

# Cantor Matyas Balogh

by Mathias B. Freese

In the Hungarian town of Monor, Cantor Matyas Balogh taught his liturgical prayers to a few bar mitzvah students for very little money. The cantor gave lessons to supplement his meager income, the synagogue providing him with two rooms in the back of the sanctuary. He had an old cast iron stove for heat during the difficult winters and a hot plate. And there was an ice box that kept the butter, cheese and milk reasonably chilled. The cantor always kept some chocolate in the ice box. One wall of his living room was lined with crooked and sagging pine shelves that held his musical arrangements, prayer books bound in goatskin, a picture or two of him with other students at a seminary many years ago; here and there a *tshatsbke* from his travels, a Spanish silver goblet for the Passover seder, an incense box from France, and several postcards from a stay in Vienna, his favorite of all cities. A porcelain mezuzah he bought at the Alhambra in Granada.

As he made breakfast for himself, one egg, only once a week, jam, hard pumpernickel bread and a glass of tea made from leaves, he put a sugar cube between his front teeth and sipped. Cleaning up he always left for mid day as it took away from the pleasure of breakfast. In the morning he did his scales, running through lyrics in his baritone voice which had a low register to it, as if a cello. Now and then the cantor took some honey so as to keep his instrument resonant, tuned and refreshed. On some occasions he might sing to himself a Gershwin tune he'd heard in a cabaret in Vienna. He was a quick learn and very fluent in several languages. Loving Gershwin, he was probably the only cantor in all of Monor if not the entire county who sang a little Gershwin. One of his favorite 78s was Oscar Levant's interpretation of "Rhapsody in Blue." And he was probably as well the only cantor in Monor who read Kafka, his favorite stories "The Burrow" and "In the Penal Colony," all contained in slender literary magazines Rabbi Rosenzweig gave him as a present in Vienna, saying "Kafka speaks to these times."

Life for the cantor had its rhythms and regularities. News over the radio was grim as the Nazis were on the march across Europe, Hitlerian tirades broadcast almost on a daily basis. Hungary was next, the cantor knew. Having traveled as a young student, he considered migrating to Russia, but with its history toward the Jews it was far from a good choice; he thought of Poland,

but like Russia, a land of pogroms. Vienna since *Anschluss* was now Nazified, Hitler's haunt as a young man. The cantor had read *Mein Kampf* underlining with his favorite fountain pen passages that revealed anti-Semitism of an extreme kind. The diary reeked with Jew hatred. Hitler had told Cantor Balogh exactly what he had planned for him. The cantor chose to stay put, to master his fate, if he could while here, in his birthplace, old Monor.

With no relatives alive, the cantor seemed to have friends everywhere, often former students who had learned from him over the years in different congregations. One had emigrated to America, settling in a place called Brooklyn and who periodically regaled the cantor with his adventures in the New World. The cantor kept these letters in an old tin box and from time to time took them out and reread about all the oddities and personal excitements of his former student, Moishe, now situated in an orthodox synagogue in Flatbush, also in Brooklyn. The cantor read beneath the words and sensed how vital and alive life was in America. One sensed that in singing any Gershwin song.

Reading Moishe's letters was like devouring a good piece of chocolate which prompted him to consider walking to town to the shop that made homemade sweets. He had sequestered some money for pleasure as his cost of living as a single man was minimal. At 51 he could stitch his own clothing, iron as well, cook some meals, make a reasonably good goulash, wash his underwear, all the basic needs of a bachelor who had only a few gray strands in his beard which he trimmed back as bushy ones annoyed him. Things out of place vexed the orderly and rational mind of the good cantor.

At the sweet store candies of many kinds were neatly arrayed on paper doilies, piled upon one another like chocolate Mayan temples, others concentrically displayed like Stonehenge, wheels within wheels. A paper label always gave the price by piece or weight. The selective customer could begin with one piece and add increments from there. On the two counters specialties were presented and customers sampled gladly and freely. Cantor Balogh walked about tasting this and that, always coming back to chocolates, assessing talmudically, what treats, given what change he had, might provide the best sustained pleasure. While Christian scholastics had obsessed over the number of angels on a head of a pin, the cantor savored the differing qualities of chocolate, quite the gourmand. And since he didn't like to gobble his food, for food is a major event in Jewish life, the cantor savored everything about life, even down to sucking a charm to its last piquant snap of flavor. He wasn't a connoisseur; if anything, a sensualist.

The cantor observed a woman in her forties, statuesque, her bust

firm, her hands in a muff, glide about the shop, clearly deciding what sweet she might buy. She came his way, paused, “What would you suggest as I can’t seem to make up my mind, they all look so good?”

The cantor was amused. “I prefer chocolate in any shape. Whatever else is added – almond, hazelnut or cherry pieces – are only extra delights. The sweet chocolate in this shop is extraordinary.”

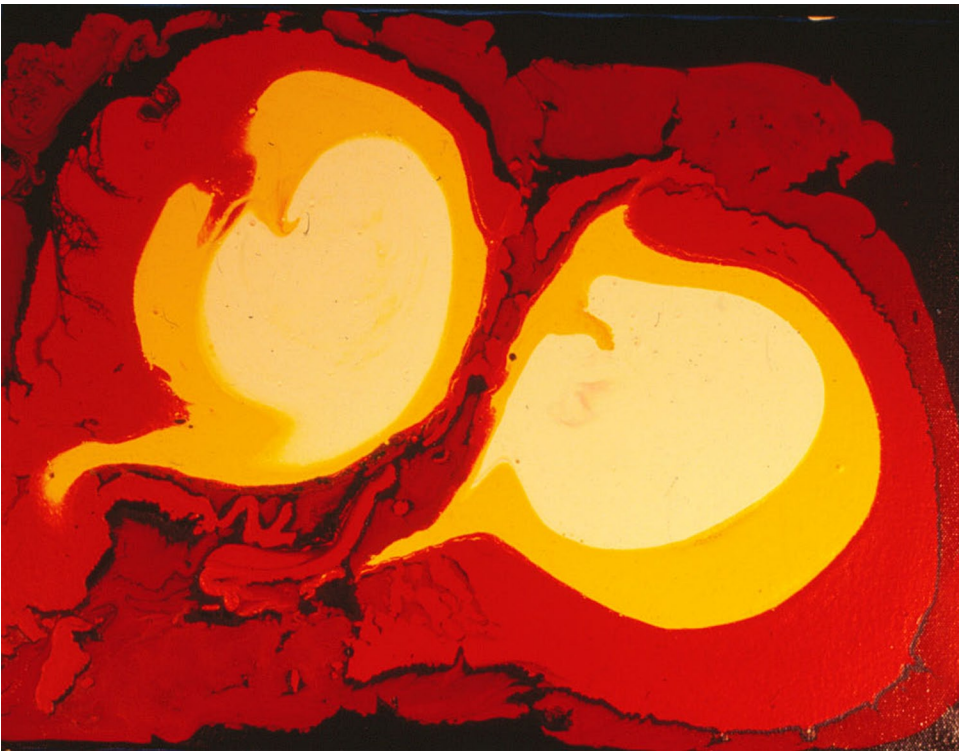
With that the woman asked the confectioner for a selection of chocolate pieces and not to go beyond what might be reasonable.

“May I offer you a piece, sir?”

“Oh, no, no. I’ve had my limit. Thank you, madam.”

“Are you sure?”

The cantor was a bit rusty, not having engaged the female sex for some time now. Quickly, he adapted and asked her if she might have coffee with him. He thought himself abrupt, but loneliness can do that to you, he mused.



Surprisingly, she agreed and down the block they chose a café they both knew and liked.

“And what is your name?”

“Rebecca Katzman.”

“I’m Matyas Balogh.”

“And you told me on our way that you are a cantor at a local synagogue.”

“Yes.”

“And what does a cantor do exactly?”

“We sing in Hebrew.” And he smiled.

Rebecca found that evasively dry if not witty.

“And do you frequent sweet shops?”

“All the time. How else should I keep my voice in shape?”

He enjoyed playing with her. In fact, the cantor was having a delightful time away from liturgy, like being in gay Vienna once more. And it had been a few years since he sat across a mature woman and made small talk.

“What do you do, Rebecca?”

“I work for a law firm as an assistant.”

“That must be very interesting during these times.”

“We don’t do immigration work if that’s what you mean. We are less controversial. It’s all so dry, mortgages, titles, interest rates and the like.”

“Do you like your work?”

“Work is work, Matyas. Real life is afterward, like meeting you in a sweet shop.”

The cantor enjoyed her calling him by his first name, it felt so less abstract.

“So, it sounds to me, Rebecca, that you haven’t as yet found your calling.”

“And you, Matyas, is being a cantor all that you could be?”

“No, it’s not. However, it has its riches. I come from a family of cantors. It was meant to be, I imagine.”

“You mean you couldn’t choose otherwise.”

“In a way I felt obligated to do it and so far it hasn’t been a dreadful experience, not at all. I have managed the discontent.”

“So, we’re not so different, you and I. We put ourselves second – and the years go along and we grow older and one day we become aware that we’re mispending our brief lives.”

“Rebecca, I came to town for a piece of chocolate and now I end up with a philosopher.”

She laughed, her face quite pleasant to the cantor, charming in manner and poise. Her fingers slender, nails polished, he observed her ears were small.

“Matyas,” again his name said warmly, “I think a lot.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I have a mind that struggles to be aware. I observe – that’s more than enough for any human being. It may be our only task in life. Others, of late, regrettably, seem to want to control that – or do away with it completely.”

Her seriousness touched him. “Rebecca,” he said disarmingly, “if the conversation goes on like this, I’ll begin to take notes. You drop ideas on me like gum drops.”

With that, she thrust back her head and laughed, quite infectiously at that. Charmed with her, the cantor easily joined in, both laughed for they were enjoying one another and how pleasant that was for the cantor who could be not a little somber.

“Matyas, lawyers at my work cannot experience what we just did, for certain. As a cantor, after all, you must be filled with anecdotes, jokes, fables, parables, that keep your congregation amused. And your taste in chocolate is impeccable.”

“Rebecca, I sing at weekly services, tutor a little, leaving wisdom to the rabbis.”

“Matyas, I must be off quite soon. Next Wednesday, I’ll be by again for more sweets. Will you be at the shop? Perhaps at about four?”

“And may we come here again for talk and laughter?”

“Of course.”

With that they parted. The cantor relished watching her hourglass figure glide down the street accompanied by one or two prurient thoughts.

During the next few days the cantor thought Rebecca, not liturgy or preparing young boys for their bar mitzvahs. He chuckled when he realized he had eaten three eggs that week, the equivalent of a box of chocolates. And he knew what he was about when he actually had a barely redeemable suit cleaned and pressed. “Katzman, Katzman, I need you like a hole in my head,” he thought, having his evening glass of tea and again treating himself to an extra sugar cube. “I’m smitten,” he said to himself, enjoying how anticipation for their next meeting actually brought a modicum of pleasure to his circumscribed life.

At last it was the day to meet Miss Katzman, and the hours dragged on while he listened impatiently to the croaking altos of his two bar mitzvah students. Finally, he was on the street in his refreshed suit, a tie that took him

10 minutes to knot, polished black shoes, his only dress pair.

Katzman was waiting at the doorway of the sweet shop, again with her muff, for it was cold.

“You look quite debonair, Matyas. Shall we go to our haunt?”

After coffee and a delicate pastry, they began to chat in a more serious vein.

“Are you going to be intense once more, Rebecca?”

“Do you find it troubling to feel my ‘intensity,’ as you call it?”

“On the contrary. When I sing a deeply moving prayer, I’m in a world of my own. All significant music has to be interpreted. I’m always searching for an inflection, a tone that might reveal to me and the listener, the possibly sublime meanings of the lyrics. And if you encourage me, like in some American films I’ve seen (he quickly thought of Alan Jones in “The Firefly”), I may well break into a song in the middle of this very bistro.”

“You don’t worry me, one bit, maestro Matyas. You can sing to me at any time, any place. I dare you.”

So, Cantor Matyas Balogh took a furtive glance about the café and sensed a song might be welcomed by the patrons. But what should it be? A lullaby in Hebrew, an intricate chant from the liturgy (not the place), a little Gershwin, yes, Gershwin.

Boldly now, the cantor took Rebecca’s hand and sang to her “S Wonderful” in that burnished mahoghannied baritone of his. Patrons looked toward the couple, smiling, amused, for these were sad times, oppressively felt.

Crooning to her, the simple lyrics began to make sense to him on other levels and he felt somewhat embarrassed but his creativity, his singing gave panache and he expressed himself to her with undercurrents romantic and yearning.

Rebecca’s face was a kaleidoscope of feelings, and she let herself succumb to the moment and was moved by her cantor friend, her Matyas, “Dear, Dear Matyas,” she actually said to herself, as he sang to her, with those piercing hazel eyes.

When he had finished, she stood with all the rest of the café and clapped. Shortly after, the gracious owner refreshed their coffees and brought tarts to their table in gratitude.

“Matyas, this is the wrong word, but you are a delightful ham.”

“I embarrassed you?”

“The music is so delirious and alive. I didn’t understand all the words for my English is not as good as yours and it would have suffered, no doubt, in translation.”

“You feel America in it. I know it’s hard to sit there and have someone sing to you. So uncomfortable! It was done to me by my father and I would cringe until I grew older and realized that there is much affection in that exchange. Isn’t there, Rebecca?”

“While you flirt with me you are endearing, my Matyas!”

So the cantor and Rebecca reached that point in which they became a couple, although nothing had been said as if the informality of it was to be cherished. Words couldn’t contain it. The cantor knew he had found someone intensely affectionate and with the spice of an exceedingly sharp mind which kept him off balance at times, for Rebecca had an unusually pragmatic worldview—or realistic side, if you will, to her in contrast to his thinking processes, more of a raveled sleeve than anything else. Gently Rebecca rubbed his nose against the way things are while he was off into what they could be. Matyas Gershwin had the world while Rebecca tangoed with it, silky long-limbed connections and then quick and rapid turns, swirls and swerves away from it. Rebecca always partnered well with what *is*. The cantor could abide all this for she knew his need – the cantor needed to be *felt*.

Throughout the fall months the couple walked the by-ways of small Monor, supped at restaurants previously unknown to each, saw a few movies and strolled the parks now littered with dead leaves, harbinger of the wintry months ahead. The newspapers and radio propagandized while the fascist Arrow Cross party grew stronger and bolder each day. Monor’s Jews knew the time was at hand. The lovers avoided in their conversation anything that might intrude upon their dream state. It was a subtle agreement they had come upon while the world was preparing for invasions, death and dying. Poland had been invaded in 1939. The Blitz was ending in England. The eastern European countries slavishly mimicked the Nazis so to keep some marginal measure of national sovereignty. Admiral Horthy was doing just that. Any aware person understood full well that the civilized world was collapsing.

Rebecca had decided to shatter the bubble they had dwelled in these past few months. At some profound level, she realized, as a woman, she had to manage this dreamy relationship, configure it, for Matyas seemed suspect. Was he aware?

At dinner one night, she destroyed it all. Her belief was that Matyas, now her lover, would prove durable.

“My dear Matyas, I’ve many things to tell you this night. Are you prepared?”

“Prepared,’ I don’t know what that really means. Are you hinting at something threatening to our relationship?”

“Not exactly. Allow me to tell you more about my story, for you and I have colluded in not exploring that. I know so very much more about your past than you know about mine.”

“I have learned not to ask human beings such questions. However, you are about to tell me of your dark and shadowy past, a long line of lovers, one a Magyar prince, that you have an illegitimate child; that you were a streetwalker in Vienna and are now contrite.”

“What fantasies! What a perverse imagination – from a cantor as yet.”

“If you want me to feel guilt, I don’t. I gave up guilt many, many years ago. It is a wasteful emotion. By the by, never forget, a cantor is a man.”

“Some guilt is not a bad thing.”

“Perhaps. But I’m not a sinner. I am lustful in bed with you. Should I feel guilt about all our gymnastics?”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Good. Now to your point.”

Rebecca smiled. Gathering up her intent, she began. “My parents, my sister and brother, many of my cousins are either dead or in concentration camps. Although born in Hungary, my father was a businessman and for awhile settled with our family in Poland. It was there that his business was confiscated by the Nazis. Before we were interned, he gave each of us what monies he had and told us to flee Poland. I don’t know if Sophie and Paul are alive as father shrewdly told us to separate and take different directions. I returned to Monor. I hide in the open spaces of this closed society. I told you my last name because you are a Jew, a cantor no less. To remain a human being I have to trust now and then. In these past few months I have behaved recklessly. It’s hard to give up being free.”

“And what do you mean by all this?”

“I cannot afford to be happy. Pleasure will not be mine for many years. I can only afford a piece or two of chocolate in life. You’re now in my life and I was caught off guard. No Jew, Matyas, can afford to do that. I worry about you in that ‘cave’ of yours behind the synagogue. They’ll come for you there, in time. What will you do? Lace up your tefillin and do a jig for them? Or perhaps sing ‘S Wonderful’ to the arresting officer.”

The cantor was taken aback.. So much thrown at him in such a heavy way, part criticism, part biography, part urgency – even scolding, an amalgam of care and concern, all with an electric charge to it. A warning. An alarm. A call to reason and action. A shaming of how supposedly indifferent he was to the world about him.

“‘S Wonderful’ has to be left out of it, Rebecca. Do not use it as a weapon against me.”

“Yes, not a little harsh. I used a very dear moment about us against you. I just sense over these passionate few months that we have overlooked these dreadful times.”

“What is to be done? you say. I’ve my world and it’s threatened. I know that very well, believe me. I know the future will be bleak for me – and you. Should I not make merry? Should I give up my love for you? Should I give you up entirely and take on a profound level of despair as my companion? Rebecca, is depression the answer? I realize prayer is not the way. I have loved, abiding, profound. Is this not the way?”

“I wasn’t ready for such an answer. I may have misread you because I was fearful, and you can be cavalier. Matyas, I’ve learned to be alone. In that, I find strength. Have you learned that as well?”

“I’ll share what I can of what is very private to me. Struggle to be patient as I tell you this.”

Rebecca drew close. Was she to hear intimacies that she couldn’t deal with? But she knew, given her past, all was old in human nature.

“I’ve skirted relationships all these years because I was a fool. I shunned affection, although I craved and desired it. I avoided love because I had doubts about my own capacity not only to experience it but to return it as well. And, Rebecca, it was all a self-made charade. We lie to ourselves each day. We are made up of lies, not truths. Truths, as you know, are often unbearable. How should I say this? Man fears nighttime. And he loves daytime. Yet we often flee more from the light than the dark.”

Here the cantor paused, filled both their cups with tea. Went on.

“You and I are on a lark. Our ship is love and our feelings sail. We need no direction in these times. The compass is broken. I’m not a simple cantor lost in his studies. There are hundreds of cantors all across Europe’s shtetls who will be wiped out – blessed be their souls – because they find truth and love in their teachings, books and prayers. Who am I to judge? I have found love which really, Rebecca, if we look at it clearly, is meaning. Love is meaning. I’m alone because, like you, I know who I am, what or what not can be exposed to me, what I can or cannot realize or be aware of. Tonight you thought you had pricked my bubble, but there never was one to begin with. I’ve lived, coupled and loved you these rare and precious few months, free of illusions, totally aware of our shared folly and how precarious all this is.”

Here Matyas sipped his tea, smiled at Rebecca, for he had his say so far.

“I’m overwhelmed, Matyas. You have said so much for both of us. In a way you’ve stated eloquently what our love is, for I thought it was indifference on your part, but it’s commitment, isn’t it, Matyas?”

Raising his cup, Matyas said, “I love you in ways I hope to imagine for I would die if any harm came to you. I love you because you’ve become a part of myself. Can you grasp these awkward words?”

Rebecca placed her hand upon his.

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The lark continued. Love making now was urgent, febrile, intensely all consuming as if the moment couldn’t be sustained. They both desired duration, above all, of time profoundly felt and experienced. The time of chronology only made them anxious for events were worsening – Jews were being gathered and herded to be sent west to hell. Horthy’s government actively worked with the Nazis to that end. Synagogues were ransacked, looted and set on fire. And the first issuance of yellow stars began, what Matyas called his “gold star,” as if a grade of excellence.

Meetings between them were now constricted, either her small studio or his “cave.” When they made love, it was neither sex nor lust but appeared in tender coupling. Both understood very well, though unspoken, for that was the magic of it, that in their love-making there was a sense of search, for that explosive moment in which the outer world shattered and vanished. What was craved was an experience, a mutual event between them that signified their oneness and thereby revealed what was essential to each as lover and individual. At moments Rebecca felt this rapture, an inordinate closeness for self and other; at moments Matyas was ravaged by a radical sense of endearment for Rebecca, quite explosive. Each was now sharing an extraordinary awareness of the other.

Early snow as Rebecca hurried through the cramped village streets of Monor with her groceries as she was to make dinner in their “cave” this evening. She knew at once when she saw the synagogue doors swung open. Rushing through the aisles of the sanctuary, pews overturned, the eternal light torn from its chain, she made her frenetic way to the back door that led to Matyas’ rooms.

His small living room was a shambles – shelving and books scattered about, picture frames shattered, his tea service now in pieces. And Matyas was not here. Gone. Rebecca sat down on his one soft chair. Taken away no doubt, she thought, the soldiers had destroyed what they could.

Matyas’ ancient tefillin passed down to him on his bar mitzvah by

his father were strewn across the floor, the leather boxes smashed and the straps creased probably by boots crushing them. His tallis was in a corner, now a wet clot of snow and mud. As Rebecca's eyes desperately grazed about the room she saw a letter-sized envelope, spared, angling out from two books. She retrieved it and on its face it read, in English, perhaps meant to confuse the Arrow Cross, "Rebecca, for you."

Sitting down, she opened the note. It began with Gershwin. "S Wonderful! 'S Marvelous! That you should care for me."

Dearest –

This note was written days before I was taken away. It's the end of our lark. Probably, if they haven't torn it up, by the time your eyes read it, I'm on a train to Poland or Germany. I will not be back. Maybe as I speed toward my fate I'll give up being a cantor and become a rabbi. No more Gershwin for me.

All that I can say to you has been said by my flesh, my hands, my face, our joining together as one. Words carry no freight in this instance. You once asked me if I was alone. Well, I think not. I have you in heart and mind and you comfort me, despair is lifted. You are a psalm for me to utter in the darkness. All of us must die in some fashion, but not all of us have lived as lovingly, as deeply as I have in your presence, in your arms, in your embrace.

Survive for both of us! Live, my darling.

Your loving,  
Matyas

Rebecca rose from her seat with his letter in hand, but as she went for the door she stopped herself, and turned. Looking about the disarray, she saw Matyas everywhere – torn pictures of him in seminary; his goatskin siddurs that the Arrow Cross urinated on; the porcelain mezuzah, now splintered, he had shown her on her first visit; she noticed the postcards from Vienna and the shattered demi-tasse cup he had bought there; she traced with her fingers the rings left on his table by his coffee cup; and she was pained at the crinkled black papers used for chocolate which he had treasured for some reason. A slew of journals, newspapers and magazines littered the floor, reeking from piss.

She looked again as if it were for the first time about his quarters. A

small box filled with yomicas and tallises for his students soaked in ink; his favorite fountain pen, an American Schaefer purchased in France, was snapped in two, its nib pushed in; several books by Freud, especially his favorite, he had told her, *Moses and Monotheism*, were shredded, their pages strewn about; a tarot deck that Matyas could interpret; again postcards with pictures of Michelangelo's "David," Seurat's "Sunday on the Grand Jatte," which he thought simply wonderful, and the Eiffel Tower among others, had ink blotches on them; a pink rubberball for his students to play "catch" between lessons; an old chess set made in Jerusalem, he had explained, with male figures of scholars, Maimonides as king, the kings and queens with broken heads; a book by Spinoza, another by Melville, actually set on fire, some pages charred; a glass paperweight in the shape of a Mogen David, millefiore, from Italy, looked as if smashed with a hammer; an untouched, new book of stamps, for he was always corresponding with former students and finally a profile shot of George Gershwin in a mahogany frame – his nose extended with crayon to accentuate it, one crinkled black candy paper glued to the top and the date they had first met inked in on its bottom. All this was not as remarkable as knowing he could speak five languages, write in three, or quote long passages from Byron's *Don Juan* as he often did in bed with her.

Leaving everything aside except for the letter and the dated chocolate paper, Rebecca cherished the room for a moment, for it contained everything she would ever need to remember about her cantor.