

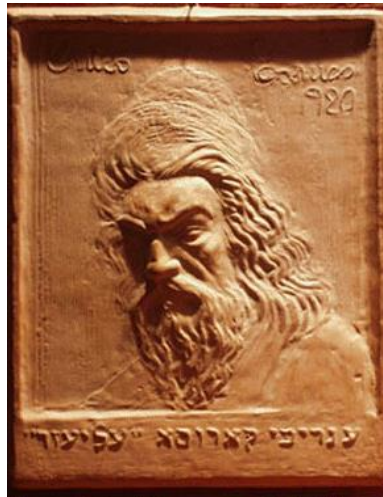
Jacques Fromental Halévy, LA JUIVE

A POWERFUL FRENCH OPERA

By George Plohn, Esplanade's house impresario



Jacques-François Fromental Halévy
Composer of *La Juive* (1799-1862)



Terra cotta portrait of Enrico Caruso as
Eléazar, 1920. Text in Yiddish at the
bottom: "Enrico Caruso Eléazar."

La Juive (In English: *The Jewess*) is a French grand opera in five acts by Jacques Fromental Halévy, the opera which remarkably was first performed at the inauguration of the newly built luxurious Opéra Garnier in the center of Paris, on 23rd of February 1835. This opera is not a biblical story, but rather a story of Jewish life and persecution in the 15th century Europe, in this case, of all countries, in Switzerland.

Because of the story of what was considered in the Middle Ages as inadmissible and totally impossible, namely love between a Christian man and a Jewish woman, this opera has been seen as a plea for religious tolerance, in much the same spirit as *Nathan der Weise* (In English: *Nathan the Wise*), the play by the German writer and philosopher Gotthold Lessing, a Lutheran by faith, one of the most outstanding representatives of the Enlightenment era, a play premiered back in 1779, which was a fervent plea for religious tolerance.. By the time our composer Halévy, who was both French and Jewish, composed this opera, in France there were already in place liberalized religious practices.

It is a fact, however, that earlier in the history of France, Jews were subjected to the worst possible fate, and by the time of the First Crusade in 1182, King Philip Augustus decreed the expulsion of all Jews from France. A long period of readmission and re-expulsion followed, until king Louis XIV, the Sun King, in 1675, sensing possible financial advantages, granted his Jews letters patent, taking them under his special protection. So started a slow process of emancipation of Jews in France, which continued through Louis XVI, and took even a greater step under the French Revolution of 1793. Napoleon, after his takeover, passed in 1806 a number of measures supporting the position of

the Jews in the French Empire and spread the concept of their emancipation also in the lands he conquered across Europe, liberating Jews from their ghettos and establishing relative equality for them. After the collapse of his empire and the restoration of the Bourbon kings, this process continued, and many Jews occupied high positions in the army and the judiciary, as well as in the arts and sciences. And in this bright new social environment, Halévy found inspiration to create this opera as a cry for religious tolerance.

The Jews in Switzerland

The action of the *La Juive* takes place in Switzerland. The first Jews arrived in the area we now call Switzerland when the Romans took over that part of Europe. Over the centuries they lived in Switzerland in small numbers in different towns and villages. Then, in the Middle Ages, in 1349, because of religious zeal of the locals, the Jews were expelled. It took four centuries before Jews were allowed to settle again permanently in Switzerland. First, in 1776 Jews were allowed to settle in only two cantons west of Zurich. For almost a hundred years, these remained the only two places where Jews were allowed to live. It was not until 1866, under international pressure, that Jews in Switzerland were granted the right to settle all over the country. Finally, eight years later, in 1874, Jews were granted equality, with civil rights and duties enshrined in the federal constitution, and no longer subject to any discriminatory regulations. Presently, approximately 20,000 Jews live in Switzerland, half of them in the Zurich metropolitan area. They enjoy a flourishing religious, cultural and social life, particularly in urban centers such as Zurich, Basel, Berne, Lausanne and Geneva.

Our composer, **Jacques François Fromental Halévy**, by his original name **Elias Lévy**, was born in Paris in 1799, the same year when Napoleon took over the country as First Consul with full executive powers. His father was Élie Halévy, a Bavarian by birth and a cantor by profession, who became the secretary of the Jewish community of Paris and a writer and teacher of Hebrew, and his mother was a French Jewish woman. Anti-Semitism wasn't as much of a problem in France, as it was still in neighboring countries, and it was quite possible for middle class Jews to succeed. And that's exactly what Halévy did. In fact, he turned out to be one of the successful French opera composers of the mid nineteenth century. He entered the Conservatoire de Paris at the age of only ten, in 1809, becoming a pupil and later protégé of the composer Cherubini. Following the end of his studies, in 1819, at age of 20, he was awarded the Prix de Rome (Prize of Rome), a 3 to 5 years state stipend for furthering his cultural horizon in Italy. Upon his return, Halévy began teaching at the Conservatoire in 1827 and soon he advanced to become professor of composition, teaching future great composers as Charles Gounod of the Faust fame, Georges Bizet (who will compose Carmen), and Camille Saint-Saëns (who will compose the opera Samson and Delilah). He also became chorus master at the Opéra, a member of the Institute of France, and secretary to the Académie des Beaux-Arts (Academy of Fine Arts) and was created chevalier of the Legion of Honor. After composing several lesser important operas, with his opera *La Juive*, which he composed in 1835, at age of 36, Halévy attained not only his first major triumph, but gave the world a work that was to be one of the cornerstones of the French repertory for a century to come, with the role of Eléazar becoming the favorites of great tenors such as Enrico Caruso and later Richard Tucker. Its first performance in 1835 was an enormous success.

Among the admirers of this opera was not only Gustav Mahler, who stated that "I am absolutely overwhelmed by this wonderful, majestic work, but also by Richard Wagner, known for his violent

anti-Semitic pamphlets, who in 1841, wrote an enthusiastic and positive review of Halévy's grand opera for the German press.

Halévy composed several more operas, which, however, were less successful.

Finally, after having retired to Nice, on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, Halévy died in 1862, aged 62, leaving his last opera *Noé* unfinished. It was completed by his former student Georges Bizet, of the opera *Carmen* fame, but was not performed until ten years after Bizet's own death.

Halévy's wife, Léonie, who had experienced serious mental problems during their marriage, underwent a remarkable recovery after his death and became a talented sculptress (she was 20 years younger than he.) In 1869, their daughter Geneviève married the composer Georges Bizet, a former Halévy student at the Conservatoire. After Bizet's death, Geneviève married a banker with Rothschild connections and became a leading Parisian salonnière, a party hostess. Amongst the guests at her soirées was the young Marcel Proust, who used her as one of the models in his famous epic *À la recherche du temps perdu* (French for 'In Search of Lost Time'), and also the writer Guy de Maupassant, the politician Leon Blum, and many princes, countesses, and other nobility, as well as her first cousin Ludovic Halévy, who was the librettist of the opera *Carmen*.

In a nutshell, the captivating story of this opera revolves around the Jewish goldsmith, Eléazar, and his daughter, Rachel (as Rachel is pronounced in French). Prince Léopold, who of course is Christian, and who has started a relationship with her, disguised as a Jewish apprentice of her father. Rachel knows nothing of his true identity and when she learns that he is in fact a nobleman married to Princess Eudoxie, she reveals their relationship to everyone. As a result, Prince Léopold, Rachel and her father are imprisoned on the orders of Cardinal de Brogni. But Eudoxie persuades Rachel to withdraw her accusation and Léopold is then released. Rachel and Eléazar on the other hand, are sent for execution. At the same moment that Rachel is executed, Eléazar reveals to the Cardinal that Rachel is in fact the daughter whom he has sought for years. Then Eléazar himself triumphantly goes to his death. This was in nutshell the grim-ending story.

Synopsis

Events before the opera begins

When he was young, the Jew Eléazar had lived in Italy near Rome where he had to witness the condemnation and execution of his own two sons, as heretics, by Count Brogni. Eléazar himself was then banished and had to flee to Switzerland.

During his journey, Eléazar found a baby near death, abandoned inside a burnt-out house which turned out to be the home of the Count. Bandits had set fire to the house, attempting to kill the entire family of Brogni but were unaware that the Count himself was in Rome at the time.

Eléazar took the child, a girl, and raised her as his own daughter, naming her Rachel. Count Brogni upon his return discovered the ruins of his house and the bodies of his family. He subsequently became a priest and later advanced to be a cardinal.

At the beginning of the opera, in 1414, Rachel (now a young woman) is living with her adopted father in the city of Constance, Switzerland. Around that time the forces of the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund have defeated the Hussites, in battles where Prince Léopold has distinguished

himself. The Council of Constance, convened by the Pope has been arranged to resolve Church matters, the Pope being represented there by Cardinal Brogni.

Act 1

Eléazar is a goldsmith. The crowd condemns him for working during a day dedicated to Church festivities. He is saved from lynching by the arrival of Cardinal Brogni, who in the process recognizes Eléazar as his old adversary.

Prince Léopold arrives in disguise as the young Jewish artist Samuel. Rachel is in love with this Samuel and knows nothing of his true identity. Local laws reflect prejudice against the Jews: if a Jew and a Christian have sexual relations, the Christian would be excommunicated and the Jew killed. Léopold is thus taking a great risk in this affair, especially as he is already married to the Princess Eudoxie. The crowd returns to attack Eléazar, but 'Samuel' secretly instructs his troops to calm things down. The act closes with a grand triumphal procession.

Act 2

Inside the house of Eléazar

Rachel has invited 'Samuel' for the Passover celebration in Eléazar's house. He is present while Eléazar and the other Jews sing their Passover prayers. Rachel becomes anxious when she notices that 'Samuel' refuses to eat the piece of unleavened bread that she has given him. He now reveals to her that he is in fact a Christian, without telling her his true identity. Rachel is horrified and reminds him of the terrible consequences of such a relationship.

Princess Eudoxie enters in the meantime to order from Eléazar a valuable jewel as a present for her husband, at which point Samuel (alias her very husband Prince Léopold) hides.

After Eudoxie leaves, Léopold promises to take Rachel away with him. She tries to resist, worrying about abandoning her father, but as she is about to succumb to his advances, they are confronted by Eléazar, who curses Léopold, who then runs off.

Act 3

Rachel, who has followed 'Samuel' to the Palace, offers her services as a lady's maid to Princess Eudoxie. Eléazar arrives at the palace to deliver the jewel. He and Rachel recognize Léopold as 'Samuel'. Rachel declares before the entire assembly that Léopold seduced her, following which she, Eléazar and Léopold are arrested and placed in prison, on the instructions of Cardinal Brogni.

Act 4

Princess Eudoxie asks to see Rachel in prison, and persuades her to withdraw her allegations.

Rachel agrees; Cardinal Brogni agrees to commute Léopold's sentence, and to spare Rachel and Eléazar if they convert. Eléazar at first answers that he would rather die, but then makes plans to avenge himself. He reminds the Cardinal of the fire in his house near Rome many years before and tells the Cardinal that his infant daughter did not die. He says that she was saved by a Jew and that only he knows who he is. If he dies, his secret will die with him. Cardinal Brogni begs him to tell him where his daughter is, but in vain. Eléazar sings of the vengeance that he will have in dying, but he suddenly remembers that he will be responsible for the death of Rachel. The only way to save her is to admit that the Cardinal is her father and that she is not Jewish but Christian. The act ends with the opera's most famous aria, Eléazar's '*Rachel, quand du Seigneur*' (French for 'Rachel when from

the Lord'). He does not want to sacrifice Rachel to his hatred of those who hate his coreligionists, and renounces his revenge. However, when he hears the cries from a pogrom in the streets, he decides that God wants him to bear witness in death with his daughter to the God of Israel.

Act 5

Eléazar and Rachel are brought to the gallows where they will be thrown into a cauldron of boiling water. Rachel is terrified. Eléazar explains her that she can be saved if she converts to Christianity. She refuses and climbs to the gallows before him. As the people are singing various prayers, Cardinal Brogni asks Eléazar if his own daughter is still alive. Eléazar says that she is and when Cardinal Brogni asks where she can be found, Eléazar points to the cauldron, saying "There she is!" He then climbs to his own death while the Cardinal falls on his knees. The opera ends with a chorus of monks, soldiers and the people singing "It is done and we are avenged on the Jews!"

Our DVD is a 2003 recording of a live performance from the Wiener Staatsoper (The State Opera of Vienna, Austria), with the American tenor Neil Shicoff as Eléazar, the Bulgarian soprano Krassimira Stoyanova as Rachel, the Romanian soprano Simina Ivan as Eudoxie, the Chinese born American tenor Jianyi Zhang as Léopold, and the Austrian bass Walter Fink in the role of Cardinal Brogni - The Chorus and Orchestra of the Vienna State Opera is under the baton of the Croatian conductor Vjekoslav Šutej.

Today's Part 1 with the first 3 acts lasts 2 hours, and next Sunday, the remaining two acts 1 hr.

As a final note, I would like to mention that once a staple of the repertory, and Enrico Caruso's final new role at the Met, this opera has all but disappeared from the canon. Our tenor, Mr. Shicoff, born in 1949, the son of a Brooklyn cantor, has said that he was deeply touched by the opera's exploration of anti-Semitism and that he found the role of Eléazar, embittered by the brutal persecution of his people, ideally suited to his intense artistry. In 1976 Shicoff made his debut at the Metropolitan Opera, where he sang tenor leads in Rigoletto, La Bohème, Werther, and Der Rosenkavalier. He also sang in opera houses throughout Europe. In 2010 he was widely expected to follow the powerful Ioan Holender as the general director of the Vienna State Opera, but eventually somebody else was named.

As a personal note, this same Ioan Holender, is not only Romanian-born, but from the same city as myself, and we were even students in the same high school, he five years younger than me. Ioan Holender's nineteen-year tenure as director of the Vienna State Opera was the longest in the history of this prestigious opera house. At his departure, the opera house gave a gala farewell concert in his honor with the participation of forty-six soloists and eleven conductors.

Listen to excerpts of this opera:

- Halévy La Juive - aria of Eleazar "Rachel, quand du Seigneur..." - Neil Shicoff- Wiener Staatsoper 2003

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrr0WJnL-GQ>

- The entire opera, same as our DVD is at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SV_ofKbbcB0