

**CANTOR YOSSELE ROSENBLATT: HIS LIFE AND "TIMES"**

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## INTRODUCTION

In June of 2003 I was asked to sing in a small ensemble consisting of six cantorial students each of whom were affiliated with the different Jewish movements: two worked for Orthodox synagogues, two for Conservative synagogues and two for Reform synagogues. This concert was not organized by the likes of UJA or any other umbrella organization that might facilitate an inter-denominational concert. In fact, it was the Chief Cantor of Jerusalem who organized and selected the singers for this concert. He wanted singers who were equally fine musicians and lovers of the music selected. Like the performers, the audience members of this concert, represented a variety of liberal and traditional Jews. Some wore *kippot* and *shtrreimels*, while others wore modern designer wear.

The concert was organized to celebrate the life, career and music of Yossele Rosenblatt who had died seventy years prior. All of the music performed at the concert consisted of Rosenblatt's compositions, and there were recordings and video footage of Rosenblatt presented at various stages of his life as well.

Knowing little about Rosenblatt's music or story I found myself completely captivated with Rosenblatt and this concert experience. What, I wondered, was so unique about this cantor that so many different types of people would pack every inch of a Riverdale synagogue to attend? What was the life story behind this "King of Cantors?" Why did a cantor receive so much attention from both Jewish and non-Jewish worlds? These are the questions that I contemplated after leaving this concert and these questions remained with me and led me to choose this topic of research for my thesis.



"Battling Kid Yossele meets all comers!" Dressed only in a pair of shorts, suspenders, boxing gloves, one might suspect this to be a depiction of a typical boxer. But the ever-present skull-cap gives him away. This cartoon image that appeared in the Yiddish humorous weekly *Der Grosse Kundess* depicts Yossele Rosenblatt, the most extraordinary *chazzan* of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> He was also known as "The Jewish Tenor," "The Jewish McCormack"<sup>2</sup> and "The Jewish Caruso,"<sup>3</sup> to name a few. To me the most apt title for Rosenblatt is "Master

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Rosenblatt, *Yossele Rosenblatt: The Story of His Life as Told by his Son* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1954), 190.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>3</sup> *Forward*, June 25, 1933.

Chazzan.” After all, for thirty-eight years he was entrusted with the awesome and extraordinary task of interpreting liturgy and spiritually inspiring a congregation to pray. As Leo Landman explains in *The Cantor*, commentators summarized the attributes desirable for the *chazzan* in a clever mnemonic manner: the letters “*chet, zion, and nun*” spell “*chacham, zaken, and nassui*” meaning “sage, elder and married.” While Landman preferred “talent, maturity, and moral character,”<sup>4</sup> all these adjectives describe the phenomenon of Chazzan Yossele Rosenblatt.

Affectionately referred to as ‘Yossele,’ he was known as the greatest example of the uniquely Jewish vocal art of *Chazzanut*. Yossele was a virtuoso cantor and a titan of liturgical chant. He was a legendary star in the synagogue and on stage. In addition to being a cantor, he was a composer and musician of the highest order.

In the following three chapters I have attempted to bring together biographical details of Rosenblatt’s life and shape fictional vignettes that grew out of the former. Chapter one consists of the events of his career, familial relationships and professional decisions. In this chapter, I have highlighted certain aspects of Rosenblatt’s life from his early childhood in the Ukraine to his tragic death in Palestine. In chapter two, I explore Rosenblatt’s presence in both secular and Yiddish newspapers. I review articles discussing certain details of his career and in so doing reveal the uniqueness of a secular society enamored by a cantor. In chapter three, I have created a play consisting of a series of snapshots of Rosenblatt’s life based on the information presented in the first two chapters. It is my attempt to animate the colorful character and music of Yossele Rosenblatt at the pinnacle moments of his life.

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<sup>4</sup> Leo Landman, *The Cantor: A Historic Perspective* (New York: Balshon Printing & Offset, 1972) xiii.

## CHAPTER I: SETTING THE STAGE

### Biographical Information

In this chapter, I will delineate information about Rosenblatt's personal and professional lives. I will include stories that reveal Rosenblatt's talent, maturity, moral character and flaws. To best achieve this goal I will frequently refer to a biography written by his son entitled *Yossele Rosenblatt: The Story of His Life as Told by His Father*.<sup>5</sup> This biographical piece will begin with Rosenblatt's childhood and end in his tragic death. It will explore as well his personal and professional struggles and successes.

Yossele's talent was evident from a young age. Born in 1882 in the Ukrainian *shtetl* of Belaya Tserkov, the first boy in a family of nine girls, his favorite game was "cantor and choir." In this game he would invite his playmates into the house that they fashioned as their "play synagogue." Four-year-old Yossele would cover a bench with his mother's apron to create a prayer desk and wrap himself in a towel as a makeshift *tallit*. Then, standing before his fictitious *amud*, Yossele would play the part of the cantor while his contemporaries served as his choir. The songs that Yossele sung were, of course, those that he learned from his father, a cantor in Belaya Tserkov.<sup>6</sup>

Pogroms forced the Rosenblatts to leave the Ukraine some time after the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. Yossele's father Raphael and his mother Chayeh Sara elected to move to Sadagora in Galicia. Sadagora was the headquarters of the of the Ruzyn dynasty of Hasidic rabbis one of whom was Rabbi Friedman, whose father had officiated at the marriage of Raphael

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<sup>5</sup> This book is written by Yossele's son. Although this biography lacks objectivity, it is the most comprehensive work completed about Rosenblatt. It offers invaluable insight to Rosenblatt's personal and professional life.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Rosenblatt, *Yossele Rosenblatt: The Story of His Life as Told by his Son* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1954), p.13.

and Chayeh Sarah. The couple now hoped that Rabbi Friedman would assist Raphael in finding work. But it was Yossele's talent that ultimately supported the family.

After Shabbat worship one Saturday afternoon, Raphael and Yossele were invited to the rabbi's table for lunch. Yossele sang a melody that impressed the Rabbi and Reb Israel, the Cantor. Thereafter, Raphael and Yossele were invited to participate in every Sabbath, holiday and religious function held at the Rabbi's table. Unfortunately, there was little salary available as this synagogue was already supporting a competent cantor. The Rabbi suggested that Raphael and his two sons, Yossele and Levi, offer their talents in Czernowitz, a major urban center. Their first Shabbat appearance was such a huge success that the following seven engagements required 16 policemen, 8 firemen and 2 inspectors to maintain order among the overwhelmed crowd of worshippers.<sup>7</sup> They were paid a salary of ten gulden, the equivalence of four American dollars. Moreover, they began to gain fame. In fact, it was in Czernowitz that Yossele's star was born.

At ten years of age Yossele's star quality was reaching the masses. Connoisseurs of liturgical music were attending services to hear the voice of the wunderkind. It was in this city that the Viennese Cantor and Opera singer tried to talk Raphael into letting his gifted son Yossele study for the opera in Vienna. The only response elicited from Raphael was: "The gentile world had enough renegade Jews already. There is no need of my supplying it with another."<sup>8</sup> This would be the first of many temptations for Yossele to display his talents to the secular world.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 24.



Yossele's gift of flawless chanting of Hasidic tunes led to years of wandering from *shtetl* to *shtetl*. His itinerary as wandering boy cantor brought him to places such as Komarno, Sambor, Gorlice, Lemberg, and Cracow. The latter being the most venerable community in Poland. Despite Rosenblatt's talent, a member of the Cracow community explained that any cantor's stay was limited in length:

When a visiting cantor comes for a guest performance, no matter how high a position he may occupy in his calling, he officiated for several Sabbaths and then he has to pack up and leave.

That comment notwithstanding, the Rosenblatt trio performed for seventeen weeks, and on every Saturday that they performed they drew the same record audience.<sup>9</sup> Their total earnings in this unprecedented seventeen-week period were seventeen hundred gulden. Indeed, Yossele's talent was beginning to be matched by prosperity and opportunity. From the large and prosperous community of Cracow, the Rosenblatt trio traveled to an underprivileged two hundred family Polish *shtetl* called Brezsko.

It was in Brezsko that Yossele's talent would lead him to realizing the second desirable attribute of Leo Landman's "chazzan" mnemonic: the trait of emotional maturity. One Sabbath morning in Brezsko a twelve-year-old Taubele Kaufman, together with her girlfriends, stood bent over the railing of the women's gallery of the local synagogue devouring with her eyes the small figure of a boy with the sweetest sounds emanating from his mouth. He was wrapped in a huge prayer shawl and stood on a specially constructed raised platform in front of the prayer-desk. For a moment their eyes locked. In his biography, Samuel Rosenblatt describes his father's experience:

As I left the synagogue," Yossele related, "the worshipers, as they usually did, followed me, and she who later became my wife, among them. For Kiddush my father and I were invited to Taubele's home. I still recall, just as though it were today, how I sat at the table and felt fixed

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 40.

upon me all the time the brilliant brown eyes of the little girl with the pretty black tresses and the beautiful rosy face. She looked at me and I was too abashed to lift my eyes. But our eyes did meet, and when they did, I felt the blood rushing into my face. She too, reddened and quickly lowered her eyes. This happened several times. I sang but my thoughts were elsewhere. I had that far-away look, so that my father, noticing it, asked me if I was feeling well. After that Taubele left the room and I did not see her any more until we met five years later. In the meantime I began to sense a certain restlessness. It seemed to me as though the world had become empty with her departure, as though I were left alone. The little girl would not go out of my mind. Where ever I went I saw Taubele standing before me.<sup>10</sup>

Over the next five years many fathers, according to Samuel Rosenblatt, offered substantial dowries for Yossele's hand in various arranged marriages. They were all rejected. Yossele's heart belonged to Taubele. Although Yossele had outgrown the small *shtetl* of Brzesko, he arranged one more 'engagement' there.

After informing her brother of his fondness for Taubele, the marriage was arranged and consecrated on August 15, 1900, corresponding to 21 Av 5660. A newly-married man, Yossele was deemed qualified to represent in prayer any community that saw fit to appoint him. Three days after the marriage, the Jews of Munkacs, Hungary engaged Yossele Rosenblatt as their permanent cantor. This was the first pulpit at which Yossele was *halakhically* eligible to function independent of his father, as he was over thirteen years of age and married. (It was the *halakhic* policy of some European communities to have only a married man serve as *hazan*.) Within months, Yossele found himself in a dispute with the congregation over hiring a professional choir. All that the Munkacsers were willing to spend for a choir for an entire year was the hopelessly inadequate sum of 600 gulden. Frustrated, Yossele auditioned for the progressive city of Presburg. Having been chosen over 56 other applicants, eighteen-year-old

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 41.

Yossele achieved the unthinkable: he earned the title of "The *Oberkantor* of Presburg," the Chief Cantor of Presburg.<sup>11</sup>

Cultivating his innate sense of melody, Yossele spent five productive years in Presburg composing Jewish liturgical music. This period was so prolific that Yossele slept with a pencil and paper at his bedside, should a melody come to him in the middle of the night. It was during this period that Rosenblatt was able to compile 150 recitatives and choral pieces of his own composition. Many of these pieces were performed with his reputable choir.

Rosenblatt was prolific in other senses as well. By 1904, Taubele and Yossele had three children: Samuel, Leo and Nettie. With the birth of children and increasing household expenses, Yossele realized he must look beyond his job to make ends meet. Indeed, the Presburg synagogue was unable to raise his salary to meet Rosenblatt's financial needs so in 1906 Yossele boarded a train to Hamburg for a trial service in the Kohlhoefen synagogue of the *Deutsch-Israelitischer Synagogenverband*.<sup>12</sup> Yossele's success was instantaneous. On the Saturday following his trial service the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* reported:

The position of chief cantor of the local Synagogue-Union is about to be filled. Various candidates have applied, among others the presenter of a large congregation in Presburg, Mr. Josef Rosenblatt, who presented himself on Friday and Saturday of last week in the great synagogue of the congregation located at Kohlhoefen. There prevails, as we hear, unanimity of admiration regarding the singing of Mr. Rosenblatt. He possesses a phenomenal tenor voice and an exceptional manner of presentation that puts him in the category of great artists. The overwhelming majority of the members of the congregation would gladly welcome the election of Mr. Rosenblatt as chief cantor.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 63.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 70.

This was the first of many newspaper articles about the great chazzan to appear in both the Jewish and secular press.<sup>14</sup>

The Hamburg job meant for Rosenblatt a move from East to West and an accompanying cultural adjustment. After all when Rosenblatt arrived to Hamburg in 1906 the Jews numbered 18,000 and were mostly of the upper-middle class. Their economic fortune afforded them the ability to build impressive institutions. These included the Bornplatz Synagogue, private schools such as Talmud Torah Realschule, and private hospitals such as the Jewish Hospital. These German Jews looked patronizingly upon their poor brethren, those "regrettable" Jews of the East known as *Ostjuden*. In contrast to the fashionably stylish Jews of Western Germany, the *Ostjuden*, with their old-fashioned appearance and atrocious jargon, were, according to Samuel Rosenblatt: "a travesty upon the noble idiom of the fatherland."<sup>15</sup> Although Yossele was an "Easterner" himself, his talent boosted his standing. That notwithstanding, he would remain painfully aware of cultural differences as illustrated in an anecdote drawn from Samuel Rosenblatt's biography: After a thrilling concert, an aristocratic lady extended her hand to Yossele. To her great amazement, he allowed it to remain suspended in mid air. After all, it was not customary among pious Jews of Eastern Europe to shake hands with a woman. Her response: "What is the matter with this man? Where are his manners?"<sup>16</sup>

Rosenblatt noted as well the differences in prayer styles. To him, German Jews prayed without fervor or emotion. He often complained that the German Jews did not lift their voices; they did not gesticulate in prayer. Even during a prayer such as *Shma Koleinu*, textually an

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<sup>14</sup> See chapter 2 of this thesis.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 85.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 77.

impassioned plea to God, the Hamburgian Jews stood erect, motionless and seemingly unmoved. On one occasion, after Yossele delivered a piece of *chazzanut* replete with emotive cantorial gestures of word painting, he was rewarded with the congregant's comment: "Mr. Rosenblatt, you sing so divinely. Why then should it be necessary for you to sigh and wail?"<sup>17</sup>

By 1910, Yossele had become disenchanted with the Hamburg community, though his larger concern involved the state of his finances. Although he was being paid a handsome salary of 7,000 marks, a large proportion of that money became dowry to marry off his single sisters and was used to maintain his parents. In addition, Yoessle's own family was growing; by the spring of 1912, Taubele was expecting her seventh child. The synagogue board rejected Yossele's request for a salary increment. In the end he decided to search elsewhere for a position, one that would enrich him financially as well as spiritually.

In 1909 Yossele was selected to be the Chazzan for the World Zionist Congress convention held in Hamburg. Some of the representatives of this assembly were from the The First Hungarian Congregation Oheb Zedek of New York. In 1911, this community was searching for a cantor, and they offered Yossele the opportunity to *daven* for two Shabbatot. These trial performances were so successful that Rosenblatt was offered a salary of \$2,400, the highest salary ever paid by an Orthodox congregation in America.<sup>18</sup> Together with the income he would earn from weddings and funerals, Yossele's total income would approximate \$5,000. Within five years his salary would reach \$10,000.<sup>19</sup> This afforded the family a six-room apartment on West 119<sup>th</sup> street in an aristocratic Jewish neighborhood in Harlem.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 95.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 132.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 100.

New Yorkers appreciated Yossele's talent. Service after service many flocked to hear the gifted cantor and congregants were turned away at the synagogue door. According to his son, as early as 2 o'clock in the morning on *Selichot*, the entire block of 116<sup>th</sup> Street between Fifth and Lenox Avenues was blocked with people desperately trying to get into the synagogue to hear Yossele *daven*. Some had traveled from as far as St. Louis. Every service required police to enforce crowd control measures. In fact, Rosenblatt's talent was so highly regarded that he had to travel to and from the synagogue with the aid of personal bodyguards.<sup>21</sup>

By 1915, Rosenblatt had become the "cantor of choice" to perform at New York City's Jewish philanthropic and memorial events. In May 1917, a crowd of 6,000 filled the Hippodrome Theater to raise funds for Jews suffering in wartime Europe. Rosenblatt's performance helped raise \$250,000 for the cause. This event captivated the attention of the *New York Times*. On May 7, 1917 the following was written about Yossele:

The cantor is a singer of natural powers and moving eloquence. His voice is high in range and of peculiar quality, suited to the text of prayers and chants familiar to most of the hearers. The audience listened with uncovered heads.

This statement not only highlights Rosenblatt's vocal abilities, but it also reveals the wide-spread appeal that Rosenblatt had among religious and non-religious fans. By clarifying that the "audience listened with uncovered heads," the author of the article discloses the fact that Rosenblatt's concert performances were not religious experiences, instead they were perceived as vocal entertainment based on liturgical and non-liturgical texts.

The concert at the Hippodrome was the first of a tour of 30 cities on behalf of the war relief campaign. On March 17 1918, nearing the completion of this tour, Rosenblatt performed

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 114.

at the Chicago Auditorium. This performance would prove to be a turning point in his career. One of the guests of honor was Cleofonte Campanini, general director of the Chicago Opera Association. He was so inspired by Rosenblatt's artistic abilities that he visited with Rosenblatt immediately after the concert and offered him \$1,000 per performance with the famed Chicago Opera Company. Rosenblatt declined the offer. The reason for his decision was unclear and led to speculation of various newspaper writers.

Meanwhile, Rosenblatt's concert bookings were growing at an exponential rate. In fact he was to become an integral part of the New York cultural scene, including his Carnegie Hall debut in May 1918. The reviews in the New York papers were mostly ecstatic: "Jewish Tenor Triumphs in Concert" exclaimed the *New York American*, adding "Cantor Rosenblatt reveals voice of exceptional beauty, evoking thunderous applause in music far from his accustomed field."<sup>22</sup> Sol Hurok who promoted Rosenblatt in addition to other world famous artists such as composer Artur Schnabel and ballerina Anna Pavlova managed Rosenblatt's concert schedule.

### **Rosenblatt's Generosity**

In order to compete with other congregations, Ohab Zedek offered Rosenblatt the record salary of \$10,000 per year; Rosenblatt was also earning income from records, royalties and concert fees. Though his income grew so did his philanthropy and his generosity to extended family members in addition to his own eight children whom he helped support. The many Jewish organizations that asked for his help were not only given donations but were also given benefit concerts *gratis*. He was known among the less fortunate as one who would open his doors to the needy for money and for a Friday night meal. His unconditional generosity led to

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<sup>22</sup> *The New York American*, May 20, 1918.

his greatest downfall; his declaration of bankruptcy. With the intention of paying back creditors Rosenblatt began an exhausting series of appearances in vaudeville, the most lucrative form of entertainment in America.

### **Rosenblatt Hits the Secular Stage**

Rosenblatt's vaudevillian performance was void of gaudy scenery, props and flashy drum rolls. He appeared on a bare stage with all of the auditorium lights on, he was a mere solo 'act'. He would mix sentimental songs such as "Eili Eili" in Hebrew with "The Last Rose of Summer" in English, "Volga Boatman" in Russian and "La Campana" in Italian. A fellow performer in Cincinnati reported that when the cantor was finished singing, "Without a nod or bow he turned towards the wings and wings and walked...toward the stage door and out into the street." Meanwhile members of the audience were applauding and shouting for more.<sup>23</sup>

In 1927, as Vaudeville began to decline, Rosenblatt accepted a cantorial position at Congregation Anshe Sfard in Borough Park, Brooklyn. With the stock market crash of 1929 this synagogue was unable to pay him. Eventually he reassumed his position at Ohab Zedek, a wealthy congregation in spite of the Depression. Unfortunately Rosenblatt's financial woes could not be diminished by this position alone; Rosenblatt sought supplemental income.

In 1933, Rosenblatt was offered a film role that he could accept. He was asked to star in a film entitled *Dream of My People*. The idea behind this film was for Rosenblatt to sing his own compositions at the Biblical sites relevant to the words of those prayers. The goal was to give American Jews a glimpse into the sacred sites of Israel, newly built cities and settlements with Rosenblatt as the liturgical tour guide. This film was financially rewarding for Rosenblatt and it fulfilled his life long dream of visiting Israel.

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<sup>23</sup> *Standing Room Only: The Remarkable Career of Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt*, Chazzanut.com, 2004.



While in Israel Rosenblatt gave concerts, and functioned as *Chazzan* for the major synagogues and *yeshivot* in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. He spent Shabbat afternoons in the home of Rav Kook, then the chief rabbi of Israel.<sup>24</sup> Among the audience of many of Rosenblatt's concerts was the celebrated Hebrew poet Chaim Nachman Bialik. Bialik was so moved by Rosenblatt's rendition of *Shir Hama'a lot*, that Bialik proposed that it be the national anthem of Israel.

Having made the decision to settle his family in Israel, Rosenblatt decided to undertake a European concert tour to raise funds for his family's relocation. On June 17, 1933 Rosenblatt prayed at a "farewell" service held at the Hurva Synagogue on Jerusalem. The next day he suffered a sudden heart attack while filming a scene at the Dead Sea. At the age of 51, Rosenblatt died. More than 5,000 people attended his funeral on the Mount of Olives, and scenes from the funeral were included in *Dream of My People*, the movie Rosenblatt was engaged in filming. Mordechai Hershman and Zavel Kwartin, two of Rosenblatt's colleagues and friends, sang and Rav Kook gave the eulogy.<sup>25</sup>

Rosenblatt's genius and art drew deep admiration, accolades and applause from the audiences of his time. He, like other cantorial stars of his generations, was hailed, cheered, adored, venerated and handsomely rewarded for his talents. Where his story and those that of other star cantors differ is in the impact that Rosenblatt had on the secular world. In his book entitled *Legendary Voices*, Cantor Samuel Vigoda comments that star cantors did not receive the printed attention that their talents warranted. He writes:

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<sup>24</sup> Simha Raz, *An Angel Among Men* (Jerusalem, 2002), 295-296.

<sup>25</sup> *Standing Room Only: The Remarkable Career of Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt*, Chazzanut.com, 2004.

Nothing of significance has been written, recorded or published about them. Even for the most famous of them, there is hardly more available in print than bare, dry biographical data, condensed into a few lines.<sup>26</sup>

Surely, this statement does not apply to Yossele Rosenblatt. His career and personal life was deemed press worthy and stories about him were printed in Yiddish and Hebrew periodicals in addition to secular papers such as the *New York Times*. The following chapter reveals Rosenblatt's presence in the Jewish and secular media. It consists of selected examples of Rosenblatt's newsworthy experiences, which highlight his unique position as a public personality of his generation.

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<sup>26</sup> Samuel Vigoda, *Legendary Voices* (New York: M.P. Press, 1981), 4.

## **CHAPTER II: A CANTOR WORTHY OF PRINT**

### **Yossele Rosenblatt in the News**

On Sunday November 14, 2004 the graduating class of the School of Sacred Music completed a recital entitled "350 Years of Jews in America." Each student sang beautifully, and at the end Ms. Joyce Rosenzweig, artist in residence at HUC, asked each student to share his or her recital date and thesis topic. When I revealed my topic as Yossele Rosenblatt, the audience, (whose mean age was 59,) responded with a collective "Ohhhhh" of recognition. After the concert, an elderly couple approached me and asked about the details of my recital. One was Jewish by birth and the other was a Jew by choice who had converted 20 years ago. They shared an independent interest in Rosenblatt and each had attended his concerts separately before meeting each other. When I asked the Jew by choice about how she heard of Rosenblatt she responded that she had once seen one of his vaudeville performances and became mesmerized. She subsequently followed his career by reading about his performances in various newspapers, including *The New York Times*.

In the twenty-first century, it is extremely unusual to find articles about cantors in news papers especially in prestigious newspapers such as *The New York Times*. Yet a search of the *New York Times* archives reveals over a dozen articles written about Rosenblatt between the years 1915 and 1933. Of course, less surprising is the frequency with which his name appeared in Yiddish papers such as *Der Tog* and *The Forward*. Indeed, I have found dozens of articles about Rosenblatt in these publications. Why, I began to wonder was he such a popular subject for the Yiddish and even English press? I submit that his talents crossed religious lines. Although he was first and foremost a cantor, he became an icon and arguably the most famous Jewish singer of the first half of the twentieth century in America.

While both Jews and gentiles appreciated Rosenblatt's talents, a survey of the articles about him reveals more about his unique life story and its inherent pathos than his musical prowess. The press specifically reported on Rosenblatt's refusal to sing in the Chicago Opera; his concert appearances (charity and otherwise); his declining financial status; his role in *The Jazz Singer*; and the circumstances of his tragic death. These news stories represented the inherent conflict of an Orthodox cantor who at one and same time was a performer living in a secular world.

### **Rosenblatt Lured By The Opera**

*"Rabbi rejects \$1000 fee to sing in Opera."* This was the headline on page 13 of the *New York Times* on April 15, 1918. Rosenblatt's decision not to sing was deemed remarkably newsworthy for the general public in addition to Jewish readers, as *The Forward* also published articles on this theme. Both the *New York Times* and the *Forward* took an interest in Rosenblatt's decision.

Rosenblatt's potential operatic calling exposes a great deal about his personality and his perception of what was and was not appropriate for the Cantor of Congregation Oheb Tzedek of New York City. One wonders: Why would Rosenblatt refuse the modern-day equivalent of \$25,000 to sing in an opera?<sup>27</sup> Did Rosenblatt really even want to sing in the Opera? Did he willingly relinquish the opportunity or did his congregation force him to refuse the offer?

In recounting the details of this offer, the aforementioned *New York Times* article portrays a contradictory and confusing story. According to the article, it seems that

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<sup>27</sup> Henry Rosenblatt, "An Interview with Henry Rosenblatt," interview by Velvel Pasternak, August 3, 1989.

Rosenblatt was prepared to accept the role of Elazar in *La Juive* under certain conditions. In the second paragraph of this article Rosenblatt explains these conditions as explained to him by Cleofante Campanini, the manager of the Chicago opera company:

Mr. Campanini said that he would guarantee that I need not remove my beard, nor sing in any performance on either Friday or Saturday, and that he would not ask me to sing any operas that would hurt the feelings of an orthodox Jew. In fact, Mr. Campanini said that he wanted me to play the part of "Eleazar" in 'The Jewess' by Halevy, an opera highly laudatory of the Jews in which Rosa Raisa would be the Jewess.<sup>28</sup>

Rosenblatt responded to Campanini that though there was nothing to prevent him from accepting the offer under these conditions, he needed additional time to consider it. Rosenblatt then clarified that he could not play the role without the consent of his congregation. This impelled Campanini to write a letter to the board of Congregation Ohab Zedek, seeking its support in engaging Rosenblatt for the Chicago Opera. In this letter he offers the following incentive:

I suppose the story of the opera is familiar to you. It is the glorification of the Jewish religion, and the role of the Jewess will be sung by Rosa Raisa, who is a Jewess, a native of Odessa.<sup>29</sup>

The letter went on to describe the rehearsal schedule, which would require Rosenblatt to be in Chicago for only one week prior to the first performance. Thereafter, Rosenblatt would only have to be in Chicago for the performances, and the opera company agreed to pay for his roundtrip train fares to Chicago. Moreover, Rosenblatt would not be required to perform on Friday or Saturday, he would not have to shave his beard; and there would be "nothing in the performance or his appearance on the operatic stage that would in any way be a poor reflection upon the Orthodox Jewish

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<sup>28</sup> *New York Times* April 15, 1918.

<sup>29</sup> *New York Times* April 15, 1918.

faith.”<sup>30</sup> Campanini added that “Mr. Rosenblatt personally has agreed to this proposition under the condition that his congregation would allow him to accept.”<sup>31</sup> In fact, Campanini asserted that Rosenblatt had “given us the option on his services for the season of 1919-20.” Rosenblatt was flattered but uncertain if it was befitting a Cantor to appear in an opera. In an interview with the trade journal *Musical America* on June 22, 1918, Rosenblatt said: “The cantor of the past and the opera star of the future waged a fierce struggle within me. Suddenly a voice whispered into my ear, ‘Yossele don’t do it!’” Though it is unclear whether by his own volition or due to the influence of the president of his synagogue, Rosenblatt eventually refused the offer.

The board of trustees of Congregation Ohab Zedek met to discuss the matter. Their response, written by the president of the congregation, appeared in the *New York Times* in the same article:

Our board agrees with you that there is no objection to this opera from a Jewish standpoint, but we feel that the Rev. Rosenblatt’s sacred position in the synagogue does not permit him to enter the operatic stage. We have no objection to him singing in concerts, whether sacred or otherwise.<sup>32</sup>

After a close analysis of this article one can deduce that Rosenblatt was interested in performing in this opera, assuming that all of his conditions were met. And, indeed, Campanini had agreed to all of the conditions; it was the board of the synagogue that refused to allow Rosenblatt to sing in the opera. Perhaps they were concerned about losing their Cantor to the operatic world. More likely, they may have found the opera *halakhically* inappropriate. For Rosenblatt’s presence in the opera would require him to disregard the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> *New York Times* April 15, 1918.

prohibition of *kol isha*, listening to a woman's singing voice. Maybe Rosenblatt himself was uncomfortable with appearing on stage with women. When his son Henry was interviewed by Velvel Pasternak, a publisher of Jewish music, he was asked why he thought his father refused the performances of *La Juive*. Henry Rosenblatt responded:

By today's standards each performance with the Chicago Opera would have been worth in the vicinity of \$25,000. After careful thought my father decided that, as a man of the synagogue, it was not fitting to appear with women on stage or be part of an operatic performance.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps it was Rosenblatt's religious convictions, in addition to his reverence for the cantorate, that led to his refusal of this lucrative offer. This caused a media frenzy. Reporters from national newspapers, as well as Jewish dailies and weeklies, scrambled to understand how Rosenblatt could turn down such a tempting carrot. On June 22, 1918 the musical weekly entitled "Musical America" commented:

In these days of stern materialism it seems almost incomprehensible that anyone would so recklessly discard gold and glory for a belief, a mere tradition. Nevertheless such was the case with Cantor Rosenblatt. Money holds no charm for this man in the face of faith and principle.

*The Forward* also published an article about Rosenblatt's operatic offer. In this article, the author is far more direct about why Rosenblatt refused to sing: "the synagogue where he is cantor was against it."<sup>34</sup>

In many future articles, Rosenblatt became known as the Cantor who refused \$1000 to appear in the opera. For example, when Rosenblatt made his Carnegie Hall debut on May 19, 1918, the *New York Times* reported that he was the possessor of "a phenomenal tenor voice," that he sang a lullaby "dropping his voice to a pianissimo of rare carrying power," and that he recently refused an offer to sing with the Chicago Opera Company, but he has

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<sup>33</sup> Henry Rosenblatt, "An Interview with Henry Rosenblatt," interview by Velvel Pasternak, August 3, 1989.

<sup>34</sup> *Forward*, May 20, 1918.

been heard in New York as a singer of Jewish folksongs and traditional airs of the Jewish faith."<sup>35</sup>

The Chicago Opera Company was not the only company to try to engage Rosenblatt. On August 22, 1923 the *New York Times* reported that a London-based opera company had approached Rosenblatt. According to this article, there were rumors that Rosenblatt accepted their offer. Once again, Congregation Oheb Zedek got into the act, as reported:

The First Hungarian Congregation Oheb Zedek of 18 to 22 West 116<sup>th</sup> Street desires to make known to the public that the rumor spread through-out this city and which evidently emanated from the City of Philadelphia to the effect that its eminent cantor Josef Rosenblatt, who is spending his vacation in Europe, accepted a lucrative offer from a London opera manager to make a world concert tour is false. While Cantor Rosenblatt does not deny that such an offer was made to him, yet he denies that he accepted it.<sup>36</sup>

The article concludes that Rosenblatt denied these rumors and returned to his congregation in New York.

### **Rosenblatt: The Charitable Cantor**

"Man Who Refused \$1000 a Night Gives Voice Free In Stamp Drive." Thus read a headline printed in the *New York Times* on April 25, 1918.<sup>37</sup> Although the thrust of the article was a description of how Rosenblatt volunteered his talents to sing at the "War Savings tent," there are numerous references to Rosenblatt's refusal to sing at the Chicago Opera Company. After Rosenblatt appeared at this event, the article asserts that the "Liberty Loan campaign showed a marked increase in the last two days, when the average daily sales

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<sup>35</sup> *New York Times*, May 19, 1918.

<sup>36</sup> *New York Times*, August 22, 1923.

<sup>37</sup> *New York Times*, April 25, 1918.



have tipped the \$3,000 mark."<sup>38</sup> Rosenblatt's contribution was deemed newsworthy not only because he helped the war campaign but also because he had refused a lucrative opera contract and volunteered his talents nonetheless.

More articles reporting on Rosenblatt's generosity followed. On December 23, 1918 Judge Jacob Strahl, treasurer of the *Bikur Cholim* hospital of Brooklyn, arranged a banquet to honor Rosenblatt's support of the hospital. In his address he referred to Rosenblatt as "Charity's own Cantor, a Jew with a great heart and soul."<sup>39</sup> The *New York Times* wrote a short article about this dinner entitled "Dine Cantor Rosenblatt."<sup>40</sup> On May 22, 1918 Rosenblatt offered his talents to raise money for another medical cause, the Red Cross. The headlines, this time printed by the *Jewish Forum*, read: "Yossele Rosenblatt raises \$100,000 for the Red Cross!"<sup>41</sup>

Rosenblatt not only raised money for medical causes but offered his talents to champion other organizations, such as the Cantor's Association. On August 20, 1919 the *New York Times* printed an article entitled "Concerts for Cantor's Association". The article discussed how Rosenblatt was scheduled to perform in numerous concerts in which the proceeds would be donated to the Cantor's Association.

It seems that Rosenblatt's talent was only matched by his willingness to share it for worthy causes, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. The details of many of these charitable concerts were published in newspapers. On May 17, 1917 Rosenblatt sang in a concert organized by the *Central Committee for the Relief of Jews Suffering Through the War*. In honor of this

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<sup>38</sup> *New York Times*, April 25, 1918.

<sup>39</sup> *New York Times*, December 23, 1918.

<sup>40</sup> Samuel Rosenblatt, *Yossele Rosenblatt: The Story of His Life as Told by his Son* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1954) p. 184.

<sup>41</sup> *Forum*, May 22, 1918.

event Rosenblatt was inspired to write a (now famous) setting to the liturgical text *Shomer Yisrael*. Rosenblatt recounts that the liturgy is a supplication for the safety of Israel: "Oh Guardian of Israel, save the remnant of Israel."<sup>42</sup> As Rosenblatt explains, it was then that he realized that Jewish War Orphans are in fact the "remnants of Israel."<sup>43</sup> His performance resulted in the *New York Times*' headline: "Shower of Gifts at Concert by Josef Rosenblatt, Russian Cantor."<sup>44</sup>

When asked by a reporter why he was so charitable, Rosenblatt replied with the following statement: "What I have done is not charity; the Jewish law says that if you give and pronounce it charity, the Mitzvah is lost."<sup>45</sup>

### **Rosenblatt Petitions For Bankruptcy; Cantor Searches for More Work**

The press offered several articles to paint Rosenblatt in a favorable light, but it did not hesitate to expose his shortcomings as well. Rosenblatt was generous to a fault. In 1922 two Montreal businessmen accosted Rosenblatt. Their plan was to start a Hebrew/Yiddish/English newspaper entitled "Light of Israel" or "*Ner Tamid*" and they convinced Rosenblatt to invest in this dubious newspaper venture. After an initial investment of \$20,000 Rosenblatt was asked again and again for more money until his resources had been exhausted. Though the initial investments were kept

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<sup>42</sup> Palmone A. "Cantor Josef Rosenblatt; an interview," *Jewish Forum*, III (December 1920) p. 612-615.

<sup>43</sup> Samuel Rosenblatt, *Yossele Rosenblatt: The Story of His Life as Told by his Son* ( New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1954) p.186.

<sup>44</sup> Palmone A. "Cantor Josef Rosenblatt; an interview," *Jewish Forum*, III (December 1920) p. 612-615.

<sup>45</sup> Samuel Rosenblatt, *Yossele Rosenblatt: The Story of His Life as Told by his Son* ( New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1954) p. 186.

secret from his wife and family, the strain of the debt incurred became too great to keep within.

After writing \$150,000 worth of promissory notes for *Ner Tamid*, Rosenblatt was forced to file a petition for bankruptcy.<sup>46</sup> This petition was printed in the *New York Times* on January 15, 1925:

JOSEF ROSENBLATT, cantor, 59 West 120<sup>th</sup> Street. Liabilities, \$191,719: assets, \$32,559, main items being real estate valued at \$27,000: notes, including notes of Sholom Aleichem Foundation for \$1,500, amounting to \$3,325.

The petition then delineated all his creditors. Toward the end of the petition, we read the following statement referring to *Ner Tamid*: "He is also liable as endorser of notes aggregating \$47,379 of the *Ner Tamid Publishing Company*, which failed some time ago."<sup>47</sup>

Despite such headlines, the press and public were generally sympathetic. According to Samuel Rosenblatt, most believed that Rosenblatt was cheated and continued to have faith in his father's honesty and integrity. *The Big Stick*, the Jewish humorous weekly, published a cartoon consoling Rosenblatt. It pictured Rosenblatt roped in by a great number of promissory notes. The caption reads: "Wicked people have caused you to become entangled but your good angel will disentangle you."<sup>48</sup>

Determined to pay back his creditors, Rosenblatt increased his already hectic performance schedule. The *Forward* reported that:

The esteemed Cantor Reb Yossele Rosenblatt will for the first time in his career sing four concerts in one day and in the same theater. This will be today, Sunday afternoon and evening in the Academy of Music, Eleventh Street and Irvington Place.

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<sup>46</sup> *New York Times*, January 15, 1925.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Samuel Rosenblatt, *Yossele Rosenblatt: The Story of His Life as Told by his Son* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1954) p. 255.

Over ten thousand people will hear him today and he will also sing for an entire week in the same theater."<sup>49</sup>

Performing even four concerts a day was not financially beneficial enough for Rosenblatt, as evident by his turn to vaudeville, the most lucrative occupation for an entertainer in the 1920's, as reported in both the Yiddish and secular press. It seems destitution forced him to perform on the vaudevillian stage after refusing equally "sacrilegious" prestigious operatic contracts. By this time Rosenblatt no longer maintained a pulpit and thus probably felt freer to pursue secular musical venues without diminishing the status of the cantor. His son Henry believes that he agreed to appear in vaudeville because it did not require him to disregard the laws of *kol isha*:

In this medium he did not have to appear or act with women. He stood on the stage by himself with only a pulpit in front of him and sang cantorial compositions, opera and classic lieder. There were some difficult situations to overcome. Often audiences would sneer and snicker upon seeing the diminutive, bearded Jew come out on stage with black yarmulke on his head. By the time he finished singing however, he had 'ripped the house apart.'<sup>50</sup>

Rosenblatt's Jewish and non-Jewish fan base grew exponentially as he did vaudeville.

After winning over the vaudevillian audience, the newspapers documented Rosenblatt's first moving picture offer: a \$100,000 offer from Warner Brothers to appear in a movie. In 1927, Warner Brothers had set about casting the first talking picture, "The Jazz Singer" starring Al Jolson. Rosenblatt was asked to play the role of Jolson's father, the elderly Cantor. The headlines of the *Forward* read: "Is Yossele Rosenblatt Becoming a Moving Picture Actor?"<sup>51</sup> The article, like so many preceding it, exposed the inherent

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<sup>49</sup> *Forward*, January 18, 1925.

<sup>50</sup> Henry Rosenblatt, "An Interview with Henry Rosenblatt," interview by Velvel Pasternak, August 3, 1989.

<sup>51</sup> *Forward*, May 11, 1927.

tension for Rosenblatt: juggling the life of an observant Jew with the glitz and glamour of the secular world. As the reported put it, "In moving picture circles, noises are being made that Yossele Rosenblatt will soon be a moving picture actor, with his beard and yarmulke and even with his Yossele Rosenblatt voice."<sup>52</sup> Towards the article's end, the writer clarifies that Rosenblatt's religious convictions will not be challenged in this movie as he has "already sung in vaudeville, and he has not even performed on the Sabbath. The movie producers are ready to give in to all of his demands."<sup>53</sup>

Yet Rosenblatt's religious convictions were challenged when Warner Brothers asked him to sing *Kol Nidre* for the film. According to the article, the reasons that Warner Brothers wanted to engage Rosenblatt in this project, was to capture the most "authentic" synagogue experience for the *Kol Nidre* scene. Rosenblatt refused to sing *Kol Nidre* in the setting of a movie; Rosenblatt found this disrespectful.

The *New York Times* also covered this story and it too referred to the tension of performer-cantor in their article. In expressing why Rosenblatt was selected for this project, one journalist wrote that Rosenblatt "will not play a part in the photoplay. He will merely sing and let himself be photographed for the vocalized records."<sup>54</sup> Although there was no mention of what Rosenblatt was going to sing in this article, Rosenblatt sang a Yiddish song called "*Yartzeit Licht*," and he still received star billing.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> *New York Times*, May 13, 1927. p. 12.

## Rosenblatt's Death; 2,500 People Mourn

"Josef Rosenblatt, Noted Cantor, Dies; Succumbs to Heart Attack in Jerusalem After a Busy Day Making a Film; WON WORLD-WIDE FAME"<sup>55</sup> This was the headline that appeared on p.15 of the *New York Times* on June 19, 1933. Rosenblatt, who had always dreamed of visiting the holy sites of Palestine, had agreed to film a movie there. It was his hope that this movie, produced by Fox Film, would allow him to earn enough money to nullify his debts. The article outlined the circumstances of his death:

Josef Rosenblatt, noted American cantor, died here today of a heart attack. He had been active all day yesterday, visiting the Wailing Wall, the Dead Sea and the River Jordan, in which he bathed, while the American-Palestinian Fox Film Company was making he last shots of a film in which he was starring. The film was completed.<sup>56</sup>

The article then offers a biography, including details regarding his personal life and his professional career. In closing, the author referred to Rosenblatt's beard, stating: "Cantor Rosenblatt never shaved his beard."<sup>57</sup> Two days later, the *Forum* published an article about Rosenblatt's death as well. Like the aforementioned, the *Forum* also referred to the fact that Rosenblatt never shaved his beard. In fact, the author of this article referred to Rosenblatt's beard three times through out the article. He called Rosenblatt "The only modern cantor in the world who until death had a beard never touched by a scissor,"<sup>58</sup> and claimed that: "Yossele's beard played a great role in the love that all showed him."<sup>59</sup> Finally, he explained the significance of the retention of the beard: "His complete Jewish beard, the only

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<sup>55</sup> *New York Times*, June 19, 1933 p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> *Forward*, June 21, 1933, p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

untrimmed beard of today's cantors in the world, especially in America, always symbolizes the Jewish and human wholeness in this wonderful cantor-Reb Yossele."<sup>60</sup>

Why the focus/near obsession on his beard? I posit that both writers regarded the beard as a symbol of tradition. It is conceivable that Rosenblatt's decision to keep a beard functioned as a symbol of his choice to preserve his Judaism and resist complete assimilation. Jewish identity trumped the allure of opera, vaudeville and film. The *New York Times* article published Dr. Israel Goldstein's eulogy which included the following reference to Rosenblatt's traditional identity: "Josef Rosenblatt embodied within himself the highest traditions of his calling."<sup>61</sup>

Besides the beard, both the *New York Times* and the *Forum* published lengthy articles referring to the large number of people who gathered at Carnegie Hall to memorialize Rosenblatt. Indeed, he had had universal appeal, both observant and non-observant Jews and Gentiles gathered to pay tribute to the great Cantor:

Tuesday evening about two thousand people gathered in the grand Carnegie Hall for a memorial program for Yossele Rosenblatt, arranged by the Cantor's Association. This was one of the most remarkable gatherings ever held at the famous hall: Jews with long beards and yarmulkes on their heads, young clean-shaven men with bare heads, young women with older women in traditional wigs- a mixed group of this wordly and old-fashioned, free-thinkers and religious.<sup>62</sup>

Although the primary function of the memorial service was to pay homage to Rosenblatt, the service was also intended as a fundraiser for the Rosenblatt family. Both newspapers revealed the fact that the Rosenblatts did not have enough money to return Rosenblatt's wife

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<sup>60</sup> *Forward*, June 21, 1933. p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> *New York Times*, June 28, 1933.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

Taube and son Henry from Israel to New York. Happily, the author of the *Forum* article reported that sufficient funds were gathered by the memorials.<sup>63</sup>

In modern America it is a rarity to find a cantor prominently featured in the media. Today's media stars include performers such as Madonna, Elton John, and other pop stars. With the exception of a small minority of cantorial enthusiasts, few people follow the lives and careers of contemporary cantors. I believe that the press was interested in Rosenblatt for similar reasons that I have been interested in him: where his music, vocal and artistic abilities were extraordinary, his life story is equally engaging and emotionally complex.

In describing the details of Rosenblatt's life to a friend, he remarked "wow, his life sounds just like a Greek tragedy!" In fact, Yossele's life lends itself to a dramatic production because it has all the elements of a remarkable play; namely, a protagonist with religious convictions at odds with a secular world combined with a tragic story of vast riches whittled down to nothing in a series of self-defeating decisions which strained his familial relationships and these led to his death. For all of these reasons I was inspired to write a play about Rosenblatt's life.

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<sup>63</sup> *Forum*, June 29, 1933. p.14.



## CHAPTER III

### Yossele: Scenes From His Life Story

#### Introduction

(Yossele is on his death bed with C. Sarah by his side.)

Yossele: I can't believe this could be the end. Is this God's plan?

C. Sarah: God brought you to Eretz Yisrael to sing, and soon you will recover and use your voice to pray for the people of Israel. (Exit Taube)

Yossele: (To the audience.) The road the brought Yossele Rosenblatt to Israel was indirect. In order to understand this ending we have to start at the beginning....

#### Scene 1:

(Chaye Sarah holds infant Yossele and sings to him a few bars of *u'vmucho yomar*)

C. Sarah: Oy my little *tayere*, my precious little boy. Your *Tate* and I were so blessed when you were born. Not that we don't love our nine daughters, but who, after all would say *kaddish* for us when *Hashem*, determines the end of our days. (C. Sarah continues to sing; eventually the baby mimics her sweet sounds as Yossele throws his falsetto voice.)

Yossele: That sweet little voice was the birth of my signature falsetto. I always wanted to be a *chazn* like my *tate*. While my friends liked to play 'cozaks and yiddn' (your equivalent of cowboys and Indians,) I insisted that we play 'Chazn' and choir. Though cozak and yidn' turned out to be not such a game after all. Life wasn't easy in our shtetl of *Byela Tzerkov*, "White Church," the pogroms hit us hard but we took solice in our prayer.....  
God show mercy on our Israelite brothers and sisters everywhere, who are in mortal danger. Restore them to safety as in the past, amen.

(*Acheinu Kol Beis Yisroel* is sung. Gallop music is played.)

#### Scene 2:

(Yossele, Levi and Raphael move to horse and buggy)

Raphael: I took my boys with me to all of my Cantorial appearances. We sang in Komarbo, Sambor, Gorlice, Lembourg and even in Cracow. (Scene: trio traveling on hoarse and carriage.)

Boys are you studying Mishnah?

Levi: *Tate, Yossele and I are studying chapter nine, the eighth Mishnah, Heichon Pikdoni.*

Yossele: We learned that if one man borrows money, he must pay it back.

Levi: But if that money is lost, he's not liable to pay it back.

Raphael: Boys, promise me that you won't borrow from people. *Hashem*, will provide for you. (stop music)

Yossele: *Tate*, what if someone wants to borrow from us?

Raphael: If they need it then, of course you must share. It's a mitzvah!

### Scene 3:

(Yossele dismounts the horse and carriage. Then to the audience)

Yossele: This *Mishnah* would come back to haunt me, my wife and my family. Lets' see, Brzesko ..Brzesko was a shtetl in which I met a little distraction by the name of Taube Kaufman....

(Raphael, Levi and Yossele assume their position at the *amud*. Raphael *davens* and expects responses from Yossele but Yossele is stunned in an eye-gazing extended moment with Taube. Raphael nudges Yossele, but to no avail, he is smitten.)

Friends: (Tauntingly) Taubele is in love *mit dem kleine chazndel*. Taubele wants Yossele for a bridegroom...

Taube: It isn't true! I will never marry a midget who can't reach the *amud* without a platform!  
(Taube runs into Yossele, just as she calls him a midget. She offers him an awkward smile.)

Taube: (To the Audience)  
For five years I prayed that short little boy would come back for me—I started to hear about the famous 'chazndel Yossele.' Yossele was a prodigy—succeeding even in sophisticated Vienna. The great Dr. Josef Bloch deemed my Yossele as the "World's Youngest Cantor." He was so impressed that he showed up at Raphael's hotel room one afternoon with an interesting proposition: (scene)

### Scene 4:

Dr. Bloch: Mr. Rosenblatt, I am Dr. Josef Bloch. I would like to present your son Yossele to the emperor.

Raphael: You would like to do what? (Raphael looks visibly frightened.)

Dr. Bloch: It would be a great honor to the Jewish People....I am certain the emperor would recommend him to the imperial conservatory of music....

Raphael: Thank you sir, but no! My son will not go to the conservatory. He was born to the *amud* and at the *amud* he will remain.

Scene 5:

Taube: (To the Audience)  
This wasn't Yossele's only lure away from the *amud*. By the time Yossele was eighteen his father was offered four different dowry offers...

Yossele: Five, Taube,

Taube: Excuse me. After refusing FIVE different dowry offers from various fathers, my Yossele came back for me in Brzesko. On August 15, 1900, we were married. Three days later, the Jews of Munkacs engaged Yossele as their permanent cantor.  
It didn't work out in Munkacs...

Yossele: They only had 600 Gulden for a choir. What sort of choir can perform on such a salary?

Taube: And so you see, we had to move. My Yossele had no trouble getting work. He was chosen over 55 other applicants as the *Oberkantor of Presburg*. And that choir, oh, what an extraordinary sound, I can still hear them....(music begins for *Ki Vi Yirbu*)

Scene 6:

Taube: (in bed) Yossele...Enough with the composing, it is getting late. (She pats the bed. Yossele crawls into bed with her, but brings his music paper and pencil with him.)

Taube: Yossele, *Nu?*

Yossele (writing feverishly) I finally figured out that melody (he's humming as he writes it down.)

Taube: (To the Audience)  
It was miraculous that after five years of music sheets lining our bed, God still blessed us with the birth of our first three children, Samuel, Leo, and Nettie. But times got tough for us, (they get out of bed) with three kids to feed, and Yossele's ...familial responsibilities..(scene)

Yossele: Taube we've been through this.....

Taube: I just don't understand why you have to provide the dowries for *all* of your sisters. What about your own kids?

Yossele: Taube, our children are hardly suffering. We will be alright-- because I'm going to get a job that pays even more.

Taube: And to which city are you going to shlep me now?

Yossele: To Hamburg

Taube: Hamburg? To the West?

Yossele: It is one of the most prestigious positions in Europe. Surly we will live like the aristocrats and our *kinder* will be provided for.

Taube: (to the Audience)  
So we moved to Hamburg. Everyone seemed so noble and aristocratic! They used to call the easterners "Ostjuden"- regrettable Jews of the East. I remember when Yossele got himself in hot water with an heiress after a concert. (scene)

Scene 7:

Madame: (Madame has German accent)  
Cantor Rosenblatt-- Exquisite! (extending her hand) Madame Gertrude Pankin ze serd. It is a pleasure for you to meet me. (Yossele allows her hand to remain suspended in mid air.)

Yossele: Pleasure to meet you. (Yossele walks away)

Madame: What is the matter with zees man? No manners? Uncultured Ostjuden!

Scene 8:

Taube: It began to seem that Hamburg wasn't for us...

Yossele: (Looking up from a letter) Taube, I have to help my sister Gittel, she has just been widowed!

Taube: Now that we have seven children, we just can't support your whole family—

Yossele: If Hamburg can't pay us sufficiently we'll move elsewhere.

Taube: We live in one of the wealthiest communities in Europe—where do you suggest will be better?

Yossele: Listen, Taubele, At the World Zionist Congress I met a *macher* from New York, who offered me an audition with the First Hungarian Congregation Oheb Zedek. It is one of the largest *shuls* in America!

Taube: The land of golden opportunity!?. Oy, Yossele, how would we get there? Didn't you read about the sinking of that super ship, the Titanic? I'm not putting our babies on a ship—we'll all sink!

Yossele: (to the audience)  
Thank God, we all made it safely. On July 6<sup>th</sup> our boat steamed slowly into New York Harbor bid welcome by Lady Liberty's torch of freedom. God Bench Americch! **(Piano plays a few bars of God Bless America.)**

Scene 9:

Taube: America wasn't exactly what I expected. **(Piano plays disturbingly dissonant chord.)** (In character) "Where did you take me? This makes Hamburg seem like paradise! Here we're surrounded by rabble, riffraff--people without manners or refinement!

Yossele: Taubele, they're paying me \$2400 a year.

Taube: Oh. I suppose we'll make do.

R. Kid: Mom, Dad...Did you hear? America is joining the war! Can we give money to help the soldiers?

Yossele: Yes we can. Taube I'm off!

Taube: Where are you going?

Yossele: I'm going to talk to my manager. I'm going to sing concerts to raise money for these soldiers. (Yossele exits in a hurry.) **(Piano plays transitional music)**

Scene 10:

Newspaper Boy: Read all about it: Cantor tours around America raising funds for war effort. Rosenblatt raises thousands for the Red Cross. King of Cantors forgoes salary for relief concert. Read all about it! (Exit.)

(Yossele is backstage at Hippodrome.)

Sol Hurok: Yossele, baby, I only manage the careers of the best. And you my friend, the public LOVES you. Listen to all 6,000 of them screaming for you. The Hippodrome is packed for a chazn'! Go give 'em the goods!

( Piano plays showy intro and Yossele and choir sing Uv'nucho Yomar at Hippodrome. Cleo sits in the front row and introduces himself directly after this performance.)

Scene 11:

Cleo: (refined and powerfully reserved) Mr. Rosenblatt. That was truly magnificent. (Extends hand.) Allow me to introduce myself. Cleofante Campanini, general director of the Chicago Opera Association.

Yossele: (shakes hand). Pleasure to meet you.

Cleo: No, the pleasure is mine. Mr. Rosenblatt, I am deeply impressed with your voice. You have the makings of a great opera singer. I want to engage you to play the role of Eleazar in Halevy's 'La Juive.' Your fee will be \$1000 for each performance, which I trust will be satisfactory." (Yossele appears conflicted.)

Mr. Rosenblatt, I promise you that joining my company will not necessitate giving up your religious principles. Anything you want. I am prepared immediately to draw up an agreement for seventeen performances a year.

Yossele: Your proposal is quite enticing. We...

Cleo: Wonderful. I'll have a contract drawn up immediately.

Yossele: But I am not entirely my own master, I have to check with my congregation.

Cleo: I am sure they will agree. I look forward to working with you.

Yossele: Likewise. (Exit Cleo)

Yossele: (to the audience.) Hmm, Yossele the opera singer. What synagogue board wouldn't want their cantor to be an international star? (Piano plays La Dona Immobile)

Scene 12:

(Board scene; All *machers* speak with a Yiddish accent)

Macher 1: No way, no chance. I will not have my Cantor prance around singing in Operas!

Macher 2: You know there are women in Opera-- with women outfits and women boostiers-- mit der horns on the head. A *shandeh*!

Macher 1: This Campanini wrote us a letter. Listen: "I heard Mr. Rosenblatt in his recent stay in Chicago and I was so impressed mit his voice and art of singing...blah

blah...he won't have to cut his beard...it won't reflect badly on the Orthodox faith...*bubbe meises! Narishkeit!*

Yossele: The truth is that all I heard running through my head was my father's voice;

Raphael: Yossele was born to the *amud* and at the *amud* he will stay.

Yossele: Regardless, I was putting away thousands of dollars every month. We even bought a new beautiful home in Harlem.

The only thing harder then earning money in America, was holding on to it. In Montreal, two entrepreneurs invited me to a fancy dinner: **(Piano plays French bistro music.)**

**Scene 13:**

Jacques: Monsieur Cantor Rosenblatt--

Yossele: Please, call me Yossele.

Jacques: Yossele. We would like to thank you and *Hashem* for sharing your exquisite davening with our community. I commend your Opera decision. I respect a man who respects our Orthodox way of being a Jew, or of being La Juive. Yasher koach! (said to a passing waiter) Waiter, the finest bottle of champagne... cigars and caviar for the finest artist of our generation. The truth is Yossele, that so many of our people have come to this continent only to cast away their observance in order to "fit-in".:

Yossele: Gentlemen, you are too kind. I am touched by your incomparable hospitality. Thank you for treating me so wonderfully.

Jacques: It is time for you to save the future of Orthodox Judaism.

Yossele: Nothing would make me happier, *halavay!* The question is, how?

Pierre: Yossele, as partners, we'll start an orthodox Jewish weekly. If you head the enterprise, we can perpetuate and strengthen traditional Judaism.

Yossele: Why me? I'm just a chazzn.

Jacques: Yossele, the Jews love you, even the *goyim* love you. YOU can be initiator of a Jewish religious rebirth in America! We'll run the business-- all you need to do is put your name behind it and provide the financial backing.

Yossele: Thank you gentlemen. Thank you for this lavish meal and thank you for this opportunity. I can't wait to help this worthy endeavor.

Jacques: Pierre, that gives me a great idea. Let's name the paper after Yossele. We'll call it *Ner Tamid*, the Light of Israel!

Pierre: Great idea. Now in the meantime Yossele, we would advise you to observe the utmost secrecy. Even your wife must not be told a thing about what transpired between us. **(Piano plays more bistro music.)**

Scene 14:

(Taube is in the Rosenblatt kitchen. She is trying to balance her check book.)

Taube: (Talking to herself.) I don't understand. Yossele's making a small fortune abroad—how are these small checks bouncing!

(Enter Yossele)

Taube: Shh, kinder, keep it quiet, Tate is home. (Yossele sits down and studies.) Yossel, haven't I been a faithful wife? Have I ever crossed you?

Yossele: What? Taube, I don't understand...?

Taube: Have been hiding something?.

Yossele: What do you mean? Am I not making a good living for you and the children? Certainly you don't suspect me, God forbid of ...?

Taube: No Yossel. This is not about my personal comfort. But your secrets are affecting our entire family.

Yossele: What are you talking about? What have I been keeping from you?

Taube: I don't know! I deposit \$6000 you send, but the checks I make out for household bills come back marked 'insufficient funds,' You tell me what is going on!

Yossele: I am telling you, Taube, to stop worrying. The shortage will be made good and all will be well.

Taube: Yossel. Enough with this nonsense! What is going on!!!?

Yossele: (To the audience.) I told her the whole story.

Taube: This is a pipe dream! If it is such a wonderful undertaking, why did you hide it from me?

Yossele: I didn't think you knew so much about matters of business. I figured the less you were told, the better.



Taube: How much?

Yossele: What do you mean--

Taube: How much have you spent, my brilliant business man?

Yossele: \$20,000.

Taube: What have you done?! Oh, Yossel, don't you see, this is economic suicide. Get out of this little venture of yours. *Baruch Hashem*, you still have your voice. In a year or so, you can work off the debt, and we'll be free—you won't owe anybody anything.

Yossele: This is why this family needs a man's business sense! Now is the time to add to my investment. If I withdraw now, all of my investment in the paper will be pure loss. (Exit Taube.)

God please provide for us as you have provided for our people, our lands and crops with precious dew of sustenance. ( **Tal is sung**)

Scene 15:

Newspaper Boy: New York Times! Read all about it! 'King of all Cantors' petitions for bankruptcy. \$150,000 owed to "Light of Israel", failed newspaper.

Get yer paper! "Cantor Rosenblatt sings four concerts in one day, 10,000 people will hear him" Read all about it!

Announcer: And now ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls of all ages. You laughed with Sophie Tucker. You were mesmerized by The Great Houdini. You've been shocked by Pat our bearded woman, I'd now like to introduce, in his vaudeville debut, our bearded tenor, Cantor Josef Roseblatt. (Announcer elicits applause from audience)  
(**Rosenblatt sings *K'vakarat***. The audience applauds and Yossele, walks away without bowing or acknowledging the audience.) (scene)

Erno: Hey Josef, I ain't got a clue as to what you were sayin' but it sounded pretty good from where I was sittin'. More important, they love ya. I think we're on to something-- here's two grand. I'm gonna' book us in Boston, Chicago and New York. Congratulations kid, you're a Vaudeville star. (Exit Erno)

Announcer: Ladies and gentlemen, good people of Boston, welcome to our third act of the evening. You've seen our girls dance the Can-Can, and you've witnessed our own animal-Tour. If you put them together you get our next act; a Can-Tour by the name of Josef Rosenblatt. He is the Jewish John McCormick singing Danny boy! (**Danny Boy is Sung.**)

Scene 16:

W.B. Producer 1: Mr. Rosenblatt, you have heard of Warner Brothers?

Yossele: The moving picture company?

W.B. Producer 2: Yes.

Yossele: And to what do I owe the honor of your visit?

W.B. Producer 1: You are no doubt familiar with the play "The Jazz Singer."

Yossele: With George Jessel?

W.B. Producer 2: That's right. What do you think of it?

Yossele: An excellent play.

W.B. Producer 1: And that is why we here at Warner Brothers intend to produce it on screen, with sound! We are here to convince you to take part and sing some of your own liturgical compositions. You will be well compensated for your efforts.

Yossele: I'm, flattered. But you know that my position on these matters has always been and remains, the answer is no.

W.B. Producer 2: Mr. Rosenblatt, we are ready to pay you as much as \$100,000. I am sure we can find an agreeable compromise.

Yossele: Gentlemen, I appreciate your good intentions, but for some things I cannot compromise.

W.B. Producer 1: What if we just used your voice without your being seen. Perhaps we could just record you singing Kol Nidrei?

Yossele: (visibly pained) Kol Nidrei? The cantor's sacred inauguration of the holiest day of the year? Kol Nidre belongs in the synagogue, please!

W.B. Producers 2: Mr. Rosenblatt, work with us, there must be something that you could sing in this talkie.

Yossele: (To Audience)  
They kept hounding me with their producers and negotiators. Finally I agreed to sing some non-liturgical compositions. The truth is, I really needed the money. (Enter Taube)

Scene 17:

Taube: Things were looking up after Yossele's successful concert tour of Europe and South America. We finally put bankruptcy behind us. But how could any of us have predicted the aftermath of the stock market crash? We had no savings, no one was buying records or attending concerts. The situation in New York was dire—and our *shul* in Borough Park couldn't afford to pay Yossele. We very quickly fell back into serious debt.

(Taube looks on as Yossele approaches friends and acquaintances to borrow money. After being rejected he circles, until he asks from the next person.) **(Piano plays Brother Can You Spare a Dime?)**

Yossele: Mrs. Stein I really need to borrow some money.

Mrs. Stein: How much this time?

Yossele: I need \$1000. I'm sure I will be able to repay you soon.

Mrs. Stein: I'm sorry Yossele, I can't help you. (exit)

Yossele: Reb Leib, please, I'm embarrassed to say that I need \$1000.

Reb Leib: Yossele, my wife will kill me if I-

Yossele: Leib I could face arrest if I don't pay back this creditor!

Reb Leib: Sorry... (exit)

Yossele: Reb Yankl. I need a favor-

Reb Yankl: Cantor Rosenblatt, I have no money, and even if I did, I think it unwise to lend to you. We all know how overwhelming your debt is, and how unable you are to repay any of your lenders. I see no point for anyone to risk lending to you. (exit)

**(Yossele sits down, ashamed and humiliated and sings *Elohai Ad shelo Notzarti*.)** (Taube walks over and consoles her husband.)

#### Scene 18:

Taube: (Said to the audience while embracing Yossele)  
We had lost all of our money, and the hustle and bustle of America had robbed us of our peace of mind. We thought we'd find our peace in the land that Yossele's music longed for, but had always remained beyond our reach. Joseph Fox, the general manager of a Palestinian American Film Company, invited Yossele to take the principal part in a talking and singing picture to be produced in Palestine, chanting some of his own famous liturgical

compositions. With only our luggage, ship tickets, and \$25, Yossele, our son Henry and I boarded the Vulcania and sailed to Palestine. My husband was a new man. (Yossele picks up Taube and spins her around.) **(Piano plays lively Israeli folk music.)**

Taube: Yossele what are you doing? You're behaving like an infant.

Yossele: That's exactly how I feel. Like a newborn babe. (Yossele spins her one more time and then puts her down.) Can you believe it? Our own Jewish Tel Aviv--built by Jewish hands, run by a Jewish Mayor, guarded by Jewish policemen--everything as it was foreseen by our prophets!

Taube: Sha, Yossele, you should rest. Your filming schedule looks extremely demanding. The Wailing Wall, then Rachel's Tomb... you are going to see all of Eretz Yisrael in one week!

Yossele: (joyous) My music will finally be where it belongs, at its source.

Taube: (to audience) After a week of constant filming, we had made it to the final day of the shoot. On a scorching hot afternoon we descended 3000 feet from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea, the lowest place on earth. (Cast gets into position as if filming)

**Scene 19:**

Director: And action!

**(Piano plays intro to Lomir Zich Iberbeten.)**(Yossele starts singing and then starts clutching his stomach and breathing deeply.)

Director: Cut! Yossele *ma kara?* Are you alright?

Yossele: I, I have this pain in my stomach..... a pressure.... I don't...(Yossele is crouched over in pain.)

Director: The driver will take you back to the hotel. We'll finish this up tomorrow, we're nearly done anyhow. Get some rest and you'll feel better.

**Scene 20:**

(A single candle is lit. Yossele is lying down. Taube is by his side tucking him in.)

Yossele: I can't believe this could be the end. Is this God's plan?

Taube: God brought you to Eretz Yisrael to sing, and soon you'll recover, and use your voice to pray for the people of Israel.

Yossele: I ....I feel like I can barely pray for myself right now. Oh Taube, the upcoming European tour, those debts in New York-- I can't afford to be sick right now.

Taube: Yossele, shshsh... you heard the doctor's orders, your only obligation now is to rest. My sweet singer of Israel, please, try to keep quiet. Tomorrow's another day.

Yossele: *Shma Yisroel...*

(Taube steps away and watches Yossele as his head is thrown backwards. She stares at him in stunned silence and disbelief. She screams.)

(Piano improvises based on melody of Shir Hama'a lot while the following poem is read.)

The fiddle is broken. Its strings have been severed.  
The master had vanished and gone.  
The singer divine from this world had departed.  
None ever sang as he has done

The pulpit and siddur are both now deserted,  
And mourners are prayer and song.  
And bent down with sorrow are friend and companion,  
And grief mutes the synagogues throng.

The heads of the cantors are bowed deep with mourning,  
Their eyes are with tears filled and dim,  
As they weep and bewail the untimely departure  
Of the monarch of song and of hymn.

(Choir sings Shir Hama'a lot.)

END

## **CONCLUSION**

In the proceeding chapters I have presented aspects of Rosenblatt's biography, samples of his presence in the media and a play that brings to life both of these elements. Based on this information I am better able to understand the answers to the question that concerned me following the Rosenblatt concert in Riverdale: Why was Rosenblatt considered the "King of Cantors?" Why did a cantor receive so much attention from both Jewish and non-Jewish worlds? The answers fall within three main categories: talent, personal integrity and life drama.

Jews and non-Jews were drawn to Rosenblatt's unique singing ability. Although he was a dramatic tenor he had the ability to sing the lowest notes of the bass register, the highest notes of the soprano and everything in between. His voice was agile and he had an incredible ability to render coloratura passages with pinpoint accuracy. His signature falsetto was so pure that it could be heard at the back of even the largest concert hall and the tender quality of this part of his voice mesmerized his audiences. He could sing in over ten languages and in contrasting styles, ranging from liturgical music to Irish ballads and from opera to Yiddish folk songs. For all of these reasons both Jews and non-Jews were astonished by his vocal abilities.

Jews and Gentiles also appreciated Rosenblatt's compositional abilities. Rosenblatt was gifted with an innate sense of melody. His liturgical compositions combined Jewish chant modes with isolated melodies that were peppered with melodic influences of jazz, opera and folk song. Incorporating these genres into his compositions made his music accessible and appreciated by audiences, regardless of their knowledge of Hebraic texts. For those that did understand Hebrew, his compositions were prized for their ability to

profoundly express the sentiment of the text through creative word painting and use of the prayer modes. Overall, his singing and compositions astonished his international audiences and set him apart as a superior talent.

Rosenblatt was more than just a unique talent. To the Jewish world, Rosenblatt became a symbol of an immigrant who remained fervently committed to Jewish traditions while living in a modern world that attempted to lure him away from his observance. Rosenblatt never compromised his integrity as an observant Jew even when faced with adversity. For this reason, Rosenblatt became a source of public intrigue deemed worthy of a presence in the press. Throughout his career Rosenblatt was offered rare professional opportunities such as a leading role with the Chicago Opera, the London Opera and a featured role in *The Jazz Singer*. In all of these examples Rosenblatt was guaranteed that his religious observances would not be compromised. Though he was assured that he would not have to work on Shabbat or shave his beard his commitment to the Cantorate exceeded artistically and financially rewarding opportunities. He was not willing to compromise his or his congregation's convictions regarding *kol isha*. When offered enormous sums of money to sing *Kol Nidre* in *The Jazz Singer*, he challenged a major film company by refusing their request and insisted that a non-liturgical piece be used.

Rosenblatt's integrity was also displayed in his publicly documented acts of charity. Both the Jewish and non-Jewish public were intrigued by this cantor who donated his talents to benefit concerts that were organized to raise money for universal causes such as the Red Cross, the war effort and hospitals. His benefit concerts were deemed newsworthy in the 1930's just as today's Red Cross concert for tsunami relief received significant media

attention. His contributions to these projects were to him the fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of tzedakah.

In addition to his charitable actions, other elements of his life story were documented in the press. In today's society people are fascinated with stardom and financial gain and loss; the same was true in the society in which Rosenblatt lived. The inherent drama of a new immigrant declining large sums of money, entering vaudeville and suffering a tragic death just after over coming bankruptcy proved to a public fascination. It is human nature to be enthralled by real life drama. The fact that he was memorialized in a setting such as Carnegie Hall with 2,500 people from various backgrounds illustrates the remarkable impact he had on the society of his time. The unique combination of Rosenblatt's talent, integrity and life story made him a cantorial legend. Indeed, though the details of his life are not known to today's generation, his music and legacy live on each time his famous setting of *shir hama'a lot* is sung.

Recently my wife was telling her patient about my thesis topic: Yossele Rosenblatt. He was familiar with the topic and recounted a short anecdotal story involving a cantor who proclaimed himself the "Third Yossele Rosenblatt." When the cantor was asked who the second Yossele Rosenblatt was, he replied: "There will never be a second Yossele Rosenblatt!" Rosenblatt was and remains in a class by himself. His thrilling life only added to his musical allure and widespread appeal.



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