considerations. Applause could have meant any of a number of things, from actual clapping to the much more desired monetary reward. There were a number of customary pledges made on a Sabbath or Holiday if the cantor was to recite a particular blessing or prayer for someone. The most common term amongst cantors was *mishebeyrakh-gelt* explained below. It is then entirely possible that if offered a significant enough sum, a cantor could sing a *mishebeyrach* in a very lengthy and artistic way, much to the dissatisfaction of others.

The perception that the cantor made errors in reciting the liturgy because he was either unlearned, or did not care, as he concentrated solely on his voice and improvisation, developed partly out of the notion of the cantor as artist and ergo not quite religious enough. In the words of Jeremy Lockwood:

The crux of what follows hangs on the issue of perception of the saintly rabbi and the frivolous cantor. The identity of the cantor as a holy man, a spokesman for the community, is often in disharmony with the frustrations to which the cantor is susceptible. The liminal quality of the occupation of cantor, which sits in a grey area between the holy, Torah-upholding Jew and the less respectable role of a semi-obscure artist, often led to the suspicion that cantors were not pious and God-fearing Jews.<sup>4</sup>

The problem with pledges made on Sabbath and holidays was that the cantor then had to collect the fees after the Sabbath or holiday ended. This was not so easy. As salaries were far less than sufficient (see below), cantors considered such oaths for payment quite seriously.

Rav Yoel ben Eliezer Sirkis cantor of Leipa in Bohemia (today, Česká Lipa, Czech Republic) was the author of *Reiach Nichoach*, a broadsheet that was a refutation of an earlier, scathing broadside of unknown authorship from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> Sirkis first included a complete copy of the text of this anonymous critical broadside, therefore preserving it. The rebuke included all the usual items: Hebraic ignorance, moral decadence, and over-the-top musical showmanship.<sup>6</sup> Further are charges of gluttony, singing more like shouting, and odd vocal production habits, among others. Of particular interest regards the collection of the fees owed a cantor. Apparently some cantors were quite

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Shelomoh,” No. 21 in C. Adler, M. Schloessinger, J. Jacobs, and A. Kaiser, s.v. Hazzan, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1906 Online Edition, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/7426-hazzan>, accessed 10 August, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> J. Lockwood, “Legendary Voices: The Education of the Great Cantors (sic): Cantor Samuel Vigoda Opens a Window Onto a Nearly Lost Era,” <http://jewishcurrents.org/legendary-voices-the-education-of-the-great-cantors-34100>, accessed August 13, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> The broadsheet itself bears the title “נענין ואינן צועקין שלושה” (cf. Bava Metzia 75b). The text and bibliographic entry may be found in: “Tadel der Kantoren.” *Zeitschrift für Hebraeische Bibliographie* 1911, 155-158.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew L. Klein (2011), *Reiach Nichoach, a Pleasing Aroma: Prayer Leadership and Cantorial Music in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*. Unpublished, n.p.

zealous in their collections and insisted they be paid the fee that was pledged, even if it was a voluntary donation of sorts:

**Anonymous:** And as concerning voluntary donations – why, they consider them as obligations as if they had been lent money to invest. “And such taskmasters are urgent” and take by force. They don’t take a little – but rather a lot! – But it is not written: “Some give a little and some give a lot?”<sup>7</sup>

**Sirkis:** And that which was gossiped about *hazzanim* concerning oaths and vows, God tests both minds and hearts: If so, the author is a miser or a thief or a robber! For is not the *hazzan* in the place of the high priest? As it is written: “And the high priest was greater than his brethren” [how can this be] if he is poor and has the least? And *hazzanim* do not take by force! Thus hinders our author in his slanderous course.<sup>8</sup>

## Exposition

Pinkhas Szerman (1887-1942) was the *khazzan sheini* [literally “Second Cantor”] at the Great Synagogue of Warsaw. In 1924, Szerman authored an essay for the thirtieth anniversary gala book of the *Khazzonim Farband*, also known as the Jewish Ministers Cantors Association, that was entitled *The History of Chazzanuth* in English and *Di Geshekhte fun Khazzones* in Yiddish.<sup>9</sup> The volume itself is a treasure-trove of charming anecdotes about the truly greatest generation of *Khazzanim*, when the music of the cantor was at its cultural and commercial apogee. Szerman’s essay, entitled *Poilshe Khazones in Fargangenheit un Tzukunf*,<sup>10</sup> [The Polish Cantorate in the Past and the Future] was neither one of self-congratulation nor praise of the American Farband, however. Szerman’s announcement the formation of a *Khazzonim Farband* in Poland and concluded the essay with a sagacious appeal for funds from the members of the American Farband, many of who were Polish Jews.

Szerman’s appeal comes at the very end of an essay that is comprised of pathetic vignettes of abuse, poverty, and humiliation. However, he believed that only by following a Haskalah-like program of education and professionalization could cantors achieve

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p. His first point of defense is that salaries for cantors were almost always inadequate, and that moreover the cantor was like the High Priest, a comparison also made in *Teudat Shlomo*. Voluntary donations to the cantor in exchange for prayers for health, memorial prayers and so on, usually made over the Torah scroll on a Monday or Thursday morning, were vitally important to his livelihood. Pinchos Szerman attests that these were sometimes very difficult to collect, see below.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

<sup>9</sup> *The History of Hazzanuth: Issued to the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Jewish Ministers Cantors Association of America*, ed. Aaron H. Rosen, New York 1924. The volume is bi-lingual and can be opened from either side of the book, depending on the language. This volume has considerably more Yiddish than English, while the 1934 volume was completely the opposite. It was self-published by the Farband and printed by the local Pinski-Massel Press on the Bowery. Some of the advertising is in Yiddish and some in English. Some included both languages. Advertisements included piano manufacturers like Hardman, Peck or Becker Brothers, seller of pianos as well as phonographs (Brunswick and Victor); Yiddish newspapers like *Der Tug* and *Tageblatt*; Kosher catering establishments for weddings; banks; restaurants; trusses; cocoa powder; salad dressing; teas and coffees; several steamship lines.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

a higher social status and ultimately a decent living. This was not unique to Polish Jewry; from the later half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, cantors in Austria-Hungary and the German lands strove for the same sort of respect. The beginning came with the start of professional journals: first, *Liturgische Zeitschrift zur Veredelung des Synagogengesangs*, edited by Hermann Ehrlich in Berkach, Meiningen, 1851-1861; *Der juedischen Kantor*, edited by Abraham Blaustein in Berlin, 1879-1898; the *Oesterreichisch-ungarische Cantoren-Zeitung* edited by Jacob Bauer, 1881-1912. There was also a journal for Hungarian cantors written in both German and Hungarian, the *Ungarische isr. Beamtenzeitung*,<sup>11</sup> edited by Sulzer protégé Moritz Friedman. It also served as a forum for small-town cantors, impoverished and usually overworked,<sup>12</sup> as well as the laments and complaints of the sophisticated urban cantors about small-town cantors and their lack of knowledge.

In 1881, in addition to the journal, numerous Viennese cantors also founded the Austro-Hungarian Cantors Association in the apartment of Salomon Sulzer and under his auspices; in 1882, some 100 cantors from throughout the Empire came for what was called a *Kantorenteg*, held at a restaurant in the Prater. The “founding fathers” of the organization proclaimed a year later:

Modern times have taught us what the power of associations can achieve. Where the weak strength of the individual fails, the united strength of all can step in. The smaller the number of members in a group, the more negligently it will be treated by society. It is all the more so our duty to make possible the impossible through our mutual support, and to avoid all segregation.<sup>13</sup>

## Szerman: a biographical sketch

Most of what we know of Pinkhas Szerman can be found in a single source, Issachar Fater’s *Yiddische Musik in Poilin Tzvishn Bayde Welt Milchomos* [Jewish Music in Poland between the World Wars].<sup>14</sup> Fater drew from several sources published before and after the Shoah: the bibliography of Fater’s lengthy biographical sketch includes an essay by Szerman himself about his youth, and a similar essay about Szerman by Mordechai Geshuri that had also appeared in the *Stashover Yizkorbuch*.<sup>15</sup> What follows is a translation of Fater’s biographical sketch of Szerman, taken from the original Yiddish language edition:

Szerman was born in 1887 in Stashov in Southeast Poland in the Sandomierz area. By the age of eleven, Szerman was orphaned and went to live with his older brother, who was cantor in

<sup>11</sup> Schmidt, Esther, *From the Ghetto to the Conservatoire: The Professionalization of Jewish Cantors in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1826-1918)*, Oxford 2004, 176.

<sup>12</sup> It was not uncommon for a small town khazn to serve as shokhet (ritual slaughterer), mohel (performer of circumcisions), sofer, and/or melamed. See biographical notes on AB Birnbaum; see also the advertisements for positions in *Oesterreichisch-Ungarnische Cantoren-Zeitung*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>14</sup> Fater, Issachar, *Jewish Music in Poland between the Two World Wars*, Tel Aviv 1970 (in Yiddish).

<sup>15</sup> See also J. Turkow, *Azoy iz geven*, Buenos Aires 1948; N. Stolnitz, *Negine in Yiddische lebn*, Toronto 1957.

Krasnik. He remained with his brother for five years, during which he sang in his brother's choir, mastered nusach hat'filah, learned the cantillation for the reading of the Torah, and most importantly learned to read music. Lastly, he traveled with his brother and his choir giving concerts. He married at the age of seventeen and he married rich; after three years of *kest*,<sup>16</sup> he then went to study with the famed A. B. Birnbaum<sup>17</sup> at the progressive synagogue in Częstochowa.

It was here that a whole new world opened for him: in addition to his studies with Birnbaum, he immersed himself in literature and the sciences. He was a diligent student of Birnbaum and Birnbaum was the single greatest influence upon him. He won the competition for the position of second cantor at the prestigious Great Synagogue of Warsaw in 1909. Szerman nevertheless continued to study music and work on his cantorial abilities. He possessed a beautiful baritone voice, unified throughout the registers of his wide-range, though his voice was seen more as silver than golden. Nevertheless, the voice was highly cultivated but he never sounded too studied or overly artificial, and moreover continued to develop his voice. The only person who could influence him musically was the brilliant choral director Dowid Ajzensztat, the choral director at the Great Synagogue. As the khazzan rishon (the primary cantor) of the congregation frequently made concert tours,<sup>18</sup> Szerman worked with Ajzensztat closely in planning the music of a particular worship service; whenever he discussed anything with Ajzensztat, Szerman invariably took his advice.

His personal style at the *amud* drew from the tradition in which he was deeply steeped as well as the "Europeanized" material that he had learned from Birnbaum, creating a beautiful blend of the best of both styles. He dedicated himself to the ideal of paying great attention to his duties and polishing his art. He saw himself, and by extension all cantors, as having great influence on the masses if the cantors performed at the very highest level of their art in holy worship. Szerman's image of the cantor was that the cantor served the liturgical role like that of the kohen gadol. He sought respect for the cantor, a professionalized and educated cantor, and forthwith a great improvement in his economic life.<sup>19</sup>

## The Document

Szerman's writing emulated a very formal style with many *daytchmerisms* – Yiddish words often manufactured to sound more Germanic and therefore educated – and extraordinarily long sentences made up of multiple clauses. Of particular interest are

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<sup>16</sup> It was customary for the Bride's parents to provide room and board for the young couple, usually so that the young man could continue his yeshiva studies, or otherwise help the young couple to save enough money to get their own home.

<sup>17</sup> Abraham Baer Birnbaum (1864-1922) appointed to the New Synagogue in Częstochowa in 1903 and remained until his death.

<sup>18</sup> Szerman served under two giants of the cantorial firmament: Gershon Sirota (born Podolia 1874 – died Warsaw 1943) was one of the first cantors to make commercial recordings of cantorial music. He toured extensively in the course of his career. His first concert tour to the US in February 1912 had appearances in such venues as Carnegie Hall, the Hippodrome, etc., before other cities including Boston; he toured almost yearly until he was trapped in the Warsaw Ghetto. Moshe Koussevitzky (Smorgon 1899 – Brooklyn 1966). Koussevitsky was already tremendously successful in Europe prior to the war, and toured extensively, often with Israel Alter. He escaped Warsaw and spent the war in Soviet Georgia as an opera singer; he made a large number of recordings before and especially after the war, when he became the most celebrated cantor of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A complete discography for either of them does not exist.

<sup>19</sup> Fater, *op.cit.*, 236-242.

the customs and celebrations of Polish Jewry of those times that perhaps outside of the ultra-orthodox communities today are now virtually extinct. These customs, as well as Hebrew terms, will require elucidation annotated in the footnotes. Transliteration follows YIVO style, including for words in Hebrew.

When we focus not only on the distant past but our half of the last century and consider the spiritual and material condition of the cantors and the cantorate back then, we are overcome by horror at their pitiful situation. It would be enough to list the functions the khazn used to perform back then and how poorly he was paid (and how he was paid) to see how lowly the state of the cantorate was. Although he was always considered “kley kodesh”<sup>20</sup> the leadership of the community subjected him to abuses. It was out of the question that a khazn count on a more or less stable, regular salary paid on time that would sufficient to support his family. The khazn had to earn his bread by taking the occasional gigs like a bris,<sup>21</sup> weddings or making a mishebeyrach<sup>22</sup> for all the invited guests only to stretch out his hand and ask for mishebeyrach-gelt.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes a khazn could earn a few rubles without enduring the embarrassment of having to ask; for example, he was entitled to part of the obligatory dowry, called the RaKhaSh, for the initials of Rabbi, Khazn, and Shames. However, every time the father of the bride would find an excuse to lower the dowry so that the khazn would not be overpaid.

When there was a bris, the khazn was obligated to come on the Friday night to the zokher<sup>24</sup> to sing quite a few zmiros.<sup>25</sup> On the day of the bris, he also had to sing romemos<sup>26</sup> in addition to the prayers. This was in addition the seudah yom l’yoboshe<sup>27</sup> nodeh shmeycha and HaRa-chamans.<sup>28</sup> The reward for all of that was nothing more than the paltry fee he got reciting mishebeyrakh. If the khazn failed to please the celebrant by singing nicely at the end of the mishebeyrach for the mother of the child, the host gave the khazn nothing.

We need to know only what an old khazn from Shidloviets (Radom gubernia) told me to know how pathetic the situation was for khazonim then: once, some forty years ago, after returning home from a bris he examined the small amount of change he had gotten. To his shock, he discovered among the coins tin buttons still dangling white threads. These buttons had been torn off their underwear,<sup>29</sup> you should excuse me, in order to throw something into the collection box other than money.

Another moldy old custom was that on the eve of every holiday like khanike, Purim, etc., the khazn and his choir would go from one household to another like regular beggars. Some of the well-to-do householders would demand that the khazn sing them a nice rendition of “han-

<sup>20</sup> Literally “vessel of holiness,” it refers to what in the Christian world would be called clergy.

<sup>21</sup> The formal circumcision ceremony, usually held on the eighth day of the infant’s life.

<sup>22</sup> Lit. “[He] who blessed,” the formula can be used to say a blessing on behalf the sick, a prayer for the person just called to the Torah, a prayer for the mother of a newborn and the child who will receive their Jewish name if a girl, and so on.

<sup>23</sup> Customary tip given to the cantor for reciting the blessing, a small amount.

<sup>24</sup> Properly, Ben Zokhor (Jer. 20:15), the first Friday night after the birth of a male child, wherein fruit, wine, and other beverages were served. See Hayyim Schaus, *The Lifetime of a Jew Throughout the Ages of Jewish History*, Cincinnati 1950, 42, 56.

<sup>25</sup> Table songs for Shabbat, comprised of extra-liturgical religious poetry often sung to street song or popular melodies.

<sup>26</sup> An odd reference, perhaps to psalms, after the famed Alshich commentary called Romemot El.

<sup>27</sup> The circumcision meal, named for the liturgical poem “Yom L’yabasha” that was recited during the ceremony itself. Yom L’yabasha is now recited on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of Passover.

<sup>28</sup> Both part of the invitation to Grace after Meals, specifically one recited at a circumcision feast.

<sup>29</sup> The word he uses is *tachanunim*, literally “supplications.” When reciting tachanun (singular) as part of the morning liturgy, the worshipper is seated, placing his head on the forearm and look straight downward towards the crotch. These were no doubt these buttons from the fly of the undergarment. The use of the term here is meant to be polite but more so an inside joke.

eros halalu"<sup>30</sup> or "Shoshanas Yankev"<sup>31</sup> and would reward him for it. Others, however, avoided the khazn altogether by going to sleep early, or by hiding, as to forgo such a costly visit.

From rosh khoydesh Elul a khazn would sit at the cemetery for entire days waiting for people who came to visit the graves of their dearly departed.<sup>32</sup> He would meekly ask if they would like him to recite the memorial prayer for the dead at the grave, for which he would receive a small gratuity. On Erev Yom Kippur, he sat with his collection plate labeled "for the khazn" after worship and members of the congregation were expected to throw a few coins into the plate. All of this shows just how low the prestige of cantorate had fallen, in addition to the self-image of the khazn.

Even when in some way communities had decided on a salary for the khazn, it usually was not done in a kosher manner, for initially the salary was not actually part of the budget. A little later the cantor's wages were included in the budget, but until then, the khazn was paid by taking a cut of the skhite<sup>33</sup> (ritual slaughter, for which there was a fee) or out of the charity box that the gabbai used to bang on to collect charity every morning during the weekday prayer services. This is yet another illustration of the disrespect a khazn had to endure.<sup>34</sup> Anyone who knows this particular situation also well knows that many communities would not grant him an income for his services as a khazn but by giving him the monopoly for the selling yeast for khale as well as Kiddush wine on Fridays – yet another example of the cantor's lamentable situation.

Until now I have given an idea of what cantors had to do to make a living, and the methods by which he was paid. Now, however, I want to review the state of musical culture among khazonim at that time. Seldom did a khazn read music, and neither were the musical scores of Western European "Classical" cantorial music generally available. Khazonim therefore composed their own melodies that they sang over countless times until they were memorized. That is not to say that there were not here and there some truly beautiful bal tfiles who could serve as great examples to us even today; this is how we know of the music of Kashtan Weintraub,<sup>35</sup> that treasure of Jewish music, that was learned aurally and then memorized by many khazonim. It was not until his son, Hirsch Weintraub,<sup>36</sup> formally wrote down his father's compositions that they were preserved for posterity.

Most khazonim were, however, of a lower musical quality, and there are various reasons for this. After all, if you could sing well, and sang L'cha Dodi or El Adon to a rousing march tune, you could get a cantorial position.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, hiring a choral director who could prepare a choir properly as well as teach these uneducated khazonim was, back then, a very rare and rather expensive proposition. When and if such a person could be found, it seems unlikely that the community could afford to support him, much less want to do so. The khazn was therefore forced to be the choral director himself. This also meant he had to find choristers by recruiting them from impoverished families, as wealthier parents did not consider being a chorister any great honor; with that, put together some sort of ensemble to sing the prayers

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<sup>30</sup> A brief hymn recited after lighting Hanukkah candles.

<sup>31</sup> A Purim song recited after the reading of the Megillat Esther.

<sup>32</sup> Elul is the beginning of the penitential season that leads up to Rosh HaShannah; among the many customs and traditions of that month, it is customary to visit the graves of loved ones.

<sup>33</sup> Alas, only a pun in English.

<sup>34</sup> Taking charity could be humiliating. In the cantor's case, since he had actually earned his money, being reduced to begging or the appearance thereof added a whole new dimension to his humiliation.

<sup>35</sup> Solomon "Kashtan" Weintraub (Starokonstaniv (Khmelnitskiy Oblast) 1781 – Dubno 1829) was known for his incredibly virtuoso improvisations and coloratura; was musically ignorant. Toured frequently with his choir.

<sup>36</sup> Hirsch Weintraub (Dubno 1811– Konigsburg 1881) musically learned and a fine composer in his own right, he was a student of Sulzer; he wrote out a selection of his father's compositions from memory.

<sup>37</sup> Self-styled cantors continue on the scene, often the same uneducated types as back then.

to military marches, waltzes, or mazurkas. But as I am also a Polish Jew, I don't want to be too hard on them...

Khasidim don't recognize khazonim at all and looked down on them; the well-to-do khasidim never went to shuls as the khasidim went by their rebbe for Shabbat and holiday anyway. But even the skilled laborers had their own minyans, and even the butchers and other such big, dumb lunkheads had their own shuls as well. Minyans like these were comprised of the crudest elements of society, like butchers, fishermen, tradesmen and porters. Is it any wonder that khazonim were forced to cater to their "wild" tastes?

In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the situation changed radically and a new period in the cantorate began. That sad state of affairs did not last much longer. The works of the great cantorial "classicists" like Sulzer,<sup>38</sup> Lewandowski<sup>39</sup> and Naumbourg<sup>40</sup> had been unknown to the great many khazonim in Poland. These works had an incredible influence on western European synagogues and soon affected the education and creation of the modern khazn. At first, their works were only sung in the handful of Polish Choral Synagogues. However, their influence on the works of Abrass,<sup>41</sup> Blumenthal<sup>42</sup> and Belzer,<sup>43</sup> thoroughly steeped in real Jewish sentiment, were passed from khazn to khazn in manuscript form. This music forced Khazonim to awaken from their lethargy and made them put an end to their old fashioned style in order to make room for this rich and beautiful music that was so full of content. To these three who laid the foundation of the new style of western-influenced cantorial music in Poland one must include the names of Gerowitch,<sup>44</sup> Dunajewski,<sup>45</sup> Nowakowski,<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Salomon Sulzer (Hohenems 1804 – Vienna 1890) was the most influential cantor of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He modernized synagogue music not by ignoring tradition but by using modern harmony and choral writing, but also by removing what he considered superfluous coloratura that he replaced with dramatic declamation. He was considered a phenomenal singer by both Liszt and Schumann. His first collection, *Schir Zion*, was self-published in 1838 and became the model if not the actual repertoire in many progressive communities. He had many students, who went on to pulpits as far away as San Francisco and Odessa.

<sup>39</sup> Louis Lewandowsky (Wreschen (Poznan region) 1821 – Berlin 1894) went to Berlin on a musical scholarship at 13; became music director for the Berlin Gemeinde. Student of Sulzer and greatly influenced by Hirsch Weintraub. Published two major collections, *Kol Rinah Utefillah* (1871) and *Todah wezimrah* (two volumes, 1882) that began to eclipse many of Sulzer's choral works.

<sup>40</sup> Samuel Naumbourg (Denenloeh, Bavaria, 1817 – Paris 1880), cantor and choral director in Paris, published two major collections of synagogue music, *Chants Liturgicals des Grande Fetes* (1844) and *Zmiroth Yisrael* (1864). Included are works by Halevy, Meyerbeer, and Alkan.

<sup>41</sup> Osias "Pitche" Abrass (Berdichev 1820 – Odessa 1884), known as *Pitche*. Studied with Bezalel Schul-singer in Odessa, and was considered a child prodigy. Officiated as cantor in Tarnopol (1840-1842) and the first cantor appointed to the progressive congregation in Lwow (1842-1858), and chief cantor in Odessa (1858-1884). Published one work, *Simrat Joh* (1884).

<sup>42</sup> It is thought that Abrass and Blumenthal were students of Sulzer himself. See also Schmidt, above.

<sup>43</sup> Nisi Belzer (originally Nissan Spivak), active in Berdichev, was famous for welding eastern European cantorial style with western choral writing; his choir was the training ground for such talents as Boris Thomashevsky, Nachum Matenko, famed cantors like Mordechai Hershman and Pinkhas Minkowsky. He himself had not much voice, and so his choral works reduced the role of the cantor by assigning many solos and duets. See Jonathan L. Friedmann, *Synagogue Song: An Introduction to Concepts, Theories and Customs*, Jefferson, NC 2012, 152.

<sup>44</sup> Eliezer Gerowich (Kiev region 1844 – Rostov 1914), cantor-composer; published six volumes of synagogue music.

<sup>45</sup> Dunajewski (1843-1911), choral director of the Great Synagogue of Odessa.

<sup>46</sup> David Nowakowski (Malyn, Ukraine 1848-1921), choral Director of the Brody Synagogue in Odessa. Chorister with Spitzberg in Bardichev, training with Yerucham Blindman. Graduate of the conservatory in Bardichev.



A. M. Bernstein,<sup>47</sup> A. B. Birnbaum,<sup>48</sup> and P. Minkowski.<sup>49</sup> Thanks to them, illiteracy in the ranks of Polish cantors was driven out; thus, twenty years ago it was already quite rare to find a khazn that could not read music or who did not know the classic works of the cantorial repertoire.

Indeed, Birnbaum and Minkowski both published propaganda in their journals that once existed<sup>50</sup> and later in many Hebrew periodicals advocating strongly for this new model of the cantorate and for khazanim to become active in becoming learned and musically literate. Birnbaum, especially for this purpose, both wrote and/or translated lessons in counterpoint and harmony in Hebrew and Yiddish and gave lessons via correspondence just to be accessible to those who could not understand European languages. Later he established a school for cantors in Cześćochowa where he trained modern khazonim. Birnbaum, after arduous and lengthy efforts, even got the Russian authorities to allow for the first congress of khazonim in Warsaw, scheduled for 1906. This conference was meant to lay the groundwork for an organization of Polish khazonim, but sadly Russian reactionary powers<sup>51</sup> retracted their permission – and nothing more became of this plan.

Despite all that, his labor was not for nothing. Thanks to this program of education and professionalization, the cultural standing of the khazn rose and so khazonim demanded better conditions like a decent salary that was actually enough to live on and without having to stoop to schnorrer-style side income that was often so humiliating. Community leaders started looking very differently at their khazn, so much so that the blossoming of a brilliant future seemed to present itself. Nevertheless, khazonim emigrated, and when the Great War came and the economy collapsed, even more khazonim left.

In 1921, the Agudas Hakhazonim was founded to help those many khazonim who could not or would not emigrate. Unfortunately, it was impossible to do anything because the or-

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<sup>47</sup> Avraham Moshe Bernstein (1866-1932), cantor-composer, amateur musicologist, music educator. Active in Vilna, was cantor of the Vilna Chor Shul Taharat HaKodesh.

<sup>48</sup> Avraham Baer Birnbaum (Pułtusk 1865 – Cześćochowa 1922), cantor-composer-pedagogue, publisher of cantorial journal and writer of article in Jewish newspapers. Birnbaum, was regarded as an illui (“prodigy”) in Talmud. He was raised in a Chassidic atmosphere. The first melodies he heard were those which his father sang, after frequent visits to the Rebbe of Kotzk and Ger. In later years, Birnbaum became a favorite singer of zemirot at the court of the “Tzadik.” He received his musical education at a mature age, while serving as Chazan-Shochet in a small Hungarian city. In 1890, Birnbaum’s first articles on Jewish music appeared in the Hebrew Daily “Hatzfirah.” He then accepted the position of Chazan-Shochet in the community of Prosnitz, Moravia. Subsequently he occupied the position of Chazan Rishon in the new Progressive Synagogue in the city of Cześćochowa, Congress Poland. In 1908 Volume I of his *Amanut Hachazanut* for the Sabbath was published, followed by Volume Two for the High Holidays in 1912.

<sup>49</sup> Pinchas Minkowski (Belaya Tserkov 1859 – Philadelphia 1924) received his basic training from his father, and joined the choir of Nissan \*Spivak (“Belzer”) in Kishinev. At the age of 18, he was appointed Spivak’s successor and three years later became chief cantor of the Choral Synagogue (“Chor-Schul”) in Kishinev. After further study in Vienna, he sang in Kherson, Lemberg, and Odessa, and spent three years at the Kahal Adas Yeshurun Synagogue in New York. After the death of Nissan Blumethal, who had served at the Brody Synagogue in Odessa for 50 years Minkowski was recalled to Odessa in 1892 as chief cantor of the Brody Synagogue, an office he held for 30 years. Minkowski had a tenor voice of natural sweetness though lacking in power. He avoided extraneous effects such as word repetition, falsetto, and needless coloraturas. A prominent member of the intellectual group which flourished in Odessa, headed by \*Bialik, he lectured at the Jewish Conservatory, was chairman of the Ha-Zamir (“The Nightingale”) musical society, and published many articles on *hazzanut* and Jewish music, in Hebrew, Yiddish, and German. After the Russian Revolution he left for the United States.

<sup>50</sup> Birnbaum published a Hebrew language cantorial journal, Yarkhon HaKhazzanim, that only lasted some four issues. He otherwise published in such Hebrew language journals as *HaTzefirah*. It is unknown if Minkowski published a journal, but he did write and have published numerous writings in Hebrew, Yiddish, and German; he was a highly literate man who included among his friends Bialik.

<sup>51</sup> No doubt this took place after the Russian Revolution of 1905.

ganization does not have the funds; indeed, we don't even have a meeting space or an office of our own and we are forced to beg for a place to hold a meeting. To own a place in the current economic conditions in Poland would require at least half a billion Polish Marks, something we cannot even dream of.

Nevertheless, I want to drive away the pessimistic tone of all this. With time, the economic situation will improve and our situation will improve greatly. Let this prophesy quickly come to be!

Szerman's last thoughts are painfully poignant given what we know of his fate. Szerman had been trapped in the Warsaw Ghetto, deported to Majdanek in April 1943, and was said to have died there of exhaustion in the potato storehouse sometime after May 2, 1943.<sup>52</sup> Dawid Ajzensztat, with whom he had worked for nearly twenty years, was deported in an earlier "Aktion" in 1942 to Majdanek. The great Gershon Sirota, his first *khazn rishon*, died during the Ghetto Uprising, on the last day of Passover. When at last the Ghetto had been cleared, the Nazis dynamited the Great Synagogue as a deliberate sign of the destruction of Warsaw Jewry. Szerman had served that congregation for more than thirty years.

## Conclusion

Szerman vividly described the humiliation, economic deprivation, and lack of social standing the cantor had in his community. Szerman believed, and rightfully so, that only an educated and professionalized cantorate – following on the Haskalah prescription – could and would remedy the situation. The cantor as a professional could command not only a better salary and working conditions but also the respect of the members of the community. More importantly, such a cantor could command the respect of the community leadership, the very same leadership that determined his salary and responsibilities.

Szerman also includes the names of great cantor-composers in his essay who greatly influenced Polish cantors in an almost heroic fashion, providing proper models of professionalized and educated cantors. The Polish Farband went on to modest success. At its height, the Agudas Hakhazonim had 600 members. Its greatest legacy was publishing the monthly journal *Di Khazzonim Velt*, edited by Szerman. This periodical had many subscribers outside of Poland, from all over Europe and the Americas, almost entirely khazzonim who had originated in Eastern Europe.

Second to the horrific slaughter of the Holocaust was the destruction of so European Jewry and culture. Countless musicians of all varieties, including cantors, met their deaths in the Shoah. It was also the death knell of the Eastern European cantorial tradition: the cradle of cantorial music and its rich performance traditions were now gone from this world. Along with it were the primary sources that would allow for a more scholarly history. As Szerman pointed out, much of the history and music of the cantor was transmitted orally; essays like this one are the only sort of primary source material we have. Secondary literature is largely based on the work of one man, Abraham Idelsohn, in his book *Jewish Music: Its Historical Development*, in which no sources

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<sup>52</sup> See <http://warszawa.getto.pl/>.

for his information are given, while the other most cited book is *Legendary Voices: The Fascinating Lives of the Great Cantors*, self-published by noted khazn Samuel Vigoda in 1981. Vigoda gave us a book of legends and tall-tales; perhaps there is some truth to them, but like Szerman's essay, it is entertaining but hardly scholarly. Exaggerations or not, Szerman gives us a great insight into the affects of modernization and the Haskalah in the world of Eastern European religious music, and a marvelous examples of synagogue customs of the past.