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Sholem Asch and his way in literature by Isaac Warshavsky

Asch's colossal energy

His stories and dramas, his recognition in the literary world, his mistakes in life and literature

Sholem Asch who departed from the world at the age of 77 had many qualities but his biggest quality consisted in that he brought out of himself the maximum. Rarely does a man give of himself everything he possesses. About many great artists there is an opinion that they only gave a small portion of their spiritual wealth. Sholem Asch belongs to the lucky exception. Early in his life he discovered his powers and early he learned how to reveal them. Men of the spirit are usually lazy, passive. Often scared of the world of deed. But Sholem Asch belonged to that class of writers that are born doers. He was a man of action. We are not going to review Asch's life history. He started by writing Hebrew but he quickly switched to Yiddish. In the year 1900 at the age of 20 Asch came on a boat on the River Vistula to Warsaw to Peretz. In the same year he published his first story and it was immediately translated in ~~Hebrew~~ <sup>Hebrew</sup> Hasphirah (a Hebrew newspaper) and Eder (another Hebrew paper). In 1903 there appeared the first collected works of Asch in Yiddish by the name IN A SCHLECHTER ZEIT (IN A BAD TIME). But prior to that there appeared two books in Hebrew. About the same time he married Miss Matilda Shapiro, a daughter of a Hebrew Polish writer and pedagogue and commenced to collaborate in the <sup>Friend</sup> Friend (a Yiddish paper). Asch did things rapidly. He lost no time like writers who sit in the cafes and wait for miracles to happen. Asch had the talent of a writer and the energy of a banker or an industrialist. This is the secret of his success.

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Before All other Yiddish writers, Asch discovered the importance of being translated into the European languages. He wasn't satisfied with the discovering. He really did something ab ut it. By nature, Asch was a man who loved people and loved to have contact with them. This is again a characteristic that artists seldom possess. Something else. He had a faculty to discover the right people. Those who could be of help to him in his literary career. In 1904 that was about four years after his arrival in Warsaw Asch made a trip to <sup>Zakopane</sup> Zaczopah, a mountain city which was at that time in Austria. He became acquainted with a Polish writer Witkevitch and in the same year Asch's drama was produced in Krakow. The name was <sup>with</sup> MITTEN STRUM (WITH THE STREAM). Such dynamism by a writer and a Jewish one at that seemed at that time fantastic. Colleagues became jealous. Perets himself was astonished and even a tiny bit jealous. That which others only dreamt of Asch turned into fact. From then on Asch worked year in and year out in newspapers, journals, published books, produced plays, traveled over the world and beat a path to the important publishing houses and theater directors. There is a verse, if you saw a man quicken his action he is fit to stand before kings. Asch was fast in his calling and he presented himself to the great and important personalities of his time.

It need not be thought that he easily arrived there. Asch actually knew no other language except his Yiddish. Perets compared to him was a linguist but Perets remained in his home town where he worked for the Kehila and also in the Mzomir. When Asch became the cosmopolitan

~~... and it is to be expected when every sort of activity.~~

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it lay in his nature.

To Asch's praise it must be said that he had the good sense and the instinct not to mix his cosmopolitanism with his writing. Long years Asch kept himself in the framework of his little town or he kept close to the little town. Asch conceived that in the Great World does not wait for the man from Kutna to come and write about Europe. It's true he traveled the world over but he dealt with our own <sup>native</sup> "raisins and almonds". (ruszinkes & mandlen) He brought to Europe regards from Kutna, <sup>Wyska</sup> Gamin, Jirkline. Many of European great whom Asch met themselves stemmed from these little towns. They had a yearning thither. Asch was for them the typical Eastern European Jew, a kind of spiritual ambassador of those places where there lived the grandfathers, grandmothers, uncles and aunts. Asch wrote about Jews warily, with sentiment. He sang about their poverty. He seldom has a mean word about Jews. In his writings, Asch was a defender of Jews. His works nullified the accusations of the anti-Semites that all Jews are rich and that all Jews travel over the world and want to crash in everywhere. Asch's heroes were homeitters and they led a sedate, peaceful life on the shores of the <sup>Wyska</sup> Weis l. Asch even avoided showing the seamy side of the Poles. On the contrary, he endeavored to ~~written~~ show the nearness between Jew and Gentile.

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Not meaning it he hit the target. Queer as it may sound, Asch's later Christianity works are tightly tied up with Asch's philosophy and Asch's apologetic manner. He strove for peace among religions and races. He thought himself being born to make peace between Jacob and Esau. And what can be better than to show that Judaism and Christianity are the two sides of the same coin? Asch had the illusion that by calling Jesus Rabbi and attributing to him and the Apostles many miracles he would once and for all liquidate the age old quarrel between Jew and Christian. Again Asch remarkably coincided to the thoughts and ideas of the Yahudin, and the Assimilationists and in general those who were tired of carrying the Jewish burden and the Jewish tragedy. His Jesus works, principally, were liked by estranged Jews.

Asch did not have to adjust himself. He was of the same dough that made Stefan Zweig, <sup>or</sup> Franz Werfel. He thought like them and he felt like them. He was near to the kind of thinking of Rabbi Wise or of Louis Marshall.

What of Asch's writing? His creations?

Just because of his great energy in making contact and improving on his time Asch never <sup>despised</sup> despised in his work. It wasn't in his character to fathom too much, to shiver over a letter or a comma, to rewrite many times, to file the steel. The sentimental stuff is never precise and careful of every little item. Asch knew the Polish landscape. His heroes are more or less live people. He had the means to produce mood to give a situation to show human goodness, human yearning. He also had an instinct for drama, not for sharp conflicts, not of that kind of drama that has the nature of a spectacle. Asch was the writer of the wide canvas, but he never rose too high. Neither did he sink too low. He shed a tear at a funeral and right away he danced on a wedding. He groaned at the Yiddish exile and he clapped bravo on what the chaluzim are doing. As is usual with a sentimental man, he belonged to all parties. In every direction he saw the qualities. He could be inspired with every sort of activity.

There were even times when Asch was awed by Stalin. By nature an optimist, Asch saw in everything the possibility of redemption for Jews in the world. Who can know from where and through whom the help will come?

Asch played a big role in the Yiddish literature but he never could rise to the level of Sholem Aleichem. Sholem Aleichem is through and through artist. With Asch art was only of his qualities. Sholem Aleichem wrote like one of us from the inside. Sholem A. . .

Asch right from the start looked at Polish Jews as if he were a visitor from a far land. A rich uncle who came down to a poor relation from abroad. Sholem Aleichem had pity but he was laughing as only an insider can laugh. Sholem Asch had pity only. How can you laugh at poor Jews who struggle for a piece of bread? <sup>On</sup> Sholem Asch's big black eyes there always hung a tear and that tear hangs also over his works.

The last years, Asch lived over a tragedy. Asch was sure that his Jesus works will do good to the Jews. So also think many of the "assimilationist" Jews. But the Jewish Jews would just as soon forego the favor. The Jewish Jew knows what such favors do. Our enemies don't become better but they succeed in diluting the Jewishness and they lead eventually deeper into the morass of assimilation and conversion. Asch wanted to do good by the Jewish body. But he forgot that Jews when it comes to ideas and faith are very stubborn. We won't underwrite a lie because it pleases somebody.

To The Assimilated and Estranged Jews, and also many Gentiles, Asch will remain a martyr. A second Spinoza or Uriel Acosta. But to Jews who are prepared to have the Jewish lot forever and to lead Jewishness to new heights, to them Asch will remain an outsider. He is not flesh of the flesh of Polish Judaism, but an energetic, sentimental good-hearted colorful uncle. Let us give him the respect and the recognition that such an uncle deserves.

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Don't let us forget that compared to our grandfathers, we are all estranged  
jews.