



BEHIND THE PICTURE



The Singer's Cane

DOVID ZAKLIKOWSKY

Jan Peerce was known as America's Tenor, and, as a committed Jew, produced many records of Jewish music. In the words of the Rebbe to Mr. Zalmon Jaffe, the famed philanthropist from Manchester, United Kingdom, "it is well known that the artist has a rich repertoire of truly Jewish pieces."

THE ACCIDENT

At one point in his career, Peerce decided that he wanted to have more contact with his audience. He took to walking up and down the concert hall aisles while singing.

One evening, he turned down the fourth aisle and realized he had made a big mistake. "I had to make my exit, and judging from the happy, enthusiastic faces I could see looking at me, it seemed to be only a four- or five-inch drop."

With one foot in the air, he realized that he was in trouble. "It was a fifteen-inch drop, and as I went over it, I sat down hard on the left leg. I felt shock. I felt pain."

He was in the hospital for three and a half weeks with a broken leg.

THE REBBE'S CONCERN

The Rebbe kept track of Peerce's condition until he was fully recovered. He and his wife were touched by the Rebbe's care and love, and it gave them emotional strength throughout the illness and recovery.

Not long thereafter he recovered, but was reduced to walking with a cane. The Rebbe sent word, inviting him to join a *farbrengen*. It would be Jan's first time meeting with the Rebbe.

A sea of well wishers saluted the Rebbe's 25 years of leadership on Yud Shevat 5735, and the gathering was broadcast across the globe via satellite "hookups" and reported in the national media.

CONVERSATION IN YIDDISH

The Chassidim and guests listened intently as the Rebbe spoke about social activism, the American constitution, and diplomacy with the Soviet Union.

"Many of those attending wore the traditional black coat and tieless white shirt," the *New York Post* reported, "but many were dressed more informally. Long hair and blue jeans were not uncommon, and brightly colored, even paisley yarmulkes could be seen among the sea of black felt and beaver hats."

Many of the dignitaries sitting on the dais did not understand what the Rebbe was saying, as he was speaking in Yiddish. Peerce, however, did understand because his family had spoken Yiddish at home when he was a child. Although he never had any formal Jewish schooling, his parents had taught him well.

At the gathering the Rebbe delivered scholarly discourses that were interspersed with *nigunim*, when the entire crowd would sing and clap along.

Many in the crowd took turns lifting small glasses of wine, hoping to catch the Rebbe's personal attention for a short moment. The Rebbe would make eye contact, gesture with his head, and say "*L'chaim velivrachah*" – to life and blessing.

Meanwhile, one by one, the dignitaries were escorted to the Rebbe for a brief con-

versation. Abraham Beame, the Mayor of New York City, presented the Rebbe with a proclamation on behalf of the city. The Rebbe

thanked him and said, "I mentioned [in my discourse] the first Abraham, I hope you will follow in his footsteps."

The gathering began at nine in the evening, and lasted nearly seven hours. The Rebbe told the crowd, "Hashem created the world for man to perfect. The task of completing Hashem's creation demands that this task not be done halfheartedly. In the words of the Talmud, 'Man was born to toil.' When one toils, one will succeed."

The Rebbe explained that our collective mission is "to fill the earth and conquer it," while clarifying that conquering is an action performed by kings, which means we are expected to become "kings," masters over our domains, and make them dwelling places for Hashem.

The Rebbe instructed the dignitaries, Jan Peerce included, that those who have further influence as a result of their positions have the responsibility to "master" their jurisdictions.

When it was his turn, Peerce made his way through the narrow path to the Rebbe's place. He held his cane in his left hand, but it was dangling, not really touching the floor.

While most of the dignitaries would wait until the end of their conversation to say *L'chaim* with the Rebbe, Peerce raised his small plastic cup immediately upon reaching the Rebbe. The Rebbe respond-



Photo credits:
 Algemeiner Journal/Lubavitch Archives

ed, “To life and blessing,” but before he could drink, the Rebbe remarked, “We have half of Manchester here.”

Peerce, whose connection with Chabad began at his Manchester concert, had recently performed there a second time. “Yes,” he answered the Rebbe, “I saw them, my friends Zalmon and Yechiel.” He turned to Zalmon Jaffe and Yechiel Vogel, both leaders of the Manchester Chabad community, raised his glass and toasted them “*L’chaim*.”

The Rebbe and Peerce conversed in a mixture of Yiddish and English. The Rebbe told him, “They wrote me glowing letters about your concert.”

Peerce had added more Jewish songs to his performance at the Manchester concert and the Rebbe confirmed, “The concert was more than good, and even better than the first one.”

Peerce responded, “It always needs to be like that. I hope that next time will be even better.”

The Rebbe pointed to the cane and said, “It should be *gezunterheit* [healthy]. You should not need this.”

The conversation turned serious, and Peerce told the Rebbe about some of his health issues and the difficulty they caused him.

The Rebbe told Peerce, “You have to sing. You have to make people happy. You have to make those around you happy. Make those here happy, too!”

Peerce wished the Rebbe good health, and the Rebbe responded that he should report good news.

As he was leaving, the Rebbe asked, “Is Mrs. Peerce here? I heard your wife was also successful in Manchester.” The tenor exclaimed, “Yes, she was!” and then happily returned to his spot on the dais.

Peerce stayed. He enjoyed the melodies, clapped excitedly, and sang along. He listened to the talks, but as the night grew late, the Rebbe’s talks became quite scholarly and the guests slowly began to trickle out. Peerce stayed longer than many, but shortly before the Rebbe’s ninth talk he inched his way through the crowd and out the door.

“NO NEED FOR A STICK”

Shortly thereafter, Peerce and his wife had a private meeting with the

Rebbe. The Rebbe told him to throw away his “*shteken*” – his cane.

Peerce explained that his foot hadn’t completely healed, and he still needed something to lean on.

The Rebbe stood his ground. “I am asking you to please listen to what I am saying. *Varf arois der shteken!* – Throw out the stick!”

Emotionally, Peerce had grown attached to the cane. He couldn’t get rid of it.

Alice, his wife, felt he needed to give it a chance and she nagged him to give it up, insisting that he could manage without it. “If the Rebbe said, you need to listen,” she told him. “Are you going to go through all your life wearing a cane?”

Peerce did not like her reference to “wearing” the cane as if it were some kind of ornament. In anger, he threw it out and told her, “I won’t use this cane, but it is on your head.”

She was fine with it being on her head. “It doesn’t hurt,” she said.

And from then on, Peerce was able to admit; “I didn’t need to use the cane anymore.”

Rabbi Dovid Zaklikowski (dovidzak@gmail.com) is the director of Lubavitch Archives (www.LubavitchArchives.com). His latest compilation from the Rebbe’s correspondence, ***Advice for Life II: Purpose*** was recently published.



Photo credits:
 Jewish Educational Media