

# Memories of pocket Caruso

by Harry Jarvis

**A**TENDING a music appreciation class of the University of the Third Age (U3A) gave me a chance to listen to a CD entitled *Ein Lied geht um die Welt* by Josef Schmidt.<sup>1</sup> As an assiduous collector of genealogical material since the age of 17, I have had various articles published in *Shemot* on my home town of Czernowitz (Chernovtsy), the principal Yiddish-speaking centre of Bukovina, a territory now in Ukraine, which had over the years been subject to numerous occupations and was then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire.<sup>2</sup>

Now in my 80s, with my memory for recent events somewhat dimmed, I have a clear recollection of being taken as a child to the beautiful large temple in the town centre to hear the then well-known film star and international opera singer Josef Schmidt who invariably returned to his home town each year to act as cantor during the high holidays.

Though the Czernowitz synagogue was burned down by the Russians in 1941<sup>3</sup>, still the magic voice remains recorded for posterity. I feel that through *Shemot* with its wide circulation, Joseph Schmidt's contribution to Jewish culture would not be forgotten.

Josef Schmidt was born in 1904 in Davideni, Bukovina. During World War I his family settled in Czernowitz, where he began singing in the synagogue choir, and soon embarked on concert appearances. He became cantor in Czernowitz and later at the Leopoldstadt Synagogue in Vienna and at the *Adas Yisroel* Synagogue in Berlin. Despite the extraordinary brilliance of his lyrical tenor voice, a stage career proved almost impossible, since Schmidt was only 4ft 10in tall. His impresarios found the means of overcoming this difficulty by building his career on radio concerts, recordings and operetta films in which his stature was raised by adroit camera work.

## Small is beautiful

The CD sleeve provides an interesting account of his life.<sup>1</sup> It also notes that "given that his extremely small stature precluded a normal operatic career, his popularity was all the more remarkable in that he became something of a favourite not only with the general public but also with the opera buff." It records that his parents, Wolf and Sarah Schmidt, were both musical and lived in a truly cosmopolitan community where he was exposed to Romanian, Ukrainian, Polish, German and even gipsy cultures. This fact was to have a profound influence on his interpretations later on.

In 1924 it was arranged that he should live with his uncle Leo Engel in Berlin, while he studied voice and piano with *Frau* Dr Jaffe and Professor Hermann Weissenborn. Despite his slight physique he was conscripted for military service from 1926 to 1929. Upon his discharge, he returned to Czernowitz as cantor, and his career took off when he was discovered by Cornelius Bronsgeest, the eminent Dutch

baritone, then director of Berlin Radio. His international reputation was made on 29 March 1929 when he sang the role of Vasco de Gama in Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* and fan mail poured in from wherever the broadcast had been relayed.

Recordings were made by Ultraphon (Telefunken) and HMV and issued that year. Subsequently he recorded largely for Odeon/Parlophone.



Photo Lotte Jacobi

Josef Schmidt  
1904-1942

It is ironical to note that his popularity among German-speaking countries was at its height in 1933 just when the Nazi party was taking power. Between 1933 and 1936, he made an English version of the film *Ein Lied geht um die Welt* (*My song goes round the world*) as well as *Wenn du jung bist, Ein Stern fällt von Himmel* (*A star falls from heaven*, its English version) and finally *Heut' ist der schönste Tag in meinem Leben* (*Today is the most beautiful day in my life*).

Though the ban on Jewish performers made concerts in Germany impossible, he was able to sing in a series of concerts where the orchestra was conducted by Richard Tauber, that other outstanding romantic tenor. The anti-Semitic smear campaign against him reached ludicrous proportions with the issuing of a "Wanted" poster featuring Schmidt as a sought-after criminal. In 1937 Schmidt toured the United States where he was billed as the "Pocket Caruso" and "The Tiny Man with the Great Voice".

He also appeared successfully in England, France and Belgium. In 1940, he was saved from arrest by gentile friends during the occupation of Belgium and brought through France to Switzerland.

Switzerland's humanitarian record during the Nazi era has not been exactly praiseworthy.<sup>4</sup> Interned in a refugee camp (*Auffangs-Lager*) in Gyrenbad, he subsequently died there when he was refused special treatment for a serious throat ailment and denied admission to the local hospital.

He was buried in the Friesenberg Jewish cemetery in Zurich, where his headstone bears the simple inscription "*Ein Stern fällt*—Joseph Schmidt, Kammersänger, 1904-1942". The quasi-autobiographical film *Ein Lied geht um die Welt*, in which he had starred, was reissued with scant success in 1952.<sup>5</sup>

● The author, a retired doctor, who has traced his family back to 1775, has deposited papers in the Weiner Library.

## REFERENCES

1. EMI CH 764676.
2. Harry Jarvis, "A visit to post-Glasnost Chernovtsy", *Shemot*, Vol 2, 4, 1994, and "My family 60 and 200 years ago", *Shemot*, Vol 5, 1, 1997.
3. Harry Jarvis, "Prologue", translated from *The History of the Jews of Czernowitz*, Olamenu, Tel Aviv, 1962.
4. Harry Jarvis, "Relative values . . .", *Shemot*, Vol 9, 2, 2001.
5. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, XIV, Jerusalem, 1972, p 979.