

# A GREAT SINGER IN ISRAEL

The tragic story of a Ghetto youth whose life and death are vividly outlined in this article

By JOSEPH GROSS

OF all the sweet singers of Israel, Joel David Levinstein (1816-50) has a shrine all his own in the Jewish heart. His voice has been silent for almost a century; he left no scores, and all those privileged to hear him have been dead for nearly two generations. His golden tones are no longer heard, but his life still speaks to us. Instinctively the Jewish mind feels that his story is ever modern, and characteristic of the temptations and soul-struggles of the ambitious Ghetto youth, starting out over the Great Divide into the non-Jewish world, in search of fame and fortune.

He was born in 1816 in Leibau, where his father, Zevi Hirsh Halevi, was the cantor of the leading shul. Six years later his father, who had become famous as the "Libauer Chazan," was called to the Stadt-shul of Wilno, then one of the most important congregations in Russia. The boy was bright, tall for his age, and good looking. One day, as his father was rehearsing with the choir for the High Holy Days, Joel joined the chorus, displaying a rare voice, which the father hadn't even suspected. Though not yet ten years of age, he was immediately given several solos, which brought the congregation to tears.

One afternoon he was challenged to "dovven a mincha," and charmed his hearers. After that he was permitted to substitute for his father on occasional Sabbaths. He had a marvellous ear and a most retentive memory, repeating any tune after hearing it once. Whenever he officiated the synagogue was crowded to the doors and hundreds of listeners stood outside in the hopes of catching a sound. Men and women would pass his home in the hope of hearing him sing.

Immediately after Bar Mitzvah his father engaged him to Hannah, the only child of Mordecai Strashun, a man of wealth and standing in the community. The marriage contract bound the young husband to take the bride's surname because his prospective father-in-law foresaw a great future for him and wanted his own family name to be thus immortalized. However, to this day the great singer is known by neither surname, but only as "The Wilner Bal'abesil." Soon after his marriage, when he was but 14 years old, his father passed away. The ablest chazanim of Eastern Europe applied for the position, but the community would hear none of them. The almost unanimous demand was for the boy as his father's successor. The rabbi and the older men of the congregation protested indignantly against so unheard of and unthinkable a plan—for a beardless lad to be the chazan of a city and "mother in Israel." But the populace was adamant. In justification his adher-

ents pointed out that he was already "a Ba'al Habaith" (head of the house, a married man)—hence the sobriquet, "Wilner Bal'abesil." Finally peace was restored by a compromise. For appearance sake another, a "first," chazan was engaged to officiate on important holidays, until the youngster grew a beard. But the so-called "first" chazan was never more than a figure-head and was soon dismissed. Gradually the boyish voice was transformed into a tenor of remarkable power and lyric beauty.

For about 16 years he led a comparatively uneventful life, more and more adored by the congregation with every passing year. Occasionally he would make a short tour and was everywhere acclaimed. Returning to Wilno he was received with open arms. His incomparable range and power, coupled with a flute-like coloratura, enabled him to do easily things that no other singer would even attempt. Scholarly men used to say that his voice proved the saying of the Holy Zohar, "Heaven contains sacred spheres revealed only through melody and song." Listening to him, there would be unfolded before the congregation a mental panorama of Israel's sufferings for the unity of God; the Temple of Jerusalem in all its splendour; the priests performing their sacred duties; the sons and daughters of Israel rejoicing upon the hills of Zion; the siege, destruction and their wanderings in exile. They heard the assuring words of the prophet, "Comfort yet my people" . . . The Lord will have mercy on Jacob, and will yet choose Israel."

One day, in the early 1840's Levinstein visited the home of his father-in-law in a fashionable part of the town. Across the street lived a wealthy Polish family which was then entertaining Moniuszko, a prominent church organist, dreaming of fame as a composer. In honour of the host, Moniuszko played selections from his famous Polish opera, "Halka." Levinstein listened avidly. The following day he returned in the hope that the great artist would resume playing. While waiting he sang the melodies he had overheard. Moniuszko, hearing his arias, was first amazed to hear the score, then charmed with the incomparable beauty of the voice. Impetuously he rushed across to the house and asked for the singer. Thus came about the fateful meeting which was the turning point in the young Jew's career and eventually led to his tragic and untimely death.

After a few words of greeting, the composer asked the young Hebrew

to sing again. Knowing no other melodies he rendered in his own, of the Shul. Here, more at home, he appeared to even greater advantage. He displayed a voice of rare beauty, exceptional in the pristine splendour of its timbre. Coupled with an irresistibly sympathetic tenderness, was an almost unbelievable facility of execution.

As he continued singing, Moniuszko concluded that not only could Levinstein render the touching arias as no other artist, but that he was the ideal "Jontek," the heart-broken village lad whose love, "Halka," had spurned for a wealthy and aristocratic landowner. Before they parted, the composer had conceived the plan of bringing his score to the attention of the public by exploiting his sensational discovery, "in obscurity," of the world's greatest tenor. His concert tours, singing arias from "Halka," would create a demand for the opera and force its recognition by the impresarios who had heretofore received the work coldly.

To Joel the meeting opened a new world. Moniuszko was like unto an angel from Heaven, providentially sent. And so, when lessons in harmony, piano and counterpoint were offered, he joyfully accepted. Shrewdly the composer led him to believe that the instruction was merely to improve his skill as a chazan, and enable him to transcribe, and leave his compositions for the ages. He saw himself, by ceaseless studying, an accomplished musician, opening a school of Chazanuth, instructing gifted young men in the art.

Gradually the diligent pupil became a finished artist. Moniuszko then prepared to leave for Warsaw, and invited his pupil to accompany him for "a concert or two." At first Levinstein refused. Already he had been annoyed by gossip about his intimacy with that "goy"—a church organist—and learning to play on the piano. But he had come to worship his teacher, and the separation was agonizing. As he was hesitating Moniuszko disclosed to him the plan to further the production of Halka by concerts, the first of which was a phenomenal success. Invitations began to pour in upon him. Each appearance resulted in ovation. The news reached Wilno. Scandal mongers were busy. The town was in an uproar—Joel was singing in Polish, before Goyim. It was rumoured, too, that he had cut the length of his garment, and even trimmed his beard! Responding to the frantic pleas of his wife and father-in-law, he returned and officiated at the shul. In the witchery of his matchless tones all was

forgotten by the congregation. he left for Warsaw, "for just a while, to show these Goyim what a Jew can do."

Upon his return, rehearsals commenced. Playing opposite as Halka, was a young Polish of great talent, beauty and charm who had occasionally sang with at concerts. And so, what might have been expected happened. He thrown into almost daily contact with the brilliant and accomplished girl, the sentiments expressed in arias became genuine. Without realizing it until too late, he fell helplessly in love with her. The tortured-a tortuous soul-struggle, was torn between the synagogue, which he could not leave, and stage, which he could not resist. Ghetto from which he was inseparable, and the great outside world lured him on; between his overpowering love for the Polish girl and his loyalty to his wife and people.

As to the girl's sentiments, conflicting stories still abound. Probably apochryphal, is that she too, loved him madly; that she was ready for his sake to adopt Judaism and even offered his wife a fabulous sum to divorce him. Another version is that she was jealous of tumultuous applause and the ovation which his arias brought forth at concerts, and coquetishly lured on, ultimately to break his heart-spirit, so that she might be the singing artist of the troupe.

In despair Levinstein turned to the only understanding friend whom he could take counsel—Moniuszko. But here he met with other crushing disappointment. Phenomenal success had incurred jealousy of the Polish artists. Rancor and hatreds were aroused against "Jewish invader," presuming to take the leading role in what was expected to become the leading national opera of Poland. Moniuszko informed that if he wanted his opera to be formally staged he must not be suspected of friendship with the Jews, and above all he must send that "Moshko" (slang Polish for "Moses," a Jew) back to the Ghetto, where he belonged. The opera had already become famous, the composer's reputation established. The Jewish singer, whose voice had lost much through suffering, was now a burden upon him. Moniuszko was but waiting for an opportunity to broach the painful subject to Levinstein. With perfect frankness, though not without sorrow—for he had come to love his pupil—the maestro made it clear that he must forget not only his fatuation, but the opera also, and return to his synagogue. "After you'll be happier there," he tempted to comfort the artist-singer.

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**A GREAT SINGER**

(Concluded from page 18).

For weeks Levinstein dragged himself through the streets of Wilno. One day, after having gazed with misty eyes at the posters announcing the premiere of Halperin with another's name for his role, he straggled, as usual, to his post-front of her residence. There he was attacked brutally and beaten into unconsciousness. Taken to a hospital, he was recognized and sent back to Wilno. There, after a while he recovered from his wounds sufficiently to realize what had happened to him.

Although he had been the subject of bitter attacks at home before his return, the sympathy of the community was now with him. In the hope of curing him, the Rabbi and other eminent members of the Kehilla were called to assure him that he was still the idol of the congregation, which longed for his return. But he would not be comforted. The most eminent physicians were sent for by his father-in-law, who almost bankrupted himself in the effort to restore him to health; but it was all in vain. Levinstein insisted that he had committed an unpardonable sin, and been divinely punished by the total loss of his voice, therefore he had nothing to live for. His condition grew worse until suddenly, on the 17th day of Tammuz, he arose almost at dawn, apparently a changed man. He had dreamt that he was once more the chazan of the shul and was singing as well as ever, before an adoring congregation. It did seem as if his golden notes had come back to him, in all their beauty and power; perhaps even more touching because of his suffering. When he had finished he cried to his wife: "My voice is back! My voice is back! I am again the Stadthazan of Wilno," and ran off in the direction of the shul. He had no sooner entered the building and taken his accustomed place on the Almemor than he fell dead.

Thus, at 34 years of age, came an end the life of Israel's greatest cantor, and one of the most gifted vocalists the world has ever known.

**Pretoria Jewish Women's Benevolent Association**

The 40th annual general meeting of the Pretoria Jewish Women's Benevolent Association was held in the Memorial Hall on the 18th inst. There was a large attendance over which Mrs. A. Etin presided. Mrs. M. Neifeld was presented with a certificate inscribing her name in the Golden Book for her services rendered to the association. The election of officers-bearers and committee members for the ensuing month were as follows: President, Mrs. A. Etin; vice-president, Mrs. S. Price; hon. treasurer, Mrs. H. Sher; hon. secretary, Mrs. H. Schewitz. Committee: Mesdames N. Rom, G. Kaplan, J. Hellman, H. Goldberg, W. Ravid, S. Friedlander, A. Novis, H. Stein, S. Goldblatt, B. B. Friedland, J. Taback, J. Druihan, S. Goldblatt, J. Horwitz, I. Hurwitz, I. Schewitz, S. Leibman, L. Rubinstein, N. Zway, S. Dobkins, S. Ginsberg and W. Hirsch.



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**Reception to Sholom Schwartzbard**

Chief Rabbi Professor Dr. J. L. Landau will preside at a reception in honour of Sholom Schwartzbard at the Carlton Hotel on Sunday night, the 29th inst. Rabbi M. C. Weiler and Mr. Maurice Kentridge, M.P., will address the gathering in English, and Mr. I. Charlash and Mr. M. Schür will speak in Yiddish.

The well-known Cantor, B. Chagy, will render a number of Jewish folk songs. Mr. H. Sacks will be at the piano. Table reservations can be made by 'phoning 33-1339.

**A Children's Concert**

The following children are to be heartily congratulated on the initiative and enterprise displayed by them in arranging a special concert over the week-end in aid of the Jewish National Fund: Sheila Reichman, Shirley Balkin, Keile Balkin, Gita Balkin, Juanita Masur, Shulamith Poliak.

This is the second function arranged by them in aid of the Jewish National Fund. They have thus set an excellent example to other children, fully worthy of emulation.

**Children's Services**

Services for children will be held on both days of Rosh Hashonah at 10 a.m. in the Hebrew High School (opposite the Park Synagogue, Wolmarans Street) where an address by Chief Rabbi Dr. J. L. Landau will be delivered, and in the Yeoville Hebrew School (in the Yeoville Synagogue grounds, Kenmere Road) where Rev. Dr. A. T. Shrock will speak. All children will be welcome.