

Biography of Cantor Jakub Lichterman 1909-1986

At the age of 8, I started singing as a soprano in a synagogue choir in Warsaw, Poland where I was born. Although my parents were opposed, they finally agreed because I was so keen and had such a beautiful soprano voice. After singing for one year, I applied to the choir of the Great Synagogue of Warsaw, the Tlomacka Synagogue. It was extremely difficult to be accepted; trying out was a huge challenge as the choir master, Leo Low accepted only the most talented singers. My acceptance was a great honor for my family. The choir consisted of 120 members of which 80 were young boys, sopranos and altos, and 40 adult professional singers, some of whom sang in the state opera chorus.

Life was not easy. We attended many rehearsals along with school and homework, and had to walk in snow, rain or heat as there was no transportation. The cantor at that time at the Great Synagogue was Gershon Sirota, who had one of the great voices of history; a true legend. It was a special honor to sing with Sirota or in Leo Low's choir. This was my first introduction to professional chazzanut (the cantorate) and I cultivated a great love for it, although my earliest foundation was from my father who was a non-professional cantor.

After a short while as a member of this choir, my musical abilities were recognized and I was promoted to soloist. In Cape Town I found an old record of Cantor Sirota from around 1920 with the choir of the Tlomacka Synagogue, on which I am the soloist, singing "*v'haser satan*" from Hashkivaynu. Around the time of my Bar Mitzah my voice began to mature and dropped from a soprano to an alto. My voice never broke and at the age of 17 I began singing as an adult tenor.

Fate and destiny played their hand and I became the assistant cantor of the second synagogue of Warsaw, the Nozyk Synagogue where I was soon promoted to first cantor. Cantor Sirota had left the Great Synagogue for an extended concert tour overseas and on his return he transferred to the Nozyk Synagogue where I served as his assistant. I studied music and voice at the Warsaw Conservatory of Music from which I graduated with honors. This was a time in my life of intensive study and devotion to Jewish and secular music and I rarely missed a symphony or opera performance. Besides being a full time cantor, I sang as tenor soloist in the Warsaw Philharmonic Choir and the Hazamir Jewish Choir. We sang a complicated repertoire of oratorios, classical music, folk and liturgical music. Because of my voice, I was nicknamed "glocken", meaning "a bell".

As assistant cantor to Sirota, I was extremely busy as he only led services once a month when we blessed the new month. The other three weeks I led services with the choir. The Nozyk Synagogue was more popular than the Great Synagogue, especially for weddings. On Sundays we averaged 8-12 weddings scheduled every hour as well as Saturday nights. I did all those weddings as Cantor Sirota was unavailable. At Nozyk Synagogue I served with the University of Warsaw Professor of History Meir Balaban who was the honorary rabbi. The choir master was the prominent composer Abraham Davidowicz. I studied extensively with him and married his daughter Sonia who was a prominent pianist and musician in Warsaw. Many Cantorial records from this period in Warsaw feature Sonia as the accompanist. In January 1939 our daughter and only child Shoshana Raizel was born.

My typical Friday evening service at Nozyk Synagogue lasted 1½ - 2 hours. We sang many great compositions; the synagogue was always packed and services were like concerts. I was also

the military cantor for the Polish army and on national holidays I led special services along with the chief chaplain Rabbi Dr. Kahane. I also sang many concerts, on radio, made records and sang at many functions such as for the Zionist Organization in which I was active.

I served as first cantor of the Nozyk Synagogue until the German occupation in September 1939 when synagogues were closed and we held secret prayer services in private homes. During the years 1940 to 1945 I endured the most traumatic experiences. I have written many articles and been interviewed extensively about this. In April, 1943 after two years of incredible conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto, I participated in the uprising and was wounded in the leg. I was captured and shipped in a cattle car to Maidanek concentration camp where my wife and 4 year old daughter were murdered. I was transferred to Birkenau, Auschwitz and Monowitz (Buna). During the notorious death marches, as the Nazis abandoned concentration camps in the face of the advancing allies in January 1945, I escaped into the woods, and survived eating snow two days without allowing myself to sleep, as I would have frozen in the snow as happened to many.

I made my way out of the woods and found myself in the border village of Gleiwitz where a Polish peasant sheltered and fed me in a haystack in his barn for a week until the Russians arrived. I made my way back to Warsaw by foot; there was utter chaos. I searched for my family in vain.

I met my second wife Miriam when she arrived from Molchov concentration camp six months after I was liberated. She was still emaciated, with little hair. We were married by Rabbi Schoenfeld from London who was sent out by the British army. I received a call from a synagogue in Johannesburg, South Africa to be their cantor. Rabbi Schoenfeld arranged for me to lead services in various London synagogues to begin earning some money. My wife waited for me in Brussels as she could not get a visa to London, while our visas to South Africa were being processed.

The chief Rabbi Rabinowitz arranged our immigration. I served the Benoni Synagogue in Johannesburg from 1947 to 1950; then we moved to Cape Town where I served 33 years as cantor of the Beth Hamidrosch Hechodosh Synagogue.

During these years I immersed myself in every aspect of Jewish life and committed to preserving the vast storehouse of synagogue musical memories I had from Poland. I painstakingly hand wrote thousands of musical manuscripts for my two sons Joel and Ivor including the complete High Holy Days services, thus ensuring that they have the opportunity to follow in my footsteps, and that my music laid the foundation for their careers.

(Cantor Jakub Lichterman passed way in August 1986 at the age of 77.)



CANTOR LICHTERMAN

3 YEARS TO WRITE BOOK

JEWISH
HERALD

IT TOOK CANTOR JACOB LICHTERMAN of the Cape Town Orthodox Hebrew Congregation (the Beth Hamedrash Hachodosh in Vredehoek) three years to write the notes and Hebrew lettering, in his own hand, for his "Complete Services for the High Festivals", containing close on 200 pages of meticulously beautiful notation and words.

The work contains the complete services for the Days of Awe (Yamim Noraim) including the "trop" (cantillation) for the Torah readings. The music to which all these prayers and readings are set was either composed by Cantor Lichterman, or adapted by him, or acknowledged to its original sources. Traditional tunes may have been modified or new ones composed, based on the old style; the cantor in places gives his own specific interpretations to certain tunes without departing radically from traditional cantorial style.

The Cantor relates that he has never before seen the complete Shahrut services in one volume; his volume is the first one to do this.

Cantor Lichterman has served for 25 years as cantor of the Synagogue, and has dedicated his work to his two sons Joel and Ivor; who are both musical and already young practitioners of the ancient cantorial art.

The volume is divided into seven sections: there are melodies and/or variations to them ascribed to such famous cantors as Lewandowski (Germany); Sulzer (Vienna); Weisser (U.S.A.); Davidowich (Warsaw) and Zilbers (U.S.A.). 15/10/74