



photo courtesy of Svetlana Portnyansky

SVETLANA PORTNYANSKY

cantorial ambassador

BY JUDY GILLMAN

It's an unpleasantly chilly night in Toronto but the Centre for the Arts is packed with hundreds of Jews from the former Soviet Union and everyone else who could snag a ticket. Svetlana Portnyansky, former Soviet singing star and now a cantor at a Los Angeles synagogue, is in town for only one scheduled performance. And what a performance it was. I can only imagine the reviews—"Move over, Streisand, a new *Yentl* has arrived." From "Bei Mir Bistu Shayn" to "Shalom, Dolly" and the theme from *Swan Lake* (with words especially written for the diva in Russian), the mighty voice that came out of the diva's petite frame nearly defied belief and definitely strained eardrums. The concert ended with an a cappella rendition of "Hatikva" that brought the audience to its feet in raucous applause.

Portnyansky enjoyed a stellar career as a soloist before defecting to the United States in 1991. Her fame in the former Soviet Union centered upon her renderings of Jewish music, but in her early years she was far from a fan of nationalist themes. "I have to admit that growing up, I was quite ashamed of being Jewish," she says with a rueful smile. Slight, soft-spoken, and darkly attractive, Portnyansky speaks of her childhood with feelings that are conflicted, filled with both joy and a deep regret.

"I was born in the center of Moscow, close to the Kremlin," she says with a wry smile. "It was the height of the Soviet era and all religious activity was strictly forbidden. I was an only child and my parents took me to a lot of cultural events—concerts, the theater, and visits to the circus. But there was nothing in our lives to remind us that we were Jewish—except, that is, for a few strange and exotic items that I was discouraged from inquiring about." Those objects included an old prayer shawl, *tefillin*, and a few early gramophone records that had belonged to Portnyansky's grandparents. The recordings were all made by cantors singing old Jewish *nigunim*. "When I asked my parents about these things, I was told, 'They are nothing, just some special things from your grandparents.' About my Jewishness I was told that that was something I should keep to myself. So, early on, I learned to be ashamed of my nationality. What could my parents do?" Portnyansky shrugs ruefully. "It was dangerous to flaunt one's religion

father, but since he couldn't handle me it was decided that I should study with a professional teacher."

Portnyansky recalls, "When I was in high school, my uncle gave me a book that turned my ideas upside down. It was a copy of Cecil Roth's *History of the Jewish People*. I read it from beginning to end. It changed all my ideas about religion; I became proud of my history and I told my parents that I had become a new person."

In her last year of high school,



Photo courtesy of Svetlana Portnyansky

Portnyansky in cantorial robes at her synagogue in Los Angeles.

was Simchas Torah and there were a lot of people there, singing and happy to be together. In that moment all my Zionist feelings awoke," she laughs, spreading her hands dramatically.

After high school, Portnyansky attended the Gnessin State Musical Academy in Moscow and graduated with honors from the five-year vocal program. Soon after, in 1989, the director of the Shalom Theatre in Moscow heard her sing and offered her a job as a soloist. The Theatre had been founded by Solomon Mikhoels, a famous Jewish actor, who was assassinated in 1948. It closed after his death and was reopened 40 years later, in 1988, by Alexander Levenbuk, who became Portnyansky's director and mentor. "He made me a Jewish singer," she says with quiet emphasis. "Though I was already very receptive to Jewish music and culture, I was eager to express my 'inner protest'"—she smiles—"at having to deny my Jewishness. So the Shalom Jewish Theatre was just the right place for me to be."

Jewish life in the Soviet Union was undergoing a great revival

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"My father was an engineer but he also graduated from the Kiev Conservatory as a pianist. He tried very hard to teach me," she laughs, "but I was willful and spoiled and behaved very badly. So you could say that my first musical experience was with my

Portnyansky visited a synagogue for the first time. "My parents were frightened. They told me to be careful, to watch out for the KGB, who often stood outside the synagogue and photographed the people attending the services. They told me to keep my face averted and to avoid bringing attention to myself. It

and Portnyansky was not only in the right place but also at exactly the right time to play an integral part in this renewal. "People were beginning to emigrate in large numbers. I performed as a soloist in a Jewish program in over 40 cities throughout the Soviet Union. The audiences were huge, and they

reacted with enormous enthusiasm. The times were feverish—I saw with my own eyes how people were packing their bags and leaving en masse. People told me, ‘You inspired us; you woke up our Zionist feelings.’ I sang with all my soul. As much as I had been ashamed of my nationality my whole life, now I poured all my love of Judaism into my songs. And my audiences reacted as I hoped they would. A moment like this happens once in a lifetime,” Portnyansky recalls, “and it was my great luck to be present at that

Jewish faces on our TV screens. We don’t want to hear Jewish voices on our radio. Go to Israel. Go away from Russia.’ I began to be afraid for my life. I had wanted to go to Israel for a long time, but the emigration process was long and difficult. I talked it over with my parents and I decided that if I were to receive an invitation to sing outside the borders of Russia, I would defect.”

In February 1991, Portnyansky was asked to perform a series of concerts in the U.S. and finally got her chance to leave the Soviet Union. “My parents had

a lot, in many ways. Very soon I signed a contract for a few concerts in the United States and then I was taken to the Jewish Theological Seminary, where they gave me a scholarship and took me in, without even having my grades or papers. It was wonderful! I studied for a few months and then I met my husband, Alex Mirmov, a Jew from Kiev.”

That same year the couple moved to California, where Portnyansky’s family in Moscow soon joined her. She continued her studies at the University



Photo courtesy of Svetlana Portnyansky

Portnyansky with Russian Orthodox priests.

moment in time.”

In 1990, Portnyansky was invited to sing at the First International Pop and Rock Festival in Moscow. “From that time on, I became pretty famous,” she shrugs modestly. “I started to appear on national radio and television. Two hundred and fifty million people saw me on TV as a Jewish singer. It was a very exciting time, full of concerts and changing world events. But at the same time I started to receive unpleasant letters at home, at the theater, and at the TV stations. They were scary, threatening. They said, ‘Go away from Russia. We don’t want to see

blessed my decision,” she told me. “Soon after my arrival in the United States, I informed my musicians that I would be staying behind and I asked the Immigration Service for political asylum.” Portnyansky was very quickly granted permission to remain in the U.S.

“Weren’t you afraid?” I asked. “No, not at all, I was very optimistic,” she replied. “From the first moment I left Russia and felt the impact of absolute freedom I knew that I would be just fine. I had been warned that I might have to sing in restaurants or work as a cleaner, but I knew that that would not happen. People helped me

of Judaism in Los Angeles and took private lessons with Samuel Fordis, the famed cantor. In 1993, she took on the position of cantor for a Conservative synagogue and now serves as cantor at Temple Isaiah in Newport Beach, California, where she lives with her husband and children, Arthur, 20, and Philip, 14. “My husband, Alex, is my best friend,” Portnyansky smiles. “He never complains when I have to travel for my concerts and tries to be with me as often as he can. When he cannot be there in person, he is there on the telephone. I am very fortunate to have such a wonderful family.

"My first time as a cantor I was nervous," Portnyansky confides, "but it quickly became a pleasure rather than a matter of work. I feel that I am a middleman between people and God. There is a lot of emotion in this kind of singing, for me as well as for the congregants. It's a very special kind of joy for me, particularly on the High Holidays. There is a lot of singing then, especially on Yom Kippur; I sing all day on Yom Kippur," Portnyansky says, laughing delightedly. "There is a lot of room for improvisation and interpretation, but it has to be done delicately," she explains, "because it plays on people's sensibilities at a very special time of the year."

I ask Portnyansky to give me an example of the kind of interpretive possibilities there are and she launches without hesitation into a rendering of the "Na'aritzeha" prayer. "You see," she says, smiling, breaking off in the middle, "that is the basic tune. Then you can..."—and off she goes, breaking into an a cappella solo in my living room that plays with and meanders around the original melody in an easy, trilling

been doing research on it for the last year," Portnyansky confides, "and together with a friend in California, we are about to embark upon a project to arrange and record 12 to 14 of the most famous cantorial compositions." Portnyansky's partner in this undertaking is Noreen Green, the founder, artistic director, and conductor of the L.A. Jewish Symphony Orchestra. The two women will be conducting, performing, and recording these old Judaic



Photo courtesy of Svetlana Portnyansky

she has performed solo concerts and continues to do so. The venues range from biannual concerts in the former Soviet Union—sometimes to an audience of a thousand people—to a series of successful concerts in Japan; and to prestigious venues such as the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow and Carnegie Hall in New York. Dodgers Stadium shows up on the list and when I point it out, Portnyansky laughs. "I sang the national anthem at a baseball game. At a boxing match, too," she says, smiling impishly. "And I was invited to sing at the opening of a church in the Jewish Autonomous Region of the Russian Federation, in the far east of Russia. Can you imagine?" she says, "I was invited by Governor Volkov to give a solo concert for the Russian Orthodox Church. I asked him, 'What should I sing?' and he answered, 'Prayers, because we all believe in the same God.' So I sang *hazanut* in front of the Russian Orthodox priests—and they all cried," Portnyansky recalls. "But what I really want to say—bottom line—I want you to know how fortunate I feel when I

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virtuosity worthy of a New Orleans jazz musician. I must have been sitting with my mouth open because Portnyansky laughs at my response and goes on to expound with enthusiasm on the beauty of the ancient, Ashkenazi cantorial music.

"To me, the classic Jewish-European cantorial music is sort of like UNESCO's World Heritage Sites—old, delicate, and endangered. It's a very difficult kind of singing. It's like Yiddish, it is dying out. Some modern cantors sing this way, but generally speaking this music is rarely performed. I have

songs with the Israel Symphony Orchestra. "We want to present it exactly as it was. We want to show that women can make a great contribution to preserving and interpreting Judaic culture," Portnyansky asserts. "We women have a lot to say."

All this talk of cantorial music might lead one to think that Portnyansky's talent is relegated to *Shabbat* services in the synagogue—but far from it. A brief glance at her website displays a dizzying parade of cities around the world where

look back at that small girl who had no idea who she was. And now I go all over the world and give concerts to Jews and to people of every religion. It's my mission to try to show people through my singing the beauty of Jewish music and culture. So I have really come a long way," Portnyansky says proudly.

One only has to remember the emotional bravos that echoed throughout the concert hall that night in Toronto to understand just how great a distance this diva has traveled. lifestyles