

Cantor Shimon Farkas OAM

By Eli Rubenstein

In this short biographical essay, I outline the career of world-renowned Cantor Shimon Farkas based on personal interviews with him, my mother Esther Rubenstein A"H and other family members. I have also based this summary on several online resources which I have included below.

Cantor Shimon Farkas OAM (Medal of the Order of Australia) is recognized as one of the great cantors of our time. He is regularly invited as a guest cantor and concert artist throughout the world. His unique voice is "unusual in quality and range, brilliant in tone, and rich in emotional warmth and expression."

Family Background

Shimon Farkas was born in 1949 in Fehergyarmat, Hungary to Chaim Meir Farkas and Faigu Weiss. Three of his four grandparents perished in Auschwitz (one died before the war).

His parents met before the war in Fehergyarmat, survived the death camps and married in Fehergyarmat after the war. His grandparents from his father's side (Yitzchak Shimon Farkas and his wife Chana (Chani) Farkas nee Perlstein - who died in 1935) had eight children, three who died in the Shoah & 5 who survived - among them Shimon's father Chaim Meir. (Chana Farkas nee Perlstein was the sister of my mother's mother, my grandmother, Chaya Matel Rubenstein). Yitzchak Shimon remarried after the death of Chana, but he and his second wife (name unknown) perished in Auschwitz in 1944.

On Shimon's father's side, the three siblings who died were Rivka, Yehudis and Moshe.

The five siblings who survived were Yossi (Joseph), Chaim Meir (Shimon's Father), Feigu (also known as Eva), Simi, & Menyu (Menachem Mendel).

On his mother's side, his mother Faigu's (aka Ilona's) parents, Asher Anshel Weiss and Serel (Serena) Weiss, both perished in Auschwitz, along with three of their children (Liba (who had 6 children), Shmiel Duvid, & Leib).

The 7 who survived were Isaac Weiss, Moishe Weiss, Faigu Farkas, Chaim Weiss, Yentu, Frici Wer Berger & Goldie Klein (later Ashkelon).

Aliyah to Israel

Shimon Farkas moved to Israel in 1951 as a child. At age nine, he conducted the Friday night service at the Rama Synagogue in Tel Aviv.

Immigration to the United States & Early Musical Training

Shimon's father's passing on Dec. 31, 1959 - the sixth day of Chanukah - at only 40 years of age, was a profound loss. However, it was not long before Shimon Farkas' exceptional musical talent was recognized. Shortly after immigrating to the United States in the fall of 1961 and settling in the Borough Park neighbourhood of Brooklyn, he was recruited by Cantor Moshe Koussevitzky (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moshe_Koussevitzky) to be the leading soloist in his choir. This early recognition was a testament to the depth and quality of Farkas' musical abilities. (Koussevitzky was cantor from 1952 to 1966 at Temple Beth El of Borough Park which later merged with Young Israel of Borough

Park.) In the US, Shimon Farkas studied privately under Cantor Moshe Kusevitsky as well as later under Cantor David Bagley (<https://rsa.fau.edu/david-bagley>) when he was living in Israel in 1970.

Cantorial Career – 1967 to 2024

Shimon Farkas had his first posting as a cantor in Windsor, Ontario, at the Orthodox Shaarei Shomayim synagogue in 1967 and 1968 for the High Holidays. Faigu (Eva) Indig (nee Farkas) the sister of Shimon's father Chaim Meyer, lived in Windsor and made the introduction.

Shimon Farkas led High Holiday services for an Orthodox congregation in Cincinnati, Ohio in the fall of 1969 and 1970.

From 1969-70, while he was studying Economics at Yeshiva University, he travelled to Israel for one year where he studied at Bar Ilan University as an exchange student.

In Israel, in 1969, he met Veronica Weisz from Sydney, Australia who was a student at Machon Gold in Jerusalem. They were married in New York in 1971, and moved to Sydney immediately following their wedding. (Both of Veronica's parents were Holocaust survivors. Her father was from Miskolc and her mother was from Budapest. Her grandfather from her mother's side – Rabbi Shmuel Dov Bernath - was the Rosh Hashochtim, Moel and Chazan Sheni at Kazincy Shul in Budapest and survived the war with his wife and some of his children in Budapest. (The Belzer Rebbe hid at his home in Budapest on his way to Israel during WWII.) Bernath emigrated to Sydney after the war to head up a new Orthodox Haredi congregation there, and to set up a mehadrin shechita.)

At the age of 22, 1972, Shimon Farkas was appointed as cantor of Australia's largest Orthodox congregation, The Central Synagogue of Sydney, Australia, where he served for the next 15 years.

Parallel to his cantorial career, Shimon Farkas also owned and ran a successful furniture business from 1979 – 2008.

In 1987, Shimon Farkas was appointed cantor of the famed Concord Resort Hotel in the Catskill Region, where he drew capacity crowds each Passover and High Holy Days until 1996. He was reappointed to his current position of Chief Cantor in Sydney when the new Central Synagogue was dedicated in May 1998 after a disastrous fire destroyed the old synagogue in 1994.

The 2000's

Well into the 21st century, Chazzan Farkas continues to thrill audiences with his extensive repertoire, spanning seven languages. These include cantorial, Yiddish, Ladino, Opera and Broadway favourites. He performs frequently in Israel, the U.S. and Europe. In 2007, he appeared with the famous Composer and Conductor Marvin Hamlisch and the Calgary Symphony Orchestra in a gala concert, which led to the idea of reproducing this concert in Sydney. In 2008, Shimon produced and appeared in a Gala Concert titled "FROM BROADWAY TO JERUSALEM" at the Central Synagogue of Sydney, where Marvin Hamlisch conducted the Sydney International Orchestra. In 2009, Shimon Farkas produced and appeared with Cantor Helfgot in a Gala concert titled "SYMPHONY FOR THE SOUL" in Sydney and Melbourne conducted by Dr. Mordechai Sobol and the Sydney International Orchestra.

Shimon Farkas has made dozens of audio recordings of his work, including "Voices of the Concord," which may be found at the DJSA Dartmouth Jewish Sound Archive. <https://djsa.dartmouth.edu/albums/11188>

Australia Medal

In 2008, Farkas was awarded the Order of Australia Medal for his services to The Central Synagogue and the Jewish community.

Next Generation of Musical Talent

Shimon Farkas and his wife Veronica have three children: Chaim, Mimi & Dov - both Chaim and Dov are also musical, singing frequently with their father. (Shimon and Veronica are also proud grandparents of 11 grandchildren - five in Sydney, three in Melbourne and three in Tel Aviv.)

Dov Farkas served as Cantor of the South Head Synagogue in Sydney for eight years, after which he served as Cantor of the Chabad House of Caulfield - 770 in Melbourne for five years. In 2008, Dov was appointed Chief Cantor of the Caulfield Hebrew Congregation in Melbourne, one of Australia's largest Synagogues.

Chaim Farkas is the President of the prominent Ichud Shivat Tzion congregation in Tel Aviv. The synagogue was formerly the centre of German Jewish survivors in Tel Aviv but was suffering from dwindling membership and attendance – it was revived through the efforts of Chaim Farkas. Chaim Farkas also leads services at Ichud Shivat Tzion from time to time. The synagogue

is modern orthodox, but prides itself in the unique synergy it is creating between the religious and secular world in Tel Aviv.

Shimon Farkas is the grandfather of Eden Shifroni (daughter of Mimi & Arik Shifroni), a Soprano with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. “I definitely think my passion for music was ignited at a very young age,” Shifroni, who grew up watching her grandfather Shimon Farkas sing as the chazzan at Sydney’s Central Synagogue, told *the Australian Jewish News*.

Participation in the March of the Living

Shimon Farkas has travelled to Poland several times to participate in the annual March of the Living in Auschwitz-Birkenau on Holocaust Remembrance Day. There he chanted El Malei Rachamim, the traditional prayer for the six million Jews who perished in Auschwitz, along with performing Szól a Kakas Már – with his sons Chaim & Dov Farkas. The revered Rabbi of Kalev (1751– 1821) wrote "Szól a kakas már," his most famous composition, a song expressing the deep yearning for the redemption of the Jewish people and their return to the land of Israel. Shimon Farkas has also been instrumental in raising funds for the International March of the Living to help additional students participate in this life changing experience.

In the spring of 2024, Shimon Farkas and his sons – accompanied his wife and several of his grandchildren - will once again join the March of the Living, including appearing in Budapest on the evening of May 5th, Holocaust Remembrance Day. At that time, they will lead a memorial service commemorating the over 400,000 Hungarian Jews – including

many of their family members - who were deported and murdered in Auschwitz in the spring of 1944, some 80 years ago.

Sources:

Personal Interview with Shimon Farkas, Esther Rubenstein, Sidney Indig and on line sources including:

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