



Standing Room Only: The Remarkable Career of Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt

Yossele Rosenblatt (1882-1933). Photo: Irving Chidnoff

By David Olivestone

In an obituary for Cantor Josef Rosenblatt, whose seventieth *yahrtzeit* was observed this year, *The New York Times* noted, “He was so well known in this country that letters from Europe addressed to ‘Yossele Rosenblatt, America,’ reached him promptly.”¹

No other *chazzan* has ever attained such nationwide popularity and fame among both Jewish and Gentile audiences as Yossele Rosenblatt, while remaining completely observant and retaining his position at the *amud*. There have been some who became world-famous, such as the celebrated tenor Richard Tucker, who also began his career as a cantor. Tucker, however, was not Orthodox, and once he became a star of the Metropolitan Opera, he led congregations only on the Yamim Noraim or on Pesach.

Rosenblatt, on the other hand, despite having turned down offers to appear in the opera, rose to become a star of the entertainment world of the 1920s, all the while wearing his large black yarmulke and frock coat. He endeared himself to all who heard him, whether in person or in his recordings. His enormous popularity was evident even decades after his death.

Yossele was born in 1882 in the Ukrainian shtetl Belaya Tserkov—the first boy in the family after nine girls.² His

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father, a Ruzhiner *chassid* who frequented the court of the Sadagora Rebbe, was himself a *chazzan*. Recognizing his young son’s extraordinary talent, Yossele’s father began to tour with his son to help supplement the family income. The father would *daven* as the *chazzan*, but it was the child prodigy, Yossele, whom the crowds came to hear.

When he was eighteen and just married, Rosenblatt accepted his first permanent position in Munkacs, Hungary. His creative genius as a composer had already begun to bloom, and he soon found the atmosphere in Munkacs too confining. When the position of *Oberkantor* (chief cantor) in the more forward-looking city of Pressburg, Hungary, became available, Rosenblatt, still only eighteen years old, was chosen over fifty-six other candidates.

Standing not much more than five feet tall, Rosenblatt was still a commanding figure with his heavy, dark beard and fastidious appearance. He possessed a magnificent tenor voice of great beauty and extraordinary range, with a remarkably agile falsetto. In addition, he had perfect pitch and could read the most difficult musical score at sight. The sweet timbre of his voice, the superb control he displayed—particularly in coloratura passages—and his trademark “sob,” inspired his congregants and thrilled his concert audiences. And much of what he sang, and later recorded, was his own composition, significantly influenced in its tunefulness by his Chassidic background.

His five years in Pressburg saw the composition and publication of 150 recitatives and choral pieces, and in 1905 the first of numerous phonograph recordings.³ But although he

was happy there, the demands of a growing family and of supporting several relatives whom he had taken into his home forced him to seek a better paying position. This he found in Hamburg, Germany, where he again won instant acclaim; he stayed there for another five years.

By this time, Rosenblatt’s fame had begun to reach the New World, both through his records and the accounts of travelers, including delegates to the 1909 Zionist Congress, which was held in Hamburg. In 1911, the board of the First Hungarian Congregation Ohab Zedek, one of New York’s premier synagogues whose *chazzan* had just resigned, invited him to *daven* for the congregation for two Shabbatot, paying all his travel expenses and guaranteeing him a substantial honorarium. Rosenblatt’s success at Ohab Zedek, which was then in Harlem and later, on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, was immediate, and he soon cabled his wife, telling her to bring the family to America.

In New York his reputation quickly spread. Not only was Ohab Zedek packed to overflowing every time he *davened* (sometimes the police had to be called in to control the crowds attempting to enter the synagogue), but Rosenblatt became the *chazzan* of choice for all of the 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 Europe because of the war. Although there were many prominent speakers, it was Rosenblatt who was the draw, and an incredible \$250,000 was raised.

It was this event that brought Rosenblatt to the attention of *The New York Times*. “The cantor is a singer of natural powers and moving eloquence,” it reported. In a postscript that is remarkable for its insight into the Orthodox Judaism of that day, the *Times* noted that despite the fact that Rosenblatt sang “prayers and chants . . . the audience listened with uncovered heads.”⁴

The concert at the Hippodrome was the kick-off for a tour of thirty cities on behalf of the war relief campaign. Rosenblatt’s appearance in Chicago marked the next turning point in his career. An invited guest at that event was Cleofonte Campanini, general director of the Chicago Opera, who was so struck by Rosenblatt’s artistic ability that he visited him immediately after the concert and offered him \$1,000 per performance if he would sing the role of Eleazar in Halevy’s opera *La Juive*.

There is no doubt that Rosenblatt was tempted. Campanini carefully outlined a contract with terms that he believed would ensure that Rosenblatt would not have to compromise his *Yiddishkeit* in any way. He could retain his beard; he would not have to appear on Shabbat or Yom Tov; kosher food would be obtained for him; and if he was uncomfortable about appearing on stage with Gentile women, as Campanini seemed to think, it would be arranged that his co-stars would be Jewish sopranos such as

Alma Gluck or Rosa Raisa.

In the end, however, Rosenblatt could not bring himself to agree. But not wishing to offend Campanini, he asked the president of Ohab Zedek, Moritz Newman, to provide the final answer. Newman wrote to Campanini that “. . . the Rev. Rosenblatt’s sacred position in the synagogue does not permit him to enter the operatic stage.”

The offer—and its refusal—caused a storm, with reporters from national newspapers, as well as the Jewish dailies and weeklies, vying to understand how Rosenblatt could turn down such an offer of fame and fortune. In an interview with the trade journal *Musical America*, Rosenblatt said: “The cantor of the past and the opera star of the future waged a fierce struggle within me.” He claimed that “suddenly a voice whispered into my ear, ‘Yossele, don’t do it!’”⁵

Now a celebrity, Rosenblatt was in demand everywhere. Appearing just a few weeks later on the steps of The New York Public Library for the War Savings Stamp Campaign, he sang “The Star Spangled Banner,” followed by “Keili, Keili,” at the conclusion of which Enrico Caruso, the great star of the opera, stepped forward and kissed him.

Although the opera would be denied his talents, neither Rosenblatt nor his congregation saw any problem with his giving Jewish or secular music concerts. He aspired to be to the Jews “what John McCormack is to the Irish,” and was proud to be introduced as the “Jewish tenor,” rather than the Russian, German or Hungarian tenor. He rapidly learned some operatic arias and a repertoire of other ethnic songs, and in May 1918, gave his first recital at Carnegie Hall.

The reviews in the New York papers,⁶ all of which recapped his refusal to sing with the Chicago Opera, were mostly ecstatic. “Jewish Tenor Triumphs in Concert,” trumpeted the *New York American*, adding “Cantor Rosenblatt Reveals Voice of Exceptional Beauty, Evoking Thunderous Applause in Music Far from His Accustomed



Rosenblatt’s management company placed a full-page ad in *Musical Courier*, December 12, 1918, reprinting reviews of his first concert appearance in Boston.

Field.” The *Morning Telegraph* said that his rendition of Verdi’s *Questa o Quella* “could scarcely have been excelled by any living tenor.” Some critics, however, were less enthusiastic about his ventures into operatic arias, but all were swept away by the vocal agility he displayed when singing pieces of *chazzanut* and Yiddish songs.

From this point on, Rosenblatt was an integral part of the New York cultural scene, and the appearances of “Cantor Rosenblatt” were regularly listed in *The New York Times* together with those of other celebrated artists of the day. His bookings were handled by well-known managers, including the foremost impresario Sol Hurok, who promoted him in advertisements in the *Musical Courier* alongside other world-famous artists such as Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova and Austrian pianist and composer Artur Schnabel.

In order to fight off offers from other congregations, Ohab Zedek was now paying Rosenblatt the record salary of \$10,000 a year; Rosenblatt was also earning huge concert fees and royalties from his records. But as his income grew, so did his philanthropy and his generosity to various members of his family whom, in addition to his own eight children, he helped support. The many Jewish organizations that asked for his help were not only treated to a benefit concert but often also received donations out of his own pocket. And his home saw a constant procession of those in need, who knew that he would never turn them away empty-handed.

But Rosenblatt was generous to a fault, and in 1922, he agreed to invest in a dubious Yiddish newspaper venture. However much he earned, the business demanded more, and in January 1925 Rosenblatt was forced to declare bankruptcy.⁷ So great was the public goodwill towards him that few questioned his sincerity when he announced that he would employ “the only gift left to me, of which nobody can deprive me—my voice,” to earn the money to pay back his creditors.

With this in mind, he began an exhausting series of



Scene from the movie *Dream of My People*, showing Rosenblatt in a boat on the Jordan River, near Jericho.

appearances in vaudeville, then the most popular form of entertainment in America. Typically, the program would include the showing of a silent movie and a newsreel as well as various performers such as singers, acrobats, comedians and child and animal acts. In order to distinguish his performance from the others with their gaudy scenery, props and drum rolls, Rosenblatt, who was usually given top billing, insisted on appearing on a bare stage with all the auditorium lights on. He would sing a mix of sentimental songs such as “Keili, Keili” in Hebrew and Yiddish, “The Last Rose of Summer” in English, “Volga Boatmen” in Russian and “La Campana” in Italian. He was a sensation wherever he appeared throughout the country. Entertainers with whom he shared the bill were awed by this highly unusual “act.” A fellow performer in Cincinnati reported that when the cantor was finished singing, “without a nod or bow he turned towards the wings and walked . . . toward the stage door and out into the street.” Meanwhile, members of the audience were applauding madly and shouting for more. So great was the uproar that the manager had to lower the screen and show the newsreel in order to quiet them.

Of course, some of the challenges Rosenblatt faced on tour were very different from those of other artists. Clearly, finding kosher homes in which to eat was always a major priority. But he might, for example, be on a train on Purim, unable to reach a synagogue for Ma’ariv or Shacharit, in which case he would read Megillat Esther for himself from his own *klaf* (scroll). Theater managers found themselves explaining why the headliner would not be appearing in the Friday evening and Saturday shows, and his itinerary had to be drawn up in a way that he could be at Ohab Zedek for all the Jewish holidays. In 1926, Rosenblatt resigned from the *shul*, accepting an offer of \$15,000 to *daven* in a Chicago auditorium just for the High Holidays.

In 1927, when Warner Brothers set about casting the first talking picture, *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson, Rosenblatt was the obvious choice to play Jolson’s father, the elderly *chazzan*. Despite the proffered remuneration of \$100,000, he refused the role because it would have entailed singing Kol Nidrei in a make-believe setting. Contrary to popular belief, he would not even agree to dub the singing voice of Warner Oland, the actor who did play the *chazzan*.⁸ Yet Rosenblatt’s fame was so great at this time that the producers were determined to have him take some part in the movie and prevailed on him until he agreed to appear as himself, singing a Yiddish song, “Yahrtzeit Licht,” in a concert setting.⁹ Despite his tiny role, “Cantor Rosenblatt” received star billing.

With vaudeville in decline, and tiring of not having his own synagogue in which to *daven*, Rosenblatt became the *chazzan* of Congregation Anshe Sfard in Borough Park, Brooklyn, in 1927. But after the stock market crash of 1929, Anshe Sfard was unable to pay him. He eventually returned to Ohab Zedek (now in its new home on West 95th Street),

Chazzanut—Learning to Enjoy It

Of all the different types of Jewish music, *chazzanut* may be the most difficult to appreciate. In a sense, it is the Jewish equivalent of classical music. Just as classical music is an acquired taste, *chazzanut* needs to be worked at to be understood. By becoming more familiar with it, one can learn to enjoy it.

At one time, before the advent of recordings and easy access to popular entertainment, a performance by a *chazzan* and his choir was the major form of entertainment for Jewish people. But somehow, the line between entertainment and *davening* became blurred. *Chazzanim* started singing many elaborate pieces in *shul* that were composed for the concert stage but were never really intended to be used during *davening*.

During the first half of the twentieth century, *chazzanut* enjoyed what has become known as its golden age. While Rosenblatt was one of the first of Europe’s great *chazzanim* to move to America, he was not the only *chazzan* of his time to do so. Scores of highly talented *chazzanim* *davened* in *shuls* in New York and other major cities. Recordings and concerts proliferated, and many of the most famous pieces of *chazzanut* were composed in that era.

Today, even those who tend to avoid *shuls* where the *chazzan* gives lengthy performances can often sing or hum some famous cantorial melodies such as “Sheyibaneh Beit Hamikdash,” “Shehecheyanu” and “Retzei.”

You might like, therefore, to learn to appreciate *chazzanut* outside of a *shul* setting, through recordings and concerts. There is a vast range of recordings by virtually all the great *chazzanim* of the past century that you may sample to discover your preferences.

Listen to the music a few times before you decide if you really like it. See how it reflects your own understanding of the words of the prayer. Or just enjoy it for the vocal artistry of the performer. Remember that—as in any art form—not every piece is of the same quality, and you have to learn how to be discriminating.

Here are five of the greatest *chazzanim* of the twentieth century, who have left us extensive recordings:

• **Yossele Rosenblatt** (1882-1933), described in this article, was one of the most prolific composers and recording artists of cantorial music. To hear his range—both vocal and emotional—listen to his “Hineni,” “Geshem” or “Ata Yatzarta.” His “Shir Hama’alot,” “Rachem Na,” “Vehu Rachum” and “Kevakarat”

are perhaps the most often-heard pieces that he made popular.

• **Gershon Sirota** (1874-1943) was one of the most powerful and highly trained tenors of his time, with climactic top notes and outstanding voice control. The only one of the great *chazzanim* of his era not to accept a position in America, Sirota perished in the Warsaw Ghetto. You can hear the emotional intensity of his dramatic tenor voice in the famous “Retzei” and in his rendition of “Unetaneh Tokef.” You can also hear his extraordinary vocal agility in “Veshamru.”

• **Mordechai Hershman** (1888-1940), one of a line of great *chazzanim* to serve at Temple Beth-El in Borough Park, Brooklyn, was a master of Yiddish folksong as well as *chazzanut*. The elegance and warmth of his singing and the power and sweetness of his tenor voice are evident in such pieces as “Eilu Devarim,” “Umipnei Chata’enu” and “Tal.”

• **Zavel Kwartin** (1874-1953) is best known for his rendition of “Tifer Rabbi Yishmael,” one of the most dramatic and moving pieces of *chazzanut* ever written. The intensity of Kwartin’s phrasing and delivery in such pieces as “Ve’al Yedei Avadecha” and “Uveyom Simchat’chem,” make him very worthwhile listening to.

• **Moshe Koussevitzky** (1899-1966) is still remembered by many as the greatest *chazzan* of the post-World War II era. He had a graceful and

powerful lyric tenor with a phenomenal upper register with which he could do wonders. For sheer artistry, it is hard to beat his “Hashem Malach,” “Esa Einai” or “Ledor Vador.” Koussevitzky’s rendition of Israel Schorr’s “Sheyibaneh Beit Hamikdash” is his most famous recording.

There are, of course, many more *chazzanim* to listen to. Some of them may be easier to appreciate, such as Shmuel Malavsky, Moishe Oysher, Leibele Waldman or Richard Tucker. If you would like to hear a live performance by some of the leading *chazzanim* of our day, look for concerts by Chaim Adler, Yitzchak Meir Helfgot, Joseph Malovany, Ben Zion Miller, Yaacov Motzen and Benjamin Muller, among others.

Since *chazzanut* is a genuinely Jewish art form, there is a special satisfaction involved in enjoying it. You may also discover that—through your enjoyment of the music—your familiarity with the words of the *davening* will be greatly enhanced. The rewards are many and varied, so buy your first tapes or CDs—in Judaica stores or on the Web—and learn to appreciate the unique manner in which generations of our people have chosen to speak to the Almighty—in words and in song.



Cover page of sheet music for Rosenblatt’s “Yehi Ratzon” for Shabbat Mevarchim Hachodesh (announcing the new month).

the only congregation that could still afford him. Yet this, too, did not last, and his financial situation became acute.

Then in 1933, he was offered a movie role that he could accept. The idea of the proposed production, *Dream of My People*, was for Rosenblatt to sing his own compositions at the Biblical sites relevant to the words of those prayers. The movie was designed to show the Jews of America the Holy Land, with its sacred sites, newly built cities and settlements. The producers felt they had a sure success on their hands; for Rosenblatt, visiting Eretz Yisrael was the realization of a lifelong dream of his own.

Besides working on the movie, Rosenblatt gave concerts and *davened* in the major *shuls* and yeshivot in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and elsewhere, enchanting all who heard him. He spent Shabbat afternoons in the home of Rav Kook, the chief rabbi of what was then Palestine, who was deeply moved by his singing.¹⁰ Among those who attended one of his concerts was the great Hebrew poet, Chaim Nachman Bialik. Hearing Rosenblatt sing his famous “Shir Hama’alot,”¹¹ Bialik proposed that it become the national anthem of the Jewish people.

Rosenblatt decided to undertake a European concert tour to raise funds that would enable him to settle in Eretz Yisrael, as he and his wife had determined to do. On Shabbat, June 17, 1933, he *davened* at a “farewell” service held at the Hurva Synagogue in Jerusalem. The next day, after filming a scene at the Dead Sea, Rosenblatt suffered a sudden heart attack. Within a short while he died, at the tragically young age of fifty-one. More than 5,000 people attended his funeral on Har Hazetim, and scenes from the funeral were eventually included in the movie that he did not live to complete. Rav Kook gave the *hesped*, and two of Rosenblatt’s most famous colleagues, Mordechai Hershman and Zavel Kwartin, sang.¹²

A few days later in New York, some 2,500 stunned and mournful devotees attended a memorial service in Carnegie Hall. Two hundred of Rosenblatt’s fellow *chazzanim* assembled on the stage to sing his music and the *Kel Malei Rachamim*.¹³

Seventy years after his passing, Yossele Rosenblatt’s impact on *chazzanut*, in particular, and Jewish music, in general, continues to be felt. Many of his pieces have become staples in the repertoires of Ashkenazic *chazzanim* and are regularly

Poster announcing Rosenblatt’s death and funeral in Jerusalem. The Chief Rabbinate called for everyone to leave work so they could give the proper honor due the “King of Cantors.”

Rosenblatt provided an endorsement for Sunshine Kosher Crackers and Cookies on the back cover of the sheet music for his new arrangement of “Keili Keili” (undated). When traveling, he writes, they are “a veritable lifesaver for me” and they are served in every Jewish home he visits. Below Rosenblatt’s signature are details of the kosher certification provided by the OU.



sung in *shul* services and concerts.

His recordings have been repeatedly reissued, most recently on CD.

And still the greatest compliment that can be paid to any aspiring *chazzan* is that he is “a second Yossele.”

But there has been no second Yossele who has captured the hearts of the public quite the way he did. In *shul*, he gave voice to the deepest feelings and yearnings of those who entrusted him as their *shaliach tzibbur*. On the concert stage and in the theater, he would bring down the house night after night, impressing his audiences as much with his *Yiddishkeit* as with his artistry. In both settings, Yossele Rosenblatt created a *kiddush Hashem* every time he sang. **IA**

Notes

1. *The New York Times*, 20 June 1933.
2. Rabbi Dr. Samuel Rosenblatt, *Yossele Rosenblatt* (New York, 1954). Much of the information related here is taken from this book, which was written by Yossele’s eldest son. I am grateful to Yossele’s youngest (and only surviving) son, Ralph Rosenblatt, for providing me with additional details, and to his great-grandson, Rabbi Jonathan Rosenblatt of Riverdale, NY, who directed me to other sources.
3. For a discography see *The Record Collector* 20, nos. 6 and 7 (May, 1972).
4. *The New York Times*, 7 May 1917.
5. *Musical America*, 22 June 1918.
6. 20 May 1918.
7. *The New York Times*, 15 January 1925.
9. Samuel Rosenblatt’s biography is in error here, claiming that his father refused to be filmed for the movie at all. Clearly, the author had not actually seen the film when he wrote these words.
10. Simcha Raz, *An Angel Among Men* (Jerusalem, 5763), 295-296.
11. There is some confusion as to whether this melody for “Shir Hama’alot,” which is probably the one most commonly sung in American homes, was composed by Rosenblatt or by another famous *chazzan*, Pinchas Minkowsky.
12. *The New York Times*, 21 June 1933.
13. *The New York Times*, 28 June 1933.

