

CEDARS OF LEBANON

AN APPRECIATION OF I. L. PERETZ

S. NIGER

SAMUEL CHARNEY, who died in New York in 1955, was known to Jewish readers as S. NIGER and regarded as the dean of Yiddish literature. A review of the *S. Niger Memorial Volume* elsewhere in the present issue points out that Niger's career spanned the growth of modern Yiddish literature itself, and his accomplishments on behalf of that literature were unrivaled. Among his many books are *Sholem Aleichem* (1928), *Mendele Mocher Seforim*

(1936), *H. Leivick* (1948), and *I. L. Peretz* (1952).

Niger managed, in the hectic atmosphere of Yiddish literature during its most vital period, to achieve a position above factions. His special qualities—sanity, breadth, non-partisanship—distinguish the following essay on Peretz which appeared (unabridged) in the *American Jewish Year Book*, 1953 (Vol. 54) at the centenary of Peretz's birth.—Ed.

MAY 18, 1952, marked the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Yitzchak Leybush Peretz—poet, storyteller, dramatist, essayist, journalist, editor.

Peretz's work became familiar to readers of Hebrew as early as the 70's and 80's of the 19th century; in 1888 he began to publish in Yiddish and rapidly assumed a position of leadership in Yiddish literature as an inspiring force. However, Peretz never identified wholly either with the Hebraists or with the Yiddishists; he had written in Yiddish before 1888, and he continued to employ Hebrew to achieve certain of his literary goals after that date. For Peretz had too many intellectual interests, was too many-sided a man, too dynamic an artist and thinker, and, regardless of his social democratic sympathies, was too much of an individualist ever to be a social or literary partisan.

Hence it is not surprising that almost every group and faction in Jewish life and literature should claim some aspect of Peretz as its own. The hundredth anniversary of his birth [was] celebrated by Yiddishists and Hebraists, Zionists and non-Zionists, Socialists and non-Socialists alike. . . . Peretz's diversity was not limited to literary forms

and language. He made a deep impression both on the literature of the Jewish Enlightenment (particularly on the popular and Socialist-oriented aspects) and on the literature of the post-Enlightenment period. He was limited to no particular epoch or ideology. Peretz's career is the history of modern East European Jewish thought and writing in brief.

Three factors contributed to the variety of Peretz's genius: the milieu where he spent the first and largest part of his life; his family; and his unique personality.

Born in Zamosc, a former Russian stronghold near the Austrian and German frontiers, Peretz imbibed these various cultures in his youth, in addition to the Jewish, and they all had a part in the shaping of his remarkably broad *Weltanschauung*.

Other forces conspired to free Peretz from the narrow confines of his birthplace, which despite the appellation of Paris Minor in which its residents delighted, was after all only a provincial Russian-Polish town. Peretz came of a solid Sephardic-Ashkenazic family of distinguished lineage, intellectually sophisticated and rich with the traditional religious culture. Then again, the Jewish community of Zamosc had lost its homogeneous charac-

ter as early as the first half of the 19th century. In Peretz's youth the community was differentiated—not like other Jewish provincial towns only into the Hasidim and their opponents, the Mitnagdim—but also along the lines of the Orthodox, the semi-Orthodox, and the more-or-less enlightened group that included Jewish merchants whose business took them abroad to such cosmopolitan centers as Danzig and Leipzig. Peretz's early profession was also significant. He was a lawyer, an occupation that enriched his social experience and cultural interests. Yet none of these hereditary and environmental influences would have been efficacious had Peretz not been singularly equipped by his own personal qualities to assimilate them. . . .

Peretz's earliest poetry, written in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish when he was very young, shows a confluence of three cultural streams that could not have been accidental: that of Jewish folklore, that of the Enlightenment, and that of the humanistic "positivist" European literature of the 19th century. Even in his juvenilia certain basic characteristics and motifs typical of his later work are evident: a frequently epigrammatic style; humor blended with satire; the "romantic irony" of Heine, simultaneously sentimental and sarcastic; a narrative tendency in his verse, and a fondness for the form and didactic character of the parable; a concern with social problems and radical interpretations of society; and an interest in love as a psychological motif, an innovation in Yiddish literature in the 70's and 80's of the 19th century.

IN THE late 1880's, when Peretz had begun to publish stories in addition to his earlier poetry in both Yiddish and Hebrew, an important change took place in his personal life, as well. He was compelled to quit Zamosc (he had been informed on for propagating Socialist ideas, and the Tsarist regime had deprived him of the right to practice law). For a year Peretz travelled through the Polish provinces as a member of a commission that was investigating the economic situation of the provincial Polish Jews. (The literary result of this trip was a series of excellent sketches of Jewish life in the small towns of Poland.) Afterward Peretz moved his permanent residence to Warsaw, where

he took a position in the Jewish community administration. For half his work-day he labored in the Department of Cemeteries; the other half he devoted to his vigorous social and literary activities. He was not content to write poetry, stories, popular science, essays, and later plays—Peretz was also an editor, publisher, did public reading, lectured, was a communal figure, and became a youth leader, particularly interested in those young people who had literary, artistic, or theatrical ambition and talent.

In 1891 Peretz began to publish almanacs devoted to literature and social problems, which were known as the *Yiddishe Bibliotek*. He was assisted in this work by Jacob Dineson, a popular novelist who devoted almost all of his free time to Peretz, to the point where he practically stopped writing himself to become Peretz's alter ego. The *Bibliotek* was financed by a group of Jewish intellectuals interested in the enlightenment of the Polish Jewish masses. Peretz eagerly discovered and developed talented co-workers.

A few years later (1894-96) Peretz became associated with the students and young workers. With the collaboration of David Pinsky, who shortly afterward emigrated to the United States, Peretz began to publish brief almanacs, in lieu of a periodical, which it was extremely difficult to obtain governmental permission to publish. These *Yomtov Bletlach*, as they were popularly known, appeared on every Jewish holiday and special occasion, and contained, in addition to Peretz's own works, that of other young and liberal Jewish writers. Though never explicitly revolutionary because of the difficulties of censorship, the *Yomtov Bletlach* became a kind of legal organ for the illegal workers' and youth movement, which was then beginning to be organized. Peretz became the hero of these restless groups, though he himself belonged to none of their organizations, and they were influential in popularizing his publications. Peretz frequently attended their underground meetings to give them readings from his works (in 1899 he was arrested at one of these meetings and imprisoned for three months).

Peretz set his personal imprint on the nascent Jewish literature and the movement whose aim it was to instruct the average Jew and to raise his cultural level. He was not

the leader of that movement, because leadership demands a more circumscribed and set credo than the one Peretz possessed. Not being the standard bearer of the Jewish cultural movement, Peretz became its standard. Ceglana No. 1, the modest three-room apartment in Warsaw which he occupied until several years before his death, became the address of Jewish literature. Such literary aspirants as Abraham Reisen, Yehoash (Solomon Bloomgarten), David Pinsky, and later Sholem Asch and H. D. Naumberg came to Warsaw from the provinces, carrying manuscripts in their pockets, especially to see Peretz. Composers, actors, painters, sculptors from every part of Poland, Lithuania, and Russia, young artists and intellectuals—all came to Ceglana No. 1, to read their works aloud and listen to the works of others, to discuss literary and social problems, to sing folk songs and sit at Peretz's table of a Sabbath eve, like Hasidim at the table of their rebbe.

Peretz's influence was not restricted to Europe. From 1893 on, almost all his writings were reprinted in American Yiddish journals and periodicals. Some of his satirical works could only be published pseudonymously in the United States because of the strict Russian censorship. . . .

IT WAS Peretz's contention that a writer must use the vernacular as he would any other language—as Peretz himself did. Even more strongly than Mendele Mocher Seforim, Peretz was opposed . . . to cheap popularization, to belaboring the obvious. An author, he felt, was under an obligation to place his whole intellectual and artistic ego at the disposal of the reader, even the common reader, and dared not offer only fragments of his personality. . . .

Inevitably, Peretz had to modify the Yiddish language to achieve his purposes. . . . Peretz surpassed his contemporaries in the freedom and audacity with which he coined phrases and introduced foreignisms.

As well as enriching Yiddish diction, Peretz accelerated its rhythm. Sholem Aleichem's tempo, like Mendele's, is that of the *shtetl*, the provincial small-town—slow, stable, set. Peretz made Yiddish more dynamic, more urbane. His sentences are short, breathless, rapid, nervous. Like his two colleagues Peretz took the themes of the bulk of his

work from the *shtetl* environment of his youth; but his technique is cosmopolitan, almost European.

There is a similar distinction between Sholem Aleichem and Mendele on the one hand and Peretz in their attitude toward folklore. All three writers introduced a tremendous amount of folklore into their works; but while Mendele and Sholem Aleichem took no pains to separate themselves from their subject matter, either in style or in language, the distance between folklore and literature is . . . in Peretz . . . readily seen.

Concomitant with the flexibility and urban mobility of his diction and style, the restless thrust of his ideas, and the vigor of his emotions was the principle, the very atmosphere, of individualism that Peretz introduced into Yiddish literature. Previous to Peretz, Yiddish literature had been essentially communal. Its background had been Kobsansk, Kasrilevke—the Jewish community *qua* community. Every character represented not only himself but also the group and collective of which he was a part—the poor people or the rich people, the old-fashioned traditionalists or the up-to-date enlightened folk. Peretz did not disassociate himself from the community; he continued the tradition of depicting the social and communal milieu. But his writings give expression to the individual *qua* individual.

The uniqueness of Peretz's accomplishment in Yiddish literature lay in the fact that he was the first to give Yiddish narrative a universal psychological dimension. Peretz's characters are all completely Jewish. But since it was his aim to penetrate to the core of their personalities—and at heart they are primarily human—it may be said that while Sholem Aleichem and Mendele looked primarily for the Jew in the human being, Peretz discovered the human being in the Jew. He presents universal human problems for our consideration in an authentic Jewish form. . . .

At bottom Peretz was never completely a revolutionary realist or a romantic nationalist. His early "realism" was one of depth, often employing folk material and allegorical in spirit. Despite the fact that his Hasidic and folk tales were based on historical, folk, and legendary sources, his "romantic" work never showed the slightest desire to revive the past. Nor was his

romanticism ever that idealism of the Middle Ages so characteristic of the German Romantic movement of the early 19th century. In Peretz's romanticism he attempted to forecast the future in the depths of the past; he was a revolutionary romantic à la Victor Hugo, rather than a romantic à la Chateaubriand. . . .

THERE is a saying in one of Peretz's stories which bears directly on him. In "Skoler Rebbetzin" (from the book *Provintzreise*) the widow of the rabbi of Skol repeats this saying in the name of her husband, who had been a Mitnagid, an opponent of the Hasidim. "When people came to him and complained about the Hasidim, he said: 'There are many kinds of armies, there are many kinds of weapons, there are various customs in the world, but we are all serving the same kindom . . . the *one* kingdom.'"

The kingdom that Peretz served with a variety of weapons was that of humanism, broadly and profoundly comprehended. He did not hesitate to humanize the very mysticism of Hasidism (as, for example, in his "Oyb Nish Noch Hecher"). He believed, as a poet, in the identity of beauty and truth—and truth, in Yiddish as in a few other languages, is a synonym for charity and justice. The common man occupied so large a role in Peretz's works not only because he represented the downtrodden elements of society that Peretz aimed to ameliorate. But, like the sick boy in his story of that title, Peretz also longed for Jewish life to tower toward heaven, like a medieval cathedral. . . .

Typically, Peretz's principal metaphor for dimension was that of unlimited height. Mendele Mocher Seforim helped Yiddish literature take root and draw its sustenance from the deep soil of Jewish life; with Sholom Aleichem the language and literature expanded (although in a work like *Tevye der Milchiger* the dimension of depth is involved again); and Peretz endowed Yiddish with lofty scope.

Peretz reached the peak of his own artistry in the more successful of his Hasidic folk tales. In the course of exalting the heroes of the Hasidic folktales he elevated himself as well. His neo-Hasidism did not consist in his becoming "Hasidized"; it would be more accurate to state that he "Peretzized" Hasidism, as he did the Yiddish folk tales. The

Hasid's faith, his pious fervor, the holiness of his rebbe, his ecstatic singing and dancing—Peretz translated these into the universal language of man's faith in his creative potentialities, the ecstasy of human heroism, and the joy of dreaming. . . .

Thomas Mann has observed that there is a natural human tendency to enjoy looking for and discovering contradictions in the life and work of every great writer. This is certainly true of Peretz, as well. Complementing his romantic fantasy, Peretz was the first to introduce intellectuality of a certain kind into Yiddish literature. Though he formulated no specific ethical credo, Peretz resembled the old Yiddish morality writers. His art was often essentially one of ideas, perhaps because his personality was more ethical than aesthetic. Perhaps that is why he so seldom depicted nature; his true *paysage* was human nature, ambivalent and contradictory in the same sense that Peretz himself was in his relation to the world in general and Jewish life in particular—although he did not view himself as either ambivalent or contradictory. . . .

Spiritually the most youthful of Jewish writers, he longed for "age" in Jewish literature. But this did not imply that Peretz was old-fashioned. There was nothing he feared more than to cease being young; during his last decade he began to experiment again, particularly with plays. Just before he died (he was sixty-three at the time) he began to write juvenile poems and stories. Warsaw was then teeming with thousands of Jewish families which the Tsarist regime had uprooted from their frontier homes at the beginning of World War I. Hundreds of children had lost their parents in the process—and Peretz was one of the first to attend to the needs of these abandoned children by setting up children's homes and institutions. And it was for these children that Peretz, then already sick in body and spirit, composed light verse and charming stories. . . .

Peretz's death (of a heart attack on April 3, 1915) put an end to his career but not to his influence. On the contrary it has continued to grow, and is still growing. Like Rabbi Nachman Bratzlaver, the Hasidic Zaddik, a few of whose stories Peretz retold, he became even more of a master after his death. . . .