

# CANTOR MOSHE KOUSSEVITZKY

## Earliest Recordings

### CANTORIAL CHANTS

Tikanto Shabbos  
Akavyo ben Mahalalel  
Hateh Elokay  
Haneros Halolu  
Elokay Neshomoh



### YIDDISH SONGS

"Yismah Mosheh"  
In Alten Beys Hamidrash  
Oyf dem Beymele  
"Odom Yesodo Meofor"  
Z'khor-Gedenk  
Der Alter Reb Sender

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### Side One — Cantorial Chants

1. Tikanto Shabbos
2. Akavyo ben Mahalalel
3. Hateh Elokey
- ✓ 4. Haneros Halolu
5. Elokey Neshomoh

### Side Two — Yiddish Songs

1. "Yismah Mosheh"
2. In Alten Beys Hamidrash (Beim Tilim)
3. Oyf dem Beymele (Di Nevuch)
- ✓ 4. "Odom Yesodo Meofor"
5. Z'khor-Gedenk
6. Der Alter Reb Sender

**M**oshe Koussevitzky, (June 9, 1899-August 23, 1966) the only cantor of our day to be ranked with the great names of the Golden Age—Rosenblatt, Sirota, and Kwartin—has been dubbed the *Hazzan Hador* (Cantor of His Generation) and *Prince of the Amud* (prayer-stand) by his fellow cantors. His life falls into three separate periods, each crowned by triumphant success.

Koussevitzky's first career, in the pre-Nazi period of European history, follows 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 demonstrated a fine alto voice and a sharp ear for music. His father, recognizing the child's gift, allowed the eight-year-old to join synagogue choirs of Cantors Shimon Alter, Girovitch and particularly, Ephraim Shliapok. A typical old-style patriarchal choirmaster and a distinguished cantor in his own right, Shliapok had a deep influence on the boy, and was his first teacher of *soffeggio*.

When World War I broke out, young Moshe went with his family to Rostov. Here he continued his vocal studies with Cantor Eliyahu Salutkowsky and his religious training at the Ramailes Yeshivah. Here also in Salutkowsky's *Hazamir Singing Society* he met a young soprano whom he was later 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 Stolnitz, 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 remember the amazement his remarkable drawings and sculptures created among his young friends." Many years later Stolnitz saw hanging in Koussevitzky's home in New York drawings he had somehow 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 followed many eminent cantors in this post (among them Roitman, Hershman and Sirota), but his real triumph was to come in 1928, when the great Gerson Sirota left the renowned Tlomacki Synagogue 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 Brzyzinsky (mentor of Jan Kiepura), Liliva and Magnes. His artistry and virtuosity enchanted 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 beloved in England, where he appeared frequently in 1935, 1937 and 1939.

He made two trips to Palestine in 1934 and in 1936. His debarkations there were like national holidays. In his honor people played his 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 beleaguered Warsaw before its surrender was to chant the Yom Kippur services underground. The congregation was even joined by some despairing 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 uniforms 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, Leningrad, 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 concerts to the troops under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Education. 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 Godounov*, *Sadko*, *Eugen Onegin* and *May Night*.

After the liberation of Warsaw, Koussevitzky returned to the heart-breaking ruins of the ghetto, where he chanted the *Kel Mole Rachamim* (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. However, 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, Jacob, Simha 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 throngs 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 Strauss, critic for the *New York Times* to write, "... he proved the possessor of one of the outstanding voices of the time ... splendid quality throughout his

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wide range ... powerful, resonant and rich ... capable of the finest gradations and nuances ... a beauty of timbre so pronounced that it could hardly be over-praised."

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

In 1952 he accepted a post at the Beth-El Synagogue in the Borough Park section of Brooklyn, New York. Here he officiated 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 *rebbe*s whose spirituality and scholarship he respected.

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 graced the *Amud* with a voice of surpassing loveliness 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 *Sheyiboneh Beys Hamikdosh*, a composition of Cantor Israel Schorr, which he embellished with his usual virtuosity and which became his invariable encore at concerts.

On this disc appear five liturgic chants and six Yiddish songs, selected from the first series recorded by Cantor Koussevitzky in Europe.

—Notes by B.-H. Stambler

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- CG-601 — Cantor Joseph Shlisky — On the Sabbath
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