

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Hazzan Abraham Lopes Cardozo

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu

Introduction

The February 23, 2006 issue of the **New York Times** carried in part the following obituary:

Abraham Cardozo, Sephardic Cantor, Dies at 91

The Rev. Abraham Lopes Cardozo, the longtime cantor of a historic Manhattan synagogue and a major force in recovering and preserving the liturgical music of Spanish and Portuguese Jews, died on Tuesday at Lenox Hill Hospital in Manhattan. He was 91. Mr. Cardozo was associated with Congregation Shearith Israel, also known as the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue, for 60 years. He served as cantor from 1946 to 1984 and was cantor emeritus after retiring. Mr. Cardozo is survived by his wife of 55 years, Irma Robles Lopes Cardozo.

Who was this man who served Congregation Shearith Israel so faithfully for 60 years?

Sketch of Hazzan Cardozo's Life

Note: The material based on Mark I. Wolfson's, Mikveh Israel History Blog, www.mikvehisraelhistory.com. I am indebted to Mr. Wolfson for granting me permission to use it in this article.

Rev. Abraham Lopes Cardozo was born on September 27, 1914. His father, Joseph Lopes Cardozo, was the leader of the boys' choir at the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam. He was also a violinist, and along with Cardozo and his two brothers, the foursome formed a band that played at various gatherings and communal holiday celebrations. They all could play keyboards and also string, reed, and brass instruments. Of course, Bram, as Abraham Cardozo was known, grew up completely immersed in music of all kinds and had a natural talent. He even played piano as a toddler. As he grew, he could play any piece of music he heard by ear.

At age 18 Cardozo earned a degree that qualified him to teach Hebrew from the Ets Haim Seminary in Amsterdam. In 1938 he answered an advertisement for the position of Hazzan placed by the Surinam Congregation Zedek Ve-Shalom. Interestingly enough this ad was placed by his future father-in-law, Judah Robles, who was Parnas of the

synagogue at the time. After much deliberation over different candidates, Abraham Cardozo was chosen because of his credentials. An additional factor that led to his selection was that the salary paid for by the Dutch government and the living conditions provided were appropriate for a single young man. Hazzan Cardozo arrived in Paramaribo, Suriname on September 9, 1939. As it turned out, this appointment saved his life - the rest of his family that had remained in Holland perished in the Holocaust. Throughout his life, he observed Tisha B'Ab as the *Nahalah* (anniversary) for all of his relatives that were murdered, as this is the national Jewish day of mourning.

In 1945, Rev. Cardozo took a six-month leave of absence from his job as Hazzan in Suriname, and headed to New York. The Suriname community was declining in the wake of the war, and he wanted to expand his horizons and look for other opportunities. New York City provided the perfect vibrant Jewish community for him to spread his wings. Of course, Rev. Cardozo found his way to the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue, Congregation Shearith Israel. There, as a visiting Hazzan of a sister synagogue, he was invited to lead services. This led to an offer to join the congregational staff as an Assistant Hazzan, which he accepted. After returning to Suriname to give notice to a very disappointed Mr. Robles, he began his long tenure at Shearith Israel on January 1, 1946.

Immediately on starting as Hazzan, Rev. Cardozo reunited with the daughter of his former Parnas in Suriname, Irma Miriam Robles, who was working in New York and attended Shearith Israel regularly. They shared many of the same friends and over the next few years grew close. In December of 1950 they became engaged, and had a beautiful wedding on March 11, 1951, officiated by Rev. Dr. David de Sola Pool of Shearith Israel, assistant minister Rev. Dr. Louis Gerstein, and Rev. David Jessurun Cardozo, the Rabbi of sister congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia. Of course, the first piece of furniture they acquired for their new home was a piano – a Baldwin Acrosonic upright. The Cardozos had two daughters, Debby and Judy born in 1952 and 1955.

Rev. Cardozo was devoted to and strictly upheld the Spanish and Portuguese minhag, though in private he also appreciated other traditions. In many ways he was a living bridge between the Old World represented by the Amsterdam Sephardi community which was made up of descendants of refugees from the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal, and the New World in the first congregation in America. As the Amsterdam community was being decimated by the Nazis, Cardozo escaped just in time and continued the traditions in the New World. Rabbi Marc Angel, long time Rabbi of Shearith Israel speaking at his funeral in 2006, said that Rev. Cardozo was an ember that survived the ashes of the Holocaust.

Rev. Cardozo's passion in life was Hazzanut, and he enjoyed nothing more than leading the congregation in prayer using the tunes he knew and loved so well. Sadly though, as he was required to strictly maintain the Shearith Israel minhag, he was prevented from introducing some of the other Spanish and Portuguese melodies from the mother synagogue in his native Amsterdam that he so eagerly wanted to keep alive. Though he

was not given the title of Minister of the congregation until late in life, he performed weddings, funerals, and gave eloquent eulogies.

After he retired, he wrote two books, each with an accompanying CD of music. The first was *Sephardic Songs of Praise*, followed a couple of years later by *Selected Sephardic Chants*. Many of his friends collaborated in presenting a petition to Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, nominating Rev. Cardozo for the title of “Knight in the Order of Orange Nassau” for his service during World War II, his preserving the traditions and minhagim as practiced for hundreds of years in Amsterdam, and his loyal and proud representation of the Dutch Jewish Heritage. He was officially knighted in 2000.

In March 2005, Rev. Cardozo fell and broke his hip. Unfortunately, he never fully recovered, and he passed away on February 21, 2006 (23 Shebat 5766) at the age of 92. Hundreds of people came to the synagogue to attend his funeral and pay their respects to this great and humble man and leader of the community for 60 years. Eulogies were given by dozens of leaders, rabbis, colleagues, close friends and family. Rabbi Angel led the hakafot (circuits) around the coffin in a very moving ceremony, after which the coffin was draped with his Talet (prayer shawl).

Mark Wolfson added the following personal anecdote at the end of his article about Hazzan Cardoso.

“I used to lead the Friday night Shabbat service at [Congregation] Mikveh Israel [in Philadelphia]. One time when Rev. Cardozo was visiting for Shabbat at the invitation of Rabbi Gabbai, he led the Friday night service faster than I have ever heard it done. It was so fast, I could hardly follow along. After the service, as I was wishing him a Shabbat Shalom, I remarked on the speed with which he read the service. He replied, with a twinkle in his eye, ‘They don’t call me the Flying Dutchman for nothing!’”



Hazzan Abraham Lopes Cardozo (1914–2006)