

Unsung Heroines

Compiled by Lianna Mendelson

1196: Dolce of Worms: Firzogerin

She sang hymns and prayers and recited supplications. Every day she extended her hands to say the prayers beginning *nishmat kol hai*, and *ve-khol ma'aminim*.

She invoked *pittum ha-qetoret* and the Ten Commandments. In all the cities she taught women, enabling their “Pleasant” intoning of songs.

She knew the order of morning and evening prayer; she came early to the synagogue and stayed late. She stood throughout the Day of Atonement and chanted; she prepared the candles. She honored the Sabbaths and festivals for those who devoted themselves to the study of Torah.

- Rabbi Eleazar of Worms, trans. Judith R. Baskin

1884: Julie Rosewald: Cantor Soprano

Her position in that respect was exceedingly unique. She came to her duties almost immediately after the death of Cantor Wolff and for a number of years, in collaboration with the late organist Schmidt, she controlled and directed the music of the services until her retirement shortly after the advent of Cantor Stark. During all these years Madam Rosewald, often lovingly called the “Cantor Soprano,” made her services a source of the greatest delight to all of her hearers. She combined the highest degree of musical ability with a pious disposition and a fair understanding of Hebrew, having been trained in the school of her late father who was Cantor at Stuttgart, Germany. It was this remarkable combination that made the services of the Temple in her time attractive in the highest degree and gave pleasure as well as edification to the numerous attendants. In this work she was also assisted by her late husband, the late J.H. Rosewald, a master of music of the highest order, and the services rendered by the Rosewalds to the Temple Emanu-El constitute a piece of history that will not easily be forgotten. - Rabbi Jacob Voorsanger in *The Emanu-El*

For ten years, while living in San Francisco, she was a member of the choir of Temple Emanu-El, singing and reciting, in place of a cantor, the parts of the service usually sung and recited by that functionary—the only instance known in which a woman has led the services in a synagogue. - Henrietta Szold in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*

1950: Bas Sheva: The Youngest Girl Cantoress

Bas Sheva recorded two major albums in the early 1950s. The first, “The Soul of a People: Hebraic Chants,” featured Bas Sheva and an orchestra conducted by Hal Mooney, and was released in 1953 by Capitol Records. The recording contains six pieces of liturgy “as they might have been sung in some little Eastern European synagogue or its counterpart in one of the great American cities where immigrant Jews first settled.”

In 1954, Bas Sheva recorded her next major album, again for Capitol Records. “The Passions” featured her gasping, grunting, moaning, and vocalizing to the music of Les Baxter. It was an extremely cutting edge musical experiment, described as “a challenge to the listener... a powerful conception that plumbs the depth of human emotion” in its own liner notes.

My poor sister had to put so much strain directly on her vocal chords to make so many guttural [sic] sounds in this album. She was able to survive it only because of her wonderful vocal technique she developed singing professionally with her father Cantor Joseph Kanefsky since early childhood. - Ian Kaye (Bas Sheva's half-brother)

1975: Barbara Ostfeld: An Unassuming Pioneer

Did You Hear Me, Miss...?

“Good morning, Hebrew Union College, registrar’s desk, Miss Altshul.”

“Hello, this is Barbara Ostfeld. I’m a senior in high school in North Haven, Connecticut, and I’m interested in applying to the School of Sacred Music. I’d like to request an application form.”

“Hold on a minute. Just wait.”

“Thank you.”

“Now you’re who?”

“My name is Barb Ostfeld. I’d like to apply to the cantorial school.”

(Pause.) “I see. And how did you come to us?”

“The cantor of my current congregation went to JTS, so I called the cantor of my childhood congregation. He went to HUC.”

“Who was that?”

“Cantor Rosen. Um, Martin Rosen from Oak Park Temple in Oak Park, Illinois.”

“Well, hold on a minute. Just wait.”

“Thank you.”

“We’ve never had a request like this from a girl.” (Silence.) “Did you hear me, Miss...?”

“Um, yes, Ostfeld. Sorry -- I did hear you.”

“No girl has called up and asked for an application.”

I Get a Tip About Tips

... I think back to my initial meeting with the temple president, when he offered me the cantorial position. The meeting wasn’t much of a negotiation. The president simply named my salary in stentorian tones that did not allow for conversation. Fifteen thousand five hundred dollars.

... Even fresh from HUC, I knew that cantors of large congregations had higher salaries than this. The president could see that I was taken aback by the low number.

“We know it’s not high,” he said, “but you’ll be able to pay your rent. The fathers of the Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah students will give you gifts.”

Soon I learn from choir members, and from the organist, that my cantorial predecessors received fifty or a hundred dollars per student. Envelopes containing cash would turn up in their temple mail boxes the week following the service. Ninety students times either fifty or a hundred dollars. It would mean an additional \$4,500 to \$9,000 in earnings for me. I can’t do math to save my life, but I can see what a difference that is on a \$15,500 salary.

I guess the president wasn’t trying to take advantage of me, not about this. He just didn’t anticipate that instead of seeing me as their cantor, B’nei Mitzvah fathers would see me as a woman wearing a long black robe. I am not what cantors look like, not to them...

“Barbara, this is bad for everyone in the ACC. If congregations can pay women cantors that much less and get away with it, THEY WILL!”

It’s true that the temple president didn’t know I wouldn’t be getting the gifts that all of my predecessors had been given. And it’s true that the temple leaders were pretty progressive in hiring a woman as their cantor. But there’s no way to deny it now: It’s also true that they figured they could pay their woman cantor less.

Cantorial Fledglings and Their Plumage

My female students dress with verve. Their clothes fit their bodies and suit their temperaments. They dress in ways that enable them to curl up to study, squat to talk to a homeless person eye to eye, or run to catch the subway. - Barbara J. Ostfeld, *Catbird: The Ballad of Barbi Prim*