

Revisiting a Forgotten Jewish Music Treasure in Philadelphia

By Edwin Seroussi

In the spring of 2019, as a fellow at the Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania I was fortunate to meet, casually, Dr. Rabbi Jonathan Rosenbaum, who was introduced as President Emeritus of Gratz College. Hearing “Gratz College” I jumped on the spot and asked him “what about the Mandell Collection of Jewish Music.” Surprised by my reaction, I explained to Dr. Rosenbaum that for us, veteran scholars of Jewish music, the name “Mandell” is legendary. “Frankly,” he responded, “I was not aware that the collection was so significant.”



Eric Mandell

Indeed, Eric Mandell (1902-1988) was well-known among students of Jewish music as one of the prominent collectors and scholars in the field. Yet, twenty or even more years ago, he vanished from the horizon of the Jewish music scene. Not by design or by any deliberate decision he disappeared. There was simply no public interest invested in his endeavors at the institutions where this German-American cantor, composer (most American congregations sing his “Ahavat ‘olam” without knowing who its author was), choirmaster and avid memorializer of synagogue music left a significant imprint, primarily Gratz College in Melrose Park, Philadelphia. This forgetfulness is understandable in the context of American Jewry’s changing priorities, including its musical ones. Mandell’s collection was a repository of silent sounds from a forgotten era, no matter if that era was just only one or two generations ago. Ritual music aesthetics in Jewish America moved at the speed of light and a thick layer of dust rapidly covered the memory of Mandell and his legacy.



The Mandell Collection in Gratz College

Few weeks after my acquaintance with Rabbi Rosenbaum, I visited Gratz. What I saw was dismaying. A relatively medium-size locked room housed one of the most important treasures of Jewish musical culture. Partially visible due to boxes scattered on the floor and covered by numerous pieces of audio equipment and furniture that served the discontinued music program of the college, my eye immediately caught, by sheer chance, uncatalogued manuscript volumes lying randomly on top of a stack of unrelated materials. These manuscripts were the legacy of cantor Maier Levi of Esslingen, one of the major and earliest (1850-1860s) repositories of traditional southern German Jewish liturgy. And, I knew all too well why they were on top of the stacks. About the same time (April 2019), the Jewish Music Research Centre of Hebrew University had published a work based on these manuscripts, *Between Tradition and Modernity: The High Holy Days Melodies of Minhag Ashkenaz According to Ḥazzan Maier Levi of Esslingen* by Dr. Geoffrey Goldberg who had identified them at Gratz and studied them in the late 1990s. Where he left them then, there they remained untouched for more than two decades.



From Manuscripts of Maier Levi of Esslingen

These remarks do not mean that Gratz College did not judiciously take care of the Mandell Collection since 1970. Quite the contrary. The college was well aware of the musical treasures bequeathed to its library and cared for it. In its new premises, inaugurated in 1989, a special room housing the Mandell collection was designed with proper temperature and humidity controls as well as security locks. The printed books section of the Mandell collection was catalogued and can be searched through the online catalogue of Gratz's Library.

As my 2019 stay in the USA came to an end without making any more progress, I returned to Israel hoping that the initial dialogue with Gratz would bear fruits in a not too distant future. Then Covid came, and our existence was placed on hold. However, in November 2021, still under the "Covid regime," I was fortunate to return to Philadelphia. In the meantime, a new President was installed at Gratz, Prof. Zev Eleff. During our first encounter, Prof. Eleff immediately recognized that he is in charge of a precious treasure and that this gift needs urgent care. Above all, he envisioned that the import of the Mandell collection for scholars, students, educators and artists demands immediate digitizing in order to democratize it by allowing universal access, including in Germany, where the name of Mandell is not foreign to Jewish music and culture devotees. Gratz has already received a major gift from the Kort Foundation for this purpose.



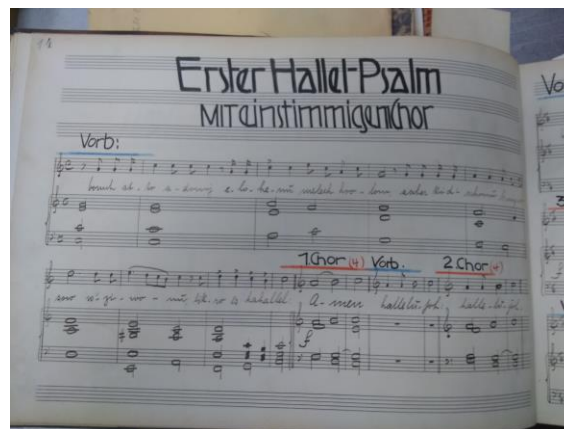
From Mandell Collection

What baffled me from the outset was why this most valuable and unique section of the Mandell collection, manuscripts, was not catalogued for half a century. The precarious and disordered state of these materials led me to focus on them and sure enough, one astonishing discovery followed another leaving me at times astounded. I shall mention only one case out of many that speaks scores about this collection and its destiny.



Volumes of Music compiled by Hugo Chaim Adler

On the first day at Gratz, out of the corner of my eye I noticed four lavishly-bound large manuscript volumes. Dated 1928 these volumes contained music compiled by cantor and composer Hugo Chaim Adler (1894-1955) for the Haupt-Synagogue of Mannheim, where he was the *Oberkantor* (Chief Cantor) for two decades preceding World War II. Seeing these volumes, I did not waste a minute getting in touch with his son, the distinguished American composer Prof. Samuel Adler. Sam was stunned upon hearing the news. He knew his father had given these volumes to Mandell upon his arrival to America in 1941, after astoundingly rescuing them a few days after Kristallnacht from the devastated synagogue in Mannheim, sneaking in through subterranean secret paths under the noses of Nazi soldiers risking his life and the life of his ten-year-old son Sam who assisted him.

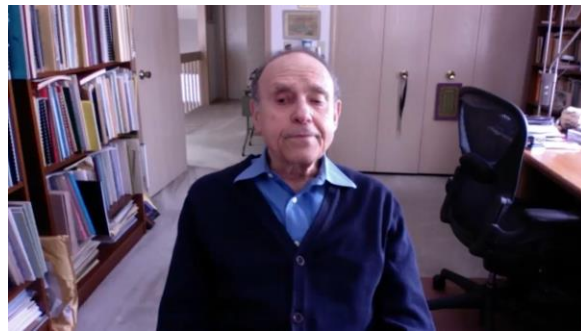


Score by Hugo Chaim Adler

Rumors about a mysterious fire at the old Gratz College that may have destroyed the volumes coupled with the amnesia mentioned in the title of this report led Sam to believe that his father's precious scores for which he as a

child and his father almost paid for with their lives were gone forever. This story speaks volumes about the American Jewish renunciation to the past even in the Information Age. Gratz properly kept Hugo Adler's invaluable volumes for eight decades. Scholar Elliot Kahn, former music librarian at JTS, mentioned them in a footnote in *Musica Judaica* (15 [2000/1], p. 53, n. 16). And yet, tragically, they were considered lost to the person who cared most about them throughout his life.

By returning these volumes to the attention of 93-year old Samuel Adler we fulfilled an important commandment (Deuteronomy 26, 1-3, slightly edited) "If you see your fellow Israelite's *manuscript* straying, do not ignore it but be sure to take it back to its owner. If they do not live near you or if you do not know who owns it, take it home with you and keep it until they come looking for it. Then give it back. Do the same if you find...anything else they have lost. Do not ignore it." If this is all we shall accomplish by returning the Mandell collection to the spotlight, *dayyeinu*, we did something.



Composer Prof. Samuel Adler in Documentary