



“An Evening with Israel Alter” – November 7th, 2023, 7.30pm

Lecture: Dr. Peter Schulze

On this "Evening with Israel Alter" I will look with you at 10 years of Alter's life, the years 1925 to 1935, in which he worked as Oberkantor of the synagogue in Hanover, performed at numerous concerts at home and abroad and received much attention with vocal recordings.

In March 1925, the “Nachrichtenblatt für die Synagogengemeinde Hannover” had the following announcement on the first page: "As we learn, Mr. Israel Alter from Vienna will be conducting the service in the synagogue on a trial basis on Friday evening (March 13th) and on Saturday morning (March 14th). On Sunday morning (March 15th) at 11 a.m. there will be a recital of selected prayers for High Holidays. The synagogue is heated."

Gerson Linhardt, the long-time (since 1892) senior cantor of the Hanover congregation, had asked to be retired for reasons of age (he was 69) - and named Israel Alter as a possible successor.

Alter's appearance in Hanover went well - his test lectures drew "extraordinary applause on all sides": "Mr. Alter," wrote the Nachrichtenblatt, "a likeable, youthful appearance, has an exceptionally rich vocal range. His piano is heartwarmingly pure, his forto has a wonderful fullness of sound. Solid Jewish knowledge enables him to give every word the emphasis it deserves without sacrificing the word to the sound. Mr. Alter made a deep impression on the listeners and gave us a few hours of pure consecration. It is not yet clear whether an engagement will come about. In any case, it would be very welcome if our congregation would win over this important, promising force."

Those responsible in the community were determined to do this, especially the first head, Joseph Berliner; the photo shows him with his brothers Manfred (right) and Emil, the inventor of the microphone and disc who lives in the USA, on a visit to his hometown of Hanover. Joseph Berliner had personally traveled to Vienna to hear Alter there and had arranged for the invitation to Hanover. After Alter's trial lectures, the council of the synagogue community decided in a "confidential meeting" (on March 26, 1925) "to continue the negotiations with the cantor Israel Alter, Vienna".

A contract that was extremely favorable for Israel Alter was agreed upon: Alter became a "Kultusbeamter" of the synagogue community for life, with a high monthly salary and free apartment; in return he had to "perform the duties of the senior cantor whenever the public service took place", but was exempt from praying on normal weekdays. He was allowed to attend funerals, weddings and family celebrations and keep the fees collected.

According to the law on the legal relationships of Jews from 1842, which dates back to the time of the Kingdom of Hanover - this law also applied unchanged in the Prussian province of Hanover - Alter's appointment as Oberkantor of the Hanover synagogue community required confirmation by the government, and the government commissioned as its expert Landrabbiner Dr. Samuel Freund, Alter's future superior, to examine the designated cantor. After Freund had "found his knowledge to be sufficient" and reported accordingly to the government, they gave the official confirmation of the new "Oberkantor".

Who was the young man who was called to Hanover to succeed the long-time cantor Linhardt and to lead and shape the services in the synagogue?

Israel Alter, born in September 1901, came from Lemberg, the capital of Galicia and Lodomeria, crown land of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As one of eight children, he grew up in the "strictly Orthodox atmosphere" of a family deeply rooted in Jewish traditions. The grandfather served as community rabbi for many years, and an older brother served as Av Beth Din, chairman of the local rabbinical court.

Israel Alter later reported that when he was "seven or eight years old, he was known as a good little singer who held small church services as a kind of curiosity."

After the outbreak of war in August 1914, the family fled to Vienna from the advancing soldiers of Tsarist Russia. There, says Alter, "I began to educate myself a little musically." In 1920, Alter began studying music and singing at the Vienna State Academy of Music and Performing Arts and prepared himself for work as a cantor as a student of cantor Isaak Halperin.

Just one year later, in 1921, Alter, barely 20 years old, received a position as head cantor at the Brigittenau Temple in Vienna's 20th district, which enabled him to support his family - Alter had married Anna Brenner from Lemberg in the same year and his son Eleazar was born in February 1923 - and he continued his studies at the academy - until he was appointed cantor of the Hanover synagogue in 1925.

It was not a given that the venerable community of Hanover, represented by Joseph Berliner, and the young man Israel Alter came together.

On the one hand, there was a synagogue community whose traditional statutes and self-image from the 19th century continue to have an effect. An example: In the Hanover community, the "Aufnahmeprinzip" still applied in the 1920s, with the result that only 20% of the Jews had the right to vote in the community, while everyone else, especially women and younger people, was denied participation. This was particularly true for the members of Eastern Jewish families, from whom local residents kept their distance, and also for the few supporters of the Zionist movement. The Hanover community was one of the largest German communities with more than 5,500 members and saw itself as a "Einheitsgemeinde", but the Hanover synagogue no longer united the entire Jewish community or even a large part of the Jewish community for a long time.

And on the other side there is Israel Alter, then 23 years old, a young man influenced by the traditions of Eastern European Judaism and with sympathies for the Zionist idea.

The Hanover community and Israel Alter - a surprising partnership! I believe that Alter's call to Hanover followed a necessity, one could also say, a vision: the leaders of the congregation wanted to preserve the traditional rite, last modified in 1870, in a synagogue without an organ, as an offer to the strictly religious worshipers - and they wished a cantor whose vocal means and personal way of praying in dialogue with the choir of mens' and boys' voices would make the service attractive to free-minded visitors - even to those who were no longer able to follow the Hebrew words of the prayers.

The congregation's board, led by Joseph Berliner, was aware that after the departure of Cantor Linhardt, it had to be possible to make the service both traditional and celebratory and artistic, so that it would appeal to and captivate every visitor, or let's say: many visitors.

This was the challenge for the new cantor Israel Alter.

At the beginning of June 1925, Israel Alter came to Hanover, where he initially moved into the Central Hotel at the train station.

Let's accompany the new cantor on a tour of the synagogue, his future workplace.

The New Synagogue, built according to plans by the architect Edwin Oppler, has served as a prayer house for the local community since 1870. The release of the building on a central square in Calenberger Neustadt was a symbolic reminder of the entry of Hanover's Jews into urban society in the second half of the 19th century.

We climb the steps to the entrance, enter, cross the anteroom and are located in the main room of the synagogue, next to the Almemor, and after a few steps, stand in front of the cantor's place, with a view of the sermon pulpit and the Torah shrine behind it, climb the steps and now look from the rabbi's place into the synagogue room, with 650 men's seats on the ground floor and 450 women's seats in the galleries - this space had to be filled by the voice of the cantor - and also the choir - whose place was the choir gallery above the western women's gallery.

Israel Alter began his service in the synagogue on Shabat "Nasso", Siwan 14, 5685 / June 5, 1925, a service with a blessing from the community's kohanim.

The Nachrichtenblatt wrote: "We extend our warm welcome to Oberkantor Israel Alter! May his work bless him and our community!"

The hopes placed in the new cantor were quickly fulfilled: Alter had "given the congregation wonderful holiday services," one could read after the High Holidays of 5686, in September and October 1925.

Alter "filled the huge space of the synagogue with his magnificent tenor voice with such mastery that the old words took on new form," later remembered rabbi Emil Schorsch, who had been working in Hanover since 1927.

We hear a first historical sound document, the "Sch'ma Yisroel" by Israel Alter, with choir and organ accompaniment, recorded at Lindström-studio in Berlin on August 19, 1929.

In the meantime, Alter's wife Anna and their son Eleazar had also arrived in Hanover, and the Alter family moved into the official apartment allocated to them on the first floor of the Gemeindehaus at Ohestrasse (the photo of the house is from 1962). From Ohestrasse it wasn't far to the synagogue, a 10-minute walk.

In his first few months in Hanover, Alter not only officiated in the synagogue, but also took part as cantor at festive events in the community, such as the ceremonial farewell to his predecessor Linhardt.

At the same time, Alter appeared at events organized by Jewish clubs, as well as Zionist associations such as the Jewish National Fund and the Bar Kochba sports club.

And as a concert singer, he was the soloist of an event with "sacred and secular songs" in the concert hall. His performance received the highest marks in the "Hannoversche Anzeiger": "I. Alter's, the head cantor's at the local synagogue, vocal qualities are so unusual and promising that the idea of introducing him to a larger audience in the concert hall, outside of the religious rites, can be called very lucky. More or less everything in this concert revolved around this tenor, who was featured extensively in Hebrew celebratory songs and in arias by Mozart, Meyerbeer and Puccini. The magic of this velvety-soft, wonderfully timbred organ was also revealed to lay persons who could see the full power and beauty of the Hebrew songs. It is astonishing how confidently Mr. Alter grasps and brings out the characteristics of an aria by Mozart, Meyerbeer and Puccini. Mozart's 'Per pietà' is particularly highlighted as a vocal achievement of the very first order. Lightness of approach, blooming beauty and warmth of tone combined with great stylistic confidence and high musicality." Alter had arrived in the Hanover public.

There was a clause in Alter's contract according to which he was free to "participate in public musical performances of a serious nature", in other words: Alter was allowed to work as a concert singer as long as there was no "interference with (his) official duties" as head cantor.

Israel Alter presented himself on postcards as an interpreter of synagogue songs, mixed musical programs and secular music. Alter didn't have to wait long for invitations from home and abroad.

Using the year 1928 as an example: We see a - probably incomplete - compilation of Israel Alter's concerts. Hanover's main train station becomes the starting point for trips to performances in Munich, Riga and Hamburg, Wiesbaden and Dortmund, Frankfurt and Amsterdam, Kassel, Rostock and Essen.

In Wiesbaden, Alter is a featured soloist at a concert of "worship songs" organized by the local synagogue choir.

In Frankfurt, Alter gives a concert in favor of the Hebrew theater "Habima", with opera arias, religious chants and Yiddish songs; here as well as in other places, supported by a printed program with text reproductions of the opera arias as well as translations of Hebrew and Yiddish song lyrics for the listeners. - Alter's concerts are often in four languages: you can hear Alter singing German, Italian, Yiddish and of course Hebrew.

At the concert in Amsterdam, Israel Alter will be accompanied on the piano by John Mandelbrod, director of the Hanover Synagogue Choir, as well as at another appearance in the New Theater in Frankfurt, at the invitation of the Zionist Women's Group, and at a concert in Dortmund.

Israel Alter 1928 performs repeatedly in Munich, Hamburg, Dortmund and Frankfurt. - As already said: my list of Alter concerts in the year mentioned is not complete.

Among the songs presented by Alter at numerous concerts was his own composition: Ribono shel olom = Lord of the World, arranged by John Mandelbrod - we see the sheet music print, London 1934, with a personal dedication to his mother: "At the cradle you sang / Mother, many small songs for me, / Thank you if I have succeeded / in being a bearer of this art."

Please listen to Alter's "Ribono shel Olom", date and place of recording unknown

Alter didn't just perform in large cities, but also in the region. An example: Alter's "concert evening" in Hameln, on December 15, 1927, in the hall of the hotel "Unter den Linden".

At this point we should not forget to mention Alter and Mandelbrod's concert tour to the USA, a challenge for both and a sensation for the Hanover Jewish community. The Nachrichtenblatt wrote: "Oberkantor Alter will not be in Hanover from February 20th to April 4th. He will begin his trip to America on the ship 'Dresden' accompanied by Mr. John Mandelbrod. On March 5th he will have his first concert in New York at Carnegie Hall."

The concert at the start of the tour through the USA with performances in Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia and elsewhere was recognized in the American press: New Yorker Staats-Zeitung: "Mr. Alter combines an excellent natural voice of unusual beauty with artistic ability of a very high degree." Forward: "His voice is a pearl of unusual power. When he sings, you feel that he feels and you are moved by him. He is a poet, an artist." New York Times: "He succeeded in creating an almost mystical atmosphere, and the sincerity of his inner movement was the most impressive part of the evening." Morning Telegraph: "A cantor called to take the place once held by men like Rosenblatt and Sirota." At the end of the trip, according to "Forward", there was another appearance at Carnegie Hall in New York.

Back in Hanover, Alter and Mandelbrod reported on their "impressions and experiences in America" to a large audience at the Jewish Youth Association.

The question arises: Does Israel Alter, the busy senior cantor of the synagogue community and sought-after concert singer at home and abroad, still have time for a private life?

Sometimes yes, as a flash photo at a celebration in Alter's apartment, perhaps in 1927, shows. We see Israel Alter with his son Eleazar on his lap, behind him his wife Anna (daughter Klara, born in 1926, already asleep, I assume) - in the middle of young people: the circle of friends of Hermann and David Sobel, brothers of Anna Alter, brothers-in-law of Israel Alter.

Both brothers came to Hanover with the Alter family and worked here as commercial employees until Hermann Sobel founded a laundry mail-order business in 1930, in which David Sobel worked as a manager and accountant. Hermann and David Sobel lived as subtenants at Alter's. - So much (or so little) about the family and house father Israel Alter.

We talked about the cantor and the concert singer Israel Alter - and we have to talk about the record star. Already in the fall of 1925 - after a concert in Berlin - the local Lindström AG had offered Alter a recording contract, combined with high monthly payments. From then on, Alter regularly traveled to Berlin to record in Lindström's studio. Recordings were released under the "Parlophon" label, such as "R'zeh" and "Moas zur", recordings by Israel Alter with choir, organ and harp under the direction of Leo Kopf.

From 1931 onwards, Alter also recorded secular songs, for example "Das Lied von uns'rer Liebe Glück" and "O ssag', war es nur ein Traum?", compositions by Franz Liszt. And in 1932 Lindström wrote that they now wanted to look for stage engagements: Alter was supposed to take part in opera performances as a guest star - but the political upheaval, the takeover of government by Hitler and the National Socialists in alliance with the Nationalists, meant that these plans were scrapped; Lindström stopped selling discs with Hebrew songs and no longer brought Alter's new recordings of secular music onto the market.

In the spring of 1933, the Nazi threat to Jewish life directly affected the Alter family. On Ohestrass - we see a model of the community center with Alter's apartment on the first floor - there was a clash with SA men who wanted to attack the Jewish kindergarten behind the community center. Apparently - we don't know exactly what happened - David Sobel and his friends stood protectively in front of the kindergarten and the children. Afterwards, David Sobel had to fear being imprisoned by the SA - he left Germany "head over heels" and fled first to Vienna and later to Palestine. I assume that at that time Israel and Anna Alter also began to think about their future and that of their children.

First, however, Israel Alter fulfilled his duties as head cantor of the synagogue, which in 1933 and thereafter, in view of the increasing exclusion and disenfranchisement of the Jewish population, again became a meeting place, a home for the community - also a place for cultural events, such as on February 24, 1934, when Israel Alter and John Mandelbrod gave a concert in the synagogue for the benefit of Jewish welfare - and on May 20, 1935, when the contemporary oratorio "Balak and Bilam" by Hugo Adler was performed in the synagogue, with Alter and Mandelbrod participating, with choir and orchestra.

Alter was still invited to concert appearances elsewhere, although - in view of the exclusion of Jews from cultural life - only from Jewish communities or the Jewish Cultural Association - an example: Berlin, Synagogue Oranienburger Straße, December 25, 1934 - performance of the oratorio "Samson" by Handel - on Handel's 250th birthday, with Alter in the title role, in front of several thousand listeners.

We hear a last historical sound document, the "El mole rachamim", recorded at Lindström in Berlin on January 20, 1930, released on record by "Parlophon" (P. 9453-II) - we hear the voice of Israel Alter, without accompaniment

In 1935, Israel Alter had the opportunity to leave Germany and find a new, and above all, safe home with his family in South Africa. I don't know how contact with the Jewish community in Johannesburg came about. What is known is that Israel Alter traveled to Johannesburg in July 1935 for a concert and rehearsal lectures in the synagogue. With the promise that he would come back to Johannesburg with his family before the High Holidays, he returned to Hanover for a short time to say goodbye and quickly dissolve his household.

On August 16th and 17th, Israel Alter appeared before the Hanover congregation one last time as a cantor. Landrabbiner Freund spoke farewell words and honored Alter as the man who "for a full decade guarded the precious treasure (of singing) in an exemplary manner and embellished our worship services with the outstanding gifts of his voice and his spirit."

On August 21st, Israel and Anna Alter left Hanover with their children Eleazar and Klara and drove to Southampton, from where they began the journey to Cape Town and on to Johannesburg.

In his luggage, Israel Alter took numerous records with him, including test recordings, which have been preserved and are now part of the collection of this house, the Villa Seligmann. After 1945, Alter's synagogue songs from the 1920s appeared again on records. They are more than historical sound documents - they are evidence of a Jewish culture that the cantor and concert singer Israel Alter helped to shape, including in this city, in Hanover - and which was destroyed during the Shoah.