**Note: Between 2000 and 2002, I was working with Igor Kipnis on a biography of his father Alexander Kipnis. When Igor died in 2002, I set aside the project because he was my primary source of information on his father. I did, however, complete several chapters which I will add to Alexanderkipnis.org**

**Today, I am pleased to post Chapter Two about Alexander’s activities as a student and young performer in Warsaw. Igor did review this chapter and he approved it. Please note that when I set this chapter aside more than 20 years ago, it contained a few questions that were still to be answered. Some of these questions appear in the text as notes.**

**– Barry Lenson, December 3, 2024**

**“My Good Luck” - The Warsaw Years**

**“I went to this little town in Poland . . . just shortly before the High holidays. And one day they gave me a solo . . . a very lovely, touching melody. And I sang this. The Hebrew words were: `A man is created from dust and returns to dust.’ . . . And it was a very lovely melody, a beautiful melody. Later on, when I came to Warsaw, and I had a little bit of money, I went to a music store to buy arias from different operas. I bought an aria from the opera *Don Carlo.* And to my greatest surprise, I saw this solo . . . it’s the aria from *Don Carlo!* [“Dormirò sol” - ed.] They put Hebrew words underneath.” (1)**

With singing for the High Holidays of 1910 concluded, Sasha decided it was time to leave Rovno behind. “I decided I would try my good luck,” he later recalled, “So I bought myself a ticket and I went to Warsaw.”(2)

It would be hard to estimate the impact that this great city had on Sasha, a young boy of nineteen, green and literally “from the provinces.” Even in his later years, his recollections about his Warsaw years took on an aura of excitement and awe. It was the first of the many great cities Sasha would call home.

As it is today, Warsaw at the time was dominated at its epicenter by its mighty opera house, the Teatr Wielki (or “Grand Theater”), built in a grand Italianate style between 1825 and 1933 under the supervision of the architect Antonio Corazzi. Since the inaugural performance of Rossini’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia* there on February 24, 1833, the Wielki became the home for not only ballet, but of the Warsaw Opera, which had achieved the status of a great national opera under the directorships of Nidecki (director from 1840-1852) and later the eminent conductor Emil Mlynarski (1898-1903), one of Poland’s most distinguished musicians. Each year prominent singers from Italy and Germany joined the outstanding Polish singers of the day.

Musicians from across Europe performed recitals in the National Theater, in the concert hall of the Warsaw Conservatory, in palaces and other venues. And the Warsaw Conservatory, where Sasha would soon matriculate, had been established as one of the preeminent music schools in Eastern Europe since its founding in 1861.

Warsaw was, moreover, the first culturally rich city that Sasha would ever know. Over the centuries, the city had been occupied by the Swedes (briefly, from 1655 to 1656), the Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic French (from 1807 until 1815) - and of course, by the Russians (from 1831 until the Soviets reestablished Polish sovereignty in 1917). (3) Warsaw was also deeply imbued with Jewish culture, able to provide Sasha with income-producing performance opportunities in synagogues and Jewish theaters. The Kampaneits Theater, headed by Israel Kampaneits, a significant figure in the history of Yiddish theater, would soon become the first theatrical organization with which Kipnis would perform regularly.

Warsaw stood before him, a new land of promise, intrigue and romance.

**Gaining a Foothold**

“In Warsaw I had only one man who knew me,” Sasha later recalled. “. . . or he didn’t even know me, I knew him. This was the son of the first cantor in Rovno. I communicated with him and he said, `There is a little synagogue and good conductor. Try and sing an audition for him, maybe they will take you.’ I went and sang an audition, and they took me. And again, [the cantor] gave me a solo to sing. They accepted me there; and there was the head of this synagogue, a little synagogue. They called the synagogue Sinai.” (4)

In another account of the same audition at the Sinai Synagogue, Sasha added a bit more detail:

“My first cantor in Rovno had a son studying music at the Conservatory. His advice was to contact a certain Girshov, who was the conductor of the Sinai Synagogue’s choir. I arrived in the evening, while the choir was rehearsing and Mr. Girshov asked me to sing. At that point, I had, besides `The Organ Grinder,’ several other songs. I sang a song by the Italian composer, Denza, and was engaged.” (5)

Yet Sasha, through no fault of his own, soon found himself involved in a small-scale dispute with the management over wages. The soloists in the choir of men and boys (it was an orthodox synagogue and no women were allowed to sing) were paid not by the synagogue directly, but rather by a wealthy patron.

“ . . . this man, a very rich man, he paid out from his pocket to the soloists, and I was considered as a soloist. So every Friday I had to go to his apartment, and then he gave me, I don’t remember exactly, oh, so many rubles to cover my expenses. It wasn’t enough. The winter came and the cold, so I bought myself a secondhand coat. Then one day I really realized, it’s nothing for me. I left Warsaw and went back to Rovno. I said, try my good luck . . . and they will need me. And I was very happy there, and really, they took me. Then one day I received a letter from Warsaw, from the conductor, [saying] `why didn’t you tell us that you are so short on means? We will give you more. Please come.’ So I did return to Warsaw.” (6)

Sasha returned to a larger salary of 12 rubles a month. “With the extra money, I was able to rent a room in the ghetto, again with three other men, and I could afford and occasional treat, such as roast goose.” (7)

With a larger income and a place to live in Warsaw, Sasha established himself yet more firmly by becoming a company member at the Kampaneits Theater, a Jewish repertory theater that performed not only works of Jewish playwrights and composers, but standard repertory as well. A production of Shakespeare’s Othello, performed in Yiddish, mentioned by Kipnis in later interviews, was almost certainly his first exposure to the great classics of Western drama and literature.

[More here about Kompaneits as it can be found.]

“I was paid, if I remember correctly, 20 rubles a month,” Sasha later recalled. (8) With a monthly salary of 20 rubles from the theater and 12 from the Synagogue, Sasha “lost no time buying for myself a new shirt, a pair of shoes, a suit and a robe.” (9)

Suddenly, Sasha had enough money to move his musical career forward. “So I decided, I am going to study now.” (10)

Armed with his knowledge that no high-school diploma was required for entrance to the Warsaw Conservatory, Sasha soon found a way to begin his studies there - not as a student of voice or opera, but rather by studying to become a bandmaster. This may seem a curious choice, but Sasha had well-founded reasoning behind it:

“My desire was to become a conductor of a band, a military band. I was growing older, and I [would] have to serve in the [Russian] army. But as a conductor of a military band, I am not a soldier.” (11)

In other words, if Sasha became a conscript for service in the notoriously harsh, anti-Semitic Russian Army - a five-year ordeal that was greatly feared by Jews - at least he would be able to pass his tenure there conducting a military band instead of enduring Spartan physical training or the kind of punishment that was regularly meted out to Jews.

“I was already over twenty years, and at twenty years I would have to go in the army. In Russia the service [was] five years, for a country which didn’t give me anything. On the contrary, anti-Semitism, hatred, was almost in every corner, in every house.” (12)

As a student bandmaster at the Conservatory, Kipnis was required to study two instruments - a stringed instrument and a wind instrument. Perhaps because he gravitated to lower resonances, he opted for the double bass and the trombone. “I learned to play the trombone - the easiest thing,” Sasha later explained in a statement that would give pause to many a brass player. (13)

The Warsaw Conservatory, under the directorship of Emil Mlynarski (1870-1935) in the years 1903-1904 (and again some time later after Kipnis’s Warsaw years, in 1919-1922), had grown and attracted a growing array of important teachers. Mlynarski himself was a renowned conductor and composer in his own right. He corresponded with Elgar, and his conducting took him to the major capitals of Europe and even to America, where he finally joined the faculty at the Curtis Institute of Music in 1929. He was also the father-in-law of Artur Rubinstein. (Check this last point!) (14)

During Sasha’s years at the Conservatory, the rector was Stanislaus Barcewicz (1858-1929), who led the Conservatory from 1910 until 1918. Building on Mlynarski’s foundation, Barcewicz supervised a distinguished faculty that included Alexander Rozycki and Ludwik Urstein (piano) and Ignacy Cielewicz (orchestra). The singing teacher, who taught at the Conservatory during the years 1905-1913, is referred to in conservatory documents simply as “Giustiniani.” He was to be Kipnis’s first singing teacher.

**First Formal Studies**

“After so much struggle and anticipation,” Sasha later recalled, “it was a disappointment to me that the teachers were not first-rate and my progress, as a consequence, was not very rapid. I was able to learn little more than two scales for double bass and trombone and a fair amount of harmony. Harmony lessons were very enjoyable. We were given a melody for which we had to write a bass and two middle voices. I also sang in the chorus and, during one of our rehearsals the conductor said to me, `Your voice and singing are so much better than the others. Why don’t you try to develop your voice?’”(15)

At the urging of the chorus master, Sasha found his way to Giustiniani’s studio. Giustiniani, Sasha later recalled, “taught in the Italian style.”(16)

Here are two of Sasha’s later recollections about the instruction that took place in Giustiniani’s studio - noteworthy for the insights into the quality of training that Sasha received at the very outset of his vocal instruction:

“I was nineteen when I began to study voice with an Italian named Giustiniani . . . Since he did not speak Russian or Yiddish, he was unable to explain to me how to produce a covered tone. He gave me this exercise: `Sing *la luna*: *la* on a low tome, *lu* an octave higher, and *na* on the low note. In singing this exercise I discovered the different sound of each tone, realizing that the low tone was open and the high tone covered. As a matter of fact, many singers at the present time [the interview quoted took place in the 1970's - ed.] do not know the difference.” (17)

In another late interview, Kipnis recalled other lessons he had learned in Giustiniani’s studio:

“I took a few lessons from him . . . we didn’t have, at least not in places where we lived . . . electric lamps. We had only kerosene lamps. So the lamp was burning and covered up with a glass cover. And then we stood there and we sang loud, sustained tones. And when the voice became very metallic and very strong, then the flame extinguished. So then I tried to do it the other way around, with my back to do this. And I achieved the same thing. Then, we tried also to sing a song, three times without accompaniment and stay in tune. I remember at that time I had learned already another song. And by that time I had learned already so many other songs and arias, and so . . . I was able to sing an aria three times in succession, and we had a tuning fork.” (18)

Sasha describes his voice during his Warsaw years:

“My voice was ‑ yes, not as low as later, but it was definitely a bass‑baritone. Or I would say a high bass.”(19)

So by that time, Sasha had learned “many” new songs and arias. He could sing them three times in succession without wandering off pitch. He had been exposed to the traditional Italian concept of covered, and uncovered, tones. And he could extinguish a kerosine lamp with his voice, whether it was placed in front of him or behind his back.

Sasha’s growth was not limited to singing. In the rich climate of Warsaw, his eagerness to know and absorb everything expanded his horizons quickly. As always, he was trying to improve himself in any way possible. “My study with Signor Giustiniani was limited to one half-hour lesson a week. He was a kind man, he could not teach me very much because he was unable to express himself in either Russian or Yiddish. My Russian was improving steadily through reading. I read everything I could find by Gorky, Tolstoy, Lermontov, Pushkin, all the Russian authors.” (20)

Sasha was also gaining exposure to some of the greatest singers of the time, through their appearances at the Teatr Wielki, a repertory company whose repertoire in those years included Gluck, Mozart, Weber, Verdi Meyerbeer, Wagner, Puccini and Tchaikovsky - as well as Polish operas by Paderewsky, Wieniawsky and others. (21)

[Note: I’ve been in touch with the Wielki and other sources, and info will be put here on the specific repertoire of the Opera during the years 1910-12.]

We do not know just which of those operas Sasha attended. Given his thirst for knowledge, it seems likely he attended them all. We do, however, know a great deal about one singer who, above all others, enthralled Sasha and fired in him a love of great art and something even more motivational: the pressing envy that leads young musicians to excel.

**La Gloria d’Italia**

The roster of singers who appeared at the Warsaw Opera during Kipnis’s years there was formidable indeed. [TK list them here when I get the info; they included Caruso].

Yet of all the singers whom Sasha had occasion to hear in Warsaw, in his later years he singled out just one for special mention. It was the illustrious Italian baritone Mattia Battistini (1856-1928), who made his debut in the Theatr Wielki in 1894 in the title role of Werther. (Massenet had honored Battistini, who was a baritone, by creating for him a special transposition/adaptation of the opera’s leading tenor role.) In the years that followed, Battistini reigned as the leading baritone of the Warsaw Opera, performing in a total of 16 seasons during the years 1894-1897, 1899-1901, 1903, 1905, and then in each season from 1908-1913.

Battistini had an unusually rich repertoire that encompassed not only Italian staples (Iago, Tonio and Scarpia) but also some German roles (most notably Wolfram). Because Battistini was the most revered Italian singer in Russia at the time (he was a close friend of the Imperial family (22), he also had come to specialize in many Russian roles such as Glinka’s Ruslan, Rubinstein’s Demon and even the defining baritone role of Russian opera, Eugene Onegin (16). Battistini’s Warsaw roles of 1912 - Sasha’s last year there - included Scarpia in Tosca and Mephistophèles in The Damnation of Faust. (23 )

When we listen to Battistini’s recordings today, we hear a nearly tenorial baritone voice of extraordinarily high quality and agility. In his day, he was often referred to as “Il Re dei Baritoni” or sometimes as simply, “La Gloria d’Italia.” (24)

Battistini’s voice and artistry had a tremendous effect on Sasha:

“When I heard Battistini, I lost all desire to study. I felt that I could never achieve such perfection. As I remember his voice, it was not a real baritone, but a tenor voice with an enormous range. He could sing a very beautiful high B, but in the low register he was unable to sing below a B natural. His voice had such beauty and quality as I have never heard since. In later years I sang with Titta Ruffo, who had Battistini’s power, but did not approach Battistini’s silken tones.” (25)

In another recollection, Sasha again recalled Battistini’s influence:

“Mattia Battistini had a great effect on me in one way, and a disastrous effect in another, because I realized that I could never sing like that! He had the kind of voice which made the voices of the other cast members sound like tin in comparison to a golden bell. And, of course, the size and phrasing of his voice - he was not a great actor, nor was he a good-looking man - but what a singer! I heard him in his prime, and believe me, when he sang Masked Ball, or Quo Vadis, the audience sat with open mouths, wondering how it is possible that a man can sing as he did! For me, it was disastrous because I thought, what’s the use? I can never sing like that! Fortunately the drive which a young singer has, and which lets him continue on after a disappointment, kept me trying again and again.”(26)

Of course, Battistini was not of the same *Fach* as Kipnis, but his effect was enormous nonetheless. In later years, Kipnis too would perform the Berlioz Mephistophèles (in addition, of course, to Gounod’s). Given the level of respect that Sasha accorded Battistini, it seems probable that the Italian might have exerted some influence on Kipnis’s conception of the devils he portrayed onstage.

Throughout his life, when Kipnis was asked about the greatest singers he had heard, he would often mention Battistini alongside the great male singers he had performed with in his own career, including Leo Slezak and Lauritz Melchior. Such was the impact that the older Italian baritone had on the young, eager and impressionable Sasha.

**die Schweigsame Frau**

Toward the end of his Warsaw years, Sasha added yet another performing activity to the others he already had in place at the Kampaneits Theater and the Sinai synagogue.

He began to perform at a second Jewish theater - one of the two principal Jewish theaters in Warsaw at the time. [Name and info on the other theater hopefully TK]

“I auditioned [earlier] for a Mr. Sandler, who was director of the other Jewish theater. I was not accepted there because Mr. Sandler did not think my voice was good enough. This decision was changed soon after when he left Warsaw and was replaced by a Mr. Schlossberg. Mr. Schlossberg was a tall, thin, very elegant man, who carried a black cane with a silver handle. He was very friendly toward me, inviting me to lunch at his house every day after rehearsal. We were served fresh sardines, white rolls with sweet butter and a small bottle of vodka. Mr. Schlossberg was a married man with five children and one day he told me he had quarreled with his wife and they were not on speaking terms. After a few weeks had passed, he said to me, `Did you know that I’m going to have another child?’ I was amazed. `But you’re not speaking to your wife,’ I answered. `That has nothing to do with it,’ was his reply. That was Mr. Schlossberg! He was paying me more than the first theater manager for singing solos as well as with the chorus.” (27)

It’s one of the many humorous anecdotes that Kipnis noted in the many interviews he conducted through his later years. Yet it begs a question. Did Sasha, with his growing number of public appearances, growing knowledge of the world, new refinement, new clothes and virile good looks, enjoy the company of women, or of one woman in particular, during his Warsaw years? We don’t know. No letters survive, and Kipnis was a gentleman who in his later years spoke only of one great love interest - his wife, the great love of his life.

But we do know that Sasha was about to expand his horizons further. As had been the case when he left Ukraine and went to Warsaw, his trajectory was again leading him west.

**Graduation**

“Finally, the day came when I was graduated from the Warsaw Conservatory of music as a bandmaster and received my diploma. I was just twenty, the age of conscription into the Russian army. I certainly had no reason to serve, and I made preparations to leave Warsaw for Berlin.” (28)

Obtaining a passport to leave Russia was not an easy matter. “A foreign passport [was] not too easy to obtain when you [were] twenty, because of the danger that this person is trying to get away,” Sasha later explained. (29) Yet with some money and influence, a passport could be obtained.

“One of those lawyers told me, `we can give you such a passport, but it will cost you thirty or forty rubles.’ It was a fortune! I didn’t have so much money, but this was a question of going to the army or ‑ so I said, I need a passport and will get the money. I got the passport and I gave them the money. I had enough money to buy myself a ticket to Berlin . . . I saved in the Jewish theater and I saved in the synagogue . . . I had double income.” (30)

Sasha also had a strong expectation that he would enjoy even more financial success in Berlin than he had in Warsaw.

“From the Sinai Synagogue, there were two singers, one was a bass and one was a tenor, and both had left Warsaw and gone to Berlin. And they both came [back] after a year, with suitcases packed with beautiful laundry and suits and shoes and socks and everything. And they said, `You see, this is what we have when we are in Berlin.’ My plan was ready, I am going to Berlin!”

Before his departure, Sasha began to correspond with one of these two singers, a bass named Katz who had also been in the choir at the Sinai Synagogue.

“One day, he corresponded with me, and one day he [wrote] `Don’t write to me anymore as Mr. Katz. Write me only as Mr. Kone.” (31)

For obvious reasons, Sasha was puzzled. “So I didn’t understand that, so I wrote him always to Mr. Katz, care of Kone. [And] the answer was, `Don’t write to Mr. Katz. Katz is dead! My name is Kone.’”

Sasha had no way of resolving the Katz-Kone controversy until he arrived in Berlin.

“I bought my ticket and I arrived in Berlin. I didn’t have very much. I had a dictionary, German‑Russian, and maybe two pairs of socks, and a shirt and an undershirt. So I went to the address of Mr. Katz; and I went on the second floor at six o’clock in the morning. He was just newly wed. And I rang the bell: and he said, `Who’s there?’ And I told him. And he said, `So early?’ And I said, `I just came from the station, I didn’t know what to do.’ `All right, he said, come in.’

“So he gave me some tea, and he said to me, `I have to tell you something. My name is not Katz anymore. My name is Kone. You see, I have come from Poland, and . . . I have no right to live in Berlin. So they told me, unless you leave Berlin we are going to arrest you. Then I went and I bought for myself a Turkish passport with the name of Kone.’ And so this was the explanation why Katz is dead and Kone ‑ Kone is alive.” (32)

The difficulties that Mr. Katz faced as an alien living in German foreshadowed many that Sasha would face soon enough in his own life. Yet on that day, with the name issue resolved at a very early hour and a cup of warm tea in hand, Sasha quickly began to ask about the possibility of finding a job singing in the same synagogue where Mr. Katz/Kone was a member of the choir.

In subsequent meetings, Sasha was introduced to still more members of the choir, who had still more suggestions to offer. In the quick run-on jumble of sentences in this quote from an interview recorded six decades later, we can still sense the excitement Sasha felt at the time:

“And there I met several young men who came a year, or two years before me, and have already achieved their tenure. And what was the idea? They all were singing in a chorus in a synagogue and in a chorus in German musicals. And at that time they opened a beautiful new synagogue, for which the Kaiser Wilhelm had given funds. And there was a wealthy man who had a factory . . . and he made tiles. And they built the synagogue mostly out of these beautiful tiles. And there was a marvelous organ, so we had a cantor . . . his name was Weihbaum. He looked like Mendelssohn. He had a beautiful, nice, fine face and a black beard, exactly like Mendelssohn. And he asked me to sing an audition. So I came up, and he was the organist sitting at a magnificent organ. And the conductor said, `Mr. Kipnis, did you bring some music with you?’ And I said, `No, I didn’t bring any music.’ `Well, how can we hear you?’ And I said, `Well, I’m going to sing to you something a cappella. So I started to sing for him a song by Tchaikovsky and it’s a lovely song, where I could show my voice. And he said, Mr. Kipnis, this song which you just sang has a great resemblance with `After the Ball,’ a song by Tchaikovsky . . . but you sang it so much slower! And I said, `I sang it slow because I thought you wanted to hear my voice.’ And so I sang my sustained notes, and they engaged me. I didn’t have very much money . . . I [had] spent all my money for the passport and for the railroad ticket.”

“I was a complete stranger, you know. Everything was new. And I accepted this position, they paid fifty Marks a month.” (33)

That audition cemented Sasha’s move westward to Berlin, another rich and challenging city. Like Warsaw, it was large, challenging and new. But it was also, for the first time, a city in a country that lay across an international border.

Russia, which had long oppressed Sasha and his family, and which promised him only further torments in the Tsar’s Army if he stayed behind, lay beneath Sasha’s shoes no more. Yet he was about to encounter a truth discovered late by many wanderers who leave their native countries behind: even a wretched homeland is a homeland nonetheless.

By going to Germany, Sasha had resolutely opened the new door to a bright new future. But it was 1912. The Great War was only months away. In ways he could not have understood at the time, he had also shut the door to his past.

**Footnotes to Chapter 2**

(1) Vivian Perlis. Oral History of American Music Interview

(2) Perlis.

(3) Grove Dictionary of Music, Warsaw Entry

(4) Perlis

(5) Tonkonogy recorded interview

(6) Perlis

(7) Tonkonogy

(8) Tonkonogy

(9) Tonkonogy

(10) Perlis

(11) Perlis

(12) Tonkonogy

(13) Perlis

(14) Tonkonogy

(15) Tonkonogy

(16) Perlis

(17) Tonkonogy

(18) Perlis

(19) Perlis

(20) Tonkonogy

(21) Grove Dictionary of Music, Warsaw Entry

(22) Grove Dictionary of Music, Battistini Entry

(23) Citation to come from Teatr Wielki

(24) (Record liner notes by Frank Granville Barker from the 1986 recording of "Mattia Battistini, King of the Baritones."

(25) Tonkonogy

(26) Mystery interview (in files, but first page of interview is missing)

(27) Tonkonogy

(28) Tonkonogy

(29) Perlis

(30) Perlis

(31) Perlis

(32) Perlis

(33) Perlis