



The cantor Polakewicz

OUR CANTORS

Kutno sang with her good cantors and her prayer leaders. I want to bring out some of their characters in our book of remembrance.

At the beginning of this century, the famous cantor Moshe Opeler prayed in the city and around. Mostly, in the Great Synagogue, which was famous in Poland for its eastern wall, a masterpiece of architecture and painting. The well-known journalist of "Today", M. Najman z"l described the Kutno synagogue in detail.

After Moshe Opeler, the cantorship in the Great Synagogue was taken over by the young Maroko, a talented singer, who composed melodies himself. He lived on Main Street¹, near the house of the Falc. Maroko had its own choir, that was conducted by Sokolowski, also a music teacher. A tall man, with long hands, which came in handy when conducting.

The first singer in the choir was Fishel Fogelman, with a fine tenor voice. I remember that, from the *cheder* of Mr. Ozer Bilowski, a Jewish Torah scholar and good educator, where I studied with my older brother, the cantor and the conductor selected children's voices for their choir.

Together with me, in that *cheder*, studied the younger pupils N. Moszkowicz, M. Elbaum, Z. Elberg, A. Goldsztajn, Z. Kowalski, and others. A. Sh. Elberg was the patron of the *cheder* and every Friday the children came to hear the section of the Torah. My brother Yehuda-Yaakov z"l (who died with my mother and two sisters in the ghetto) was the best student and that is why Mr. Elberg recommended that he be accepted into the Hebrew gymnasium, where he was one of the founders and board members.

Thanks to my high voice, I was happily accepted into different choirs. After a while, Maroko emigrated to South America and Sokolowski moved to Łódź, where he attended the local city synagogue.

After they left Kutno, the city was a long time without a cantor, as the new candidates for the office demanded an excessive allowance, according to the ideas and possibilities of the community. There were some landlords, scholars and lovers of cantorial singing, although not such ardent chassidim, who rewarded the cantors out of their own pockets (such as the Kozak family).

In Maroko times, there was a conflict between the *frum* and advanced worshipers. Maroko wanted to modernize the choir, each wearing a special hat and small

¹ TN: Królewska St.

talit. The treasurers finally agreed, although this involved a large spending. But how great was the disappointment and bitterness when, on the first Sunday morning after the Shabbat prayer during which the choir appeared in the new attire – the hats and the small talits had disappeared. The room (on the right at the entrance to the synagogue) was broken into. On the left was the "Psalm Society". The incident made a very bad impression on everyone, but fortunately there were no serious clashes, the police investigated, discovered nothing – and in time the matter was forgotten.

At a time when no municipal cantor was in the Great Synagogue, the Kutno landlords who were proficient in the traditional texts and the music, prayed in front of *Amud*² on Saturdays and holidays. Yonatan Majranc, the father of Keren Kayemet's later legatee, Yitzhak Majranc, said the *Kol Nidrei*. Among the volunteer cantors were: Leibish Finkler, a Skierniewice chassid, a first-class prayer leader. He was involved in bringing various goods from Warsaw and Łódź (*shpiliter*³) to Kutner merchants. He rewarded the singers with certain articles that he traded. However, he did not want any reward for his cantorship.

Slichot in the Great Synagogue were said by the well-known landlord Laznowski. A handsome Jew, managing a soap-factory near the train-station.



The prayer leader – Chaim Tyber

In the Skierniewice *shtiebel*, where I was davening, there were prayer leaders, Mr. Henech Menke and the Piątker *shochet*, Mr. Shlomo Hochgelernter.



Of the prayer leaders in the *Beit Midrash*: Mr. Mordechai *Shochet* (Welcman), who besides doing the slaughtering and cantorship, was also a mohel. Well-known for his politeness and seriousness. The tall Abraham *Shamash*, with his long hands and feet, was also a cantor in the *Beit Midrash*. Standing on the porch, he saw everything and everyone that was going on around him.

In recent years, until the outbreak of war, the cantor in the Great Synagogue was Polakewicz, who excelled with his heartfelt singing. He perished in Kutno ghetto.

Also, the Great Gerer *shtiebel* on Main Street (in Kopel's house) and the various chassidic *shtiebels* and *midrashim* had their own prayer leaders.



The cantor's son, Polakewicz

The cantor's son, Polakewicz, as a 15-year-old boy, showed extraordinary abilities and talent in modeling and drawing (see the above picture). He was also socially active among the Jewish youth in Kutno. He perished at the hands of the Nazi murderers.

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² TN: Hebrew, the cantor's stand.

³ TN: Yiddish, purchasing agent.