Bernhaut …Because

This concerns a remanence of an incident that occurred in 1953 while I was a junior at Weequahic High School in Newark, New Jersey. In 1951 I decided to run for president of my sophomore class. I was running against a friend, Herb Slifer and I lost to him that year and lost to him again in 1952. I clearly remember Herb coming in to my homeroom with him saying “too bad you will also lose this race”. I shrugged and smiled at his confidence.

Now, what was the difference between the first two elections and the third one? I realized that I did not do much campaigning the first two elections. The whole thing was some what of a popularity contest and I really was not that popular nor aggressive in the early contests.

At the same time, there was a very interesting advertisement for a women’s pad. It was called Modess. The ad showed a full page picture of a beautiful woman dressed elegantly and in the lower right hand corner of the ad was ‘Modess, because’. What I did was cut out the ‘Modess’ and tape ‘Bernhaut’ – so it was ‘Bernhaut, because’. I made a couple of dozen copies and asked friends to wear the sign the morning of the election. And that did the trick. I won. I had lost the first two elections and was prepared to lose the third.

At Weequahic High there was a tradition of Torch day. It was the passing of the torch to the in-coming senior year students. I had the honor of passing the torch. At the assembly, I told the following story. “There was a certain rabbi who had the ability to see the future. One of his students was going to play a trick on the rabbi. He would approach the rabbi with a bird in his hand and ask if the bird was alive or dead. If he replied dead, he would open his hand and show the living bird. If he replied alive, he would crush the bird with his hand and show the dead bird. He went to the rabbi and asked him is the bird alive or dead? The rabbi thought for a moment and then replied ‘that depends on you. It’s future is in your hand’. So my fellow students, the future is in your hands.” I made it somewhat dramatic in telling the story by raising my hand, opening and shutting it at the ‘right moment’.

For me, this incident was defining moment for me. I delivered my address with confidence. For the future, it became accepted to me that I should somehow be the president of the various organizations with which I was involved. And so it was.

As far as Herb Slifer was concerned, he never foresaw the possibility

that he would lose. He never got over the loss. He never spoke to me again. When we had class reunions he never attended. And years later he committed suicide. I don’t think the loss precipitated the suicide. It’s just that

What was the great lesson that I learned concerning this incident? Obviously, one should not give up trying. It really boils down to realizing that in order to win the race you have to understand that it’s important to not give up. Many times it is impossible to understand just what was the defining experience. But it is possible to understand that if you don’t ‘play the game’, you will never win.

The role of geography on my life

I’ve been thinking about the role of geography on my life. Some people may attribute the influence of fate – it was b’shert (fated) that such and such an event would occur that would change my very existence. Of course, the apex of b’shertedness (sp) was my building the market research department at Shop-rite/Pathmark and becoming a leading guru of site selection. More about this later.

I will designate the ‘geographic’ influence using “GEO +year” , the first will be GEO-1944. I was born in Newark and the early years were on Spruce Street off the corner of High Street. In 1944 we moved to White Terrace which is a dead-end street off Clinton Place. The block was dominated by ‘goyim’ and naturally, my two best friends were not Jewish – Billy Schnitzler and Bobby Mahr. To understand the importance of GEO-1944 it is important to understand the Hawthorne Avenue was more or less the cultural/religious chasm – living north of Hawthorne Avenue was ‘goyimsville’ and living south was ‘Jewishville’. Around 1946 we move to 27 Wolcott Terrace – a street between Hawthorne Avenue and Nye Avenue – with approximately 15 guys around my age – and only a single non-Jew (Niki Gevis – the Greek). The reality surrounding the move was the fact that my grandmother, Bessie Bernhaut, owned a two family house and what could be better than to live rent-free?

GEO-1945 was the year of the opening of a Chabad cheder (school). I had been going to the Talmud Torah school located on Osborne Terrace. My dad announced to me that I was transferring to the Chabad school. It was a tough deal for me as most of the teachers were refugees from Europe and did not speak much English. And I knew very little Yiddish. So it was a mini-disaster, except for the fact that in the process I met Rabbi Sholom Gordon - the saintly Rabbi (more on Rabbi Gordon later).

In GEO-1945+ I met Joe Tabatchnick. Slichos and the High Holy Days were the rare days that I went to shul with my father. And every year I set between Joe Tabatchnick and my father. Joe would tell me “let me know when you turn 13. You will come to work with me”. And so it was that at the age of 13 I showed up at the Chancellor Avenue store and that is when and where I met Joe’s son Seymour.

MY JOURNEY IN JEWISH MUSIC

Charlie Bernhaut, Cantors World

My own experience in ‘discovering’ Jewish music continually gives me hope that when people are exposed to and/or ‘educated’ to our wonderful ‘Soul Music’, it is never too late to learn to appreciate it. My personal journey in Jewish Music supports this belief.

I was born in 1936 in the Weequahic section of Newark, New Jersey (of ‘Philip Roth’ fame). There were over 50,000 Jews living in our wonderful Jewish ghetto. My high school was 90% Jewish and Hebrew was one of the foreign languages taught there. As a kid I attended Congregation Tifereth Zion on the corner of Clinton Place and Nye Ave. The only time I heard a cantor was on the High Holy Days and that was my first exposure to chazzonus. As a teenager in the early 1950’s, I somehow discovered the cantor at B’nai Abraham – Cantor Abraham Shapiro. His voice captivated me. I occasionally heard Cantor Mills at Oheb Shalom, and that was the extent of my early recollection of chazzonus.

While attending Rutgers University and its Law School, from 1956 to 1962, I discovered the Feenjohn. It was a ‘joint’ located on MacDougal Street in The Village. That’s where I first heard the ‘Mediterranean Sound’, the combination of Israeli, Yiddish, Greek, Middle Eastern music. It was my favorite haunt during those years. After graduating law school I went to Israel to live on a kibbutz for a year and it was there that I heard and learned to love the early Israeli music that had a ‘Jewish sound’ (that now has, sadly, deteriorated to an imitation of American ‘noise’). Upon my return to the states I married and began my career in supermarkets, market research and, eventually as a real estate consultant. But the real genesis of what has become my obsession with Jewish music began with my collection of antique gramophones and victrolas. In the early 60’s I began collecting phonographs and over the years I was offered hundreds of old ’78 recordings that people were ready to discard. Among those hundreds of old records were recordings by Rosenblatt, Kwartin, Hershman, Malavsky, Lebedoff, (and, invariably, there were Caruso records in the collections). I never listened to the recordings, but knew that they were ‘there’.

Now, skip to 1977. I was chairman of a dinner for Simon Wiesenthal. I was in my car listening to the radio when suddenly I heard Jewish music. It was WFMU, and the host, Larry Gordon, who had recently started the radio show, stated that if anyone wanted to make an announcement concerning an upcoming Jewish event, to contact him. When I called him to ask him to publicize the Wiesenthal event, it was b’shert that he invited me to the studio for an interview. After the interview I told him that knew I that I had all those old ’78 recordings and offered to give them to him to play on his program. He declined the offer, but told me that if I wanted to, he would give me a half hour on Friday mornings to play the cantorial and Yiddish records. I was intrigued by the offer – brought an old wind-up phonograph to the studio and used to hold a microphone at the front while the record was playing. This was really ‘where it all started’. It was Larry’s “Jewish and Hebrew Sound” program that eventually became Nachum Segal’s popular program that now dominates Jewish music on the air.

In 1980 I got my own program over WSOU at Seton Hall University, in South Orange, New Jersey. My “Two Hours of Jewish Soul” featured recordings from my collection that now numbers over 15,000 albums of Jewish music. (My work took me on the road where I was able to visit every Jewish record store, Jewish thrift shop, and used record store from Philadelphia to New Haven. I was obsessed with building a unique collection of Jewish music). It was the only radio program in America that featured one hour of cantorial music (the other hour featured Israeli, Yiddish, klezmer, Chassidic, Sephardic, historical and comedy recordings). I also gave very strong commentaries concerning Israel. In 1995, after a rather blunt interview with my friend from JDL condemning Islam and the Arabs, the college received some complaints and I was unceremoniously ‘fired’ from my volunteer program.

In the early 1990’s, as a member of the board of the Highland Park Conservative Temple, I tried to promote cantorial concerts. There was steep opposition: Who would come? We would lose money! It would be a disaster! I was determined to push forward on the idea. I approached my friend who was the president of Pathmark and convinced him to write a letter stating that Pathmark would cover any shortfall. When I presented this to the board, the comment then was – OK, we won’t lose money, but no one will come. I then came up with the idea to approach every congregation in Central New Jersey and offer them a no-lose proposition. If they would promise to at least attempt to sell tickets to their congregants, they could keep half of the ticket price. I got over 35 congregations to join in on the project. Finally, when presented with this program, the board agreed. We ran four very successful annual cantorial concerts in New Brunswick at the State Theater. This was my first exposure to involvement in running cantorial concerts.

Now, let’s skip to the late 90’s. Living in Manhattan. A friend tells me that a young cantor will be giving a lecture on Yossele Rosenblatt at a Friday night service and dinner at the Carlebach Shul. I attend. At the dinner, quite by accident (b’shert?) I sit next to the speaker, Cantor Benny Rogosnitzky. In casual conversation I introduce myself and mention that I was involved with Jewish music. That was that. Several months later, we somehow meet (b’shert?) and he tells me that his shul, The Jewish Center, is interested in running cantorial concerts, but he is meeting some resistance. I laugh, telling him of my own experience and offer to help him in any way that I can. I then attended some of the committee meetings, offering to help by giving them the mailing list of people who had attended my concerts and lists of people who had supported my radio program. I was very strong in my encouragement to proceed with the project. Benny ran several very, very successful annual concerts at The Jewish Center and I was pleased to work with him on those projects.

A few years ago Benny and I decided that we would form Cantors World with the goal of reviving interest in traditional chazzonus. Benny is a most extraordinary young man. In his early 30’s, he has unbounded energy and is totally focused in whatever he undertakes. I am grateful for the beautiful relationship that has developed between us. Although my three children are all older than he is, his ‘youth’ never occurs to me. He is the best partner one could hope to have. And, it is so fortunate that we share the same passion for this ‘Jewish Soul Music’. So, that’s the background of my journey in Jewish music to this point in my life. I am hopeful and optimistic that the journey will take Cantors World to even more satisfying ‘heights’ in touching and educating Jewish Souls to the wonders and beauty of ‘true’ Jewish Soul Music