

PREFACE

Preface

By ABRAHAM CAHAN

Editor of the Jewish Daily Forward and author of "Yekl," "The White Terror and the Red," "The Rise of David Levinsky," etc.

THE birth of Yiddish literature in Russia and the beginning of the great Jewish exodus from that country to America are two effects of one and the same cause. The same anti-semitic crusade that forced the Children of Israel to go beyond the seas in search of a safe home, aroused them to a new sense of their racial self-respect and to an unwonted interest in their native tongue.

Prior to the anti-Jewish riots of 1881 educated Jews were wont to look upon their mother tongue as a jargon beneath the dignity of cultured attention. Yiddish, more especially in its written form, was the language of the untutored. People with modern training spoke and wrote Russian. As for the intellectual class of the Talmudic type, it would carry on its correspondence and, indeed, write its essays, verse and fiction, in the language of Isaiah. One wrote Yiddish to one's mother, for the mothers of those days were not apt to understand anything else. For the rest, the tongue of the Jewish masses was never taken seriously and the very no-

tion of a literature in "a gibberish that has not even a grammar" would have seemed ludicrous.

Popular stories and songs were written in Yiddish long before the end of the nineteenth century, but, barring certain exceptions, these were intended exclusively for the most ignorant elements of the populace, and were contemptuously described as "servant-maid literature." (As for Yiddish poetry, it was almost wholly confined to the purposes of the wedding bard.) The exceptions here mentioned belong to the sixties and the seventies, when some brilliant attempts were made in the direction of literature in the better sense of the term by S. J. Abramovitch. But Abramovitch's stories were not even regarded as vanguard swallows heralding the approach of Spring. They aroused an amused sort of admiration. Indeed, it required a peculiar independence of mind to read them at all, and while they were greeted with patronizing applause, it was a long time before they found imitators.

All this changed when the whip of legal discrimination and massacres produced the "national awakening" of the educated Jew. Thousands of enlightened men and women then suddenly made the discovery, as it were, that the speech of their childhood was not a jargon, but a real language,—that instead of being a wretched conglomeration of uncouth words and phrases, it was rich in neglected beauty and possessed a homely vigor full of artistic possibilities. A stimulus was given to writing Yiddish "as the Gentiles do their mother tongues." Abramovitch was hailed as "the father of Yiddish

PREFACE

literature" and his example was followed by a number of new writers, several of whom proved to be men of extraordinary gifts.

The movement bears curious resemblance to that of the present literary renaissance of Ireland.

Some truly marvelous results were soon achieved, the list of writers produced by the new literature including the names of men like Rabinovitch (Sholom Aleikhem) and Peretz, whose tales were crowned with immense popularity.

Sholom Ash belongs to a younger group of Yiddish story-tellers and now that Abramovitch, Rabinovitch and Peretz are in their graves (they have all died during the last two years) he is the most popular living producer of Yiddish fiction.

His narratives and plays are alive with a spirit of poetic realism, with a stronger leaning toward the poetic than toward reality, perhaps, but always throbbing with dramatic force and beauty. Sholom Ash's passion for color and melody manifests itself as much in his rich, ravishing style as in the picturesque images it evokes. The "jargon of servant maids" becomes music in his hands.

His "God of Vengeance," which is his strongest play, is one of the best things he has written in any form. Absorbingly interesting and instinct with human sympathy, it mounts to a natural climax of cataclysmal force and great spiritual beauty.

The theme, while thoroughly original and unique, reflects the artistic traditions of the country in which the author was born and bred. It was a matter of course that the young literature of which he

PREFACE

is a conspicuous representative should shape itself under the influence of the much older and richer literary treasures of Slavic Russia and Poland. If it was natural for the novel of countries like France, Germany, Norway or Italy to fall under the sway of Turgenev, Tolstoi, Dostoyevski, Chekhov and Gorki, how much more so was it for a non-Russian fiction produced on Russian soil to seek guidance, directly or indirectly, in the same source.

Human sympathy is the watchword. Pity for and interest in the underdog—the soul of Russian art—became, from the very outset, the underlying principle of the new-born Yiddish art. No human being is so utterly brutalized as to possess not a single spark worthy of the artist's sympathetic, though ruthlessly impartial, attention,—this is the basic rule of Yiddish letters.

Himself a creature of the gutter, Yekel Tchaftchovitch, the central figure of "The God of Vengeance," is stirred by the noblest ambition known to a father in the world of orthodox Judaism. Imbedded in the slime that fills Yekel's soul is a jewel of sparkling beauty. But the very income by which he seeks to secure his daughter's spiritual splendor contains the germs of her loathsome fall and of his own crushing defeat.

The clash between Yekel's revolting career and his paternal idealism, and the catastrophe to which it inevitably leads form one of the strongest and most fascinating situations known to the modern drama.

PREFACE

I cannot conclude without a word of well-earned praise for the English version of "The God of Vengeance." Dr. Isaac Goldberg's translation is not only a thoroughly correct and felicitous equivalent of the original, but a piece of art in itself.

New York City, April, 1918.

Introduction

SHOLOM ASH is one of the chief authors in contemporary Yiddish letters,—a literature at present enjoying a renaissance that attests the remarkable vitality of a people long oppressed in intellectual no less than in economic domains,—a literature that has much to teach America in the way of fearlessness before the facts of life, frankness in their interpretation and persistent idealism in face of the most degrading and debasing environment. Indeed, the conjunction of squalid surroundings, sordid occupation and idealistic yearning to be met so frequently in Jewish writers arises most naturally from the peculiar conditions of much of the life in ghettos the world over.

It is interesting to consider Ash's "The God of Vengeance" in connection with a play like "Mrs. Warren's Profession." To be sure, there is no technical resemblance between the two dramas; nor, despite an external similarity in backgrounds, is there any real identity of purpose. Shaw's play is essentially sociological, and is a drama of disillusionment. Ash's piece glows with poetic realism and recounts an individual tragedy not without symbolic power. Yet the essentially (though not conventionally) moral earnestness of both Shaw and Ash brings the circles of their themes in a sense tangent to each other.

Mrs. Warren cherishes no delusions about her

dubious profession,—neither the delusion of that sentimentalization of the prostitute which Dumas helped so much to effect and which Augier strove to combat, nor the delusion of the conservative, conventional horror before an institution for the perpetuation of which conservatism and conventionalism are much to blame. If Yekel and his wife (in Ash's play) are not so enlightened as Mrs. Warren in their views upon the traffic off which they live, they are in their own crude way equally sincere in beholding in it a business quite as legitimate as any other. With the same inconsistency with which Hindel implores Heaven for aid in achieving her nefarious aims, after which she promises to be a model wife and mother (See Act Two), Mrs. Warren at the end of Shaw's play swears by Heaven that henceforth she will lead a life of evil.

In the case of Yekel and his wife, as in Mrs. Warren's, another touch of inconsistency is added by the agreement that theirs is not the best of professions. Crofts, too, in the English play, discusses the business with all the matter-of-factness of Ash's Shloyme, yet considers himself a gentleman none the less.

Rifkele, of course, is no Vivie. Ash's simple-minded Jewish girl is a victim, not a rebel. Yet in either case the daughter is lost to the parents, and the power of money is of no avail to win the child back. And just as Yekel, in his impotence, blasphemously thrusts the Holy Scroll from his household, so does Mrs. Warren, defeated in her attempt to win back her daughter, cry "From this

INTRODUCTION

time forth, so help me Heaven in my last hour, I'll do wrong and nothing but wrong. And I'll prosper on it." Perhaps, too, the retribution which in each case is visited upon the parent arises from the fact that both Mrs. Warren and Yekel have, in Vivie's accusatory words, "lived one life and believed in another."

"The God of Vengeance," despite conclusions too easily drawn, is not a sex play. When Ash wishes to deal with sex as sex he is not afraid to handle the subject with all the poetry and power at his command. Such a play as his "Jephthah's Daughter" treats the elemental urge of sex with daring, beauty and Dionysiac abandon. Here, too, a golden symbolism wafts through the piece. Again, in his powerful novel "Mottke the Vagabond," Ash has given us scenes from the underworld of Warsaw that are unparalleled for unflinching truth to detail. "The God of Vengeance," however, despite the sordid environment in which the play takes place, possesses a certain moral beauty,—a beauty much dimmed, perhaps, by the repellant human beings who are its carriers, but a beauty none the less. Its symbolism and its poetry lift it far above the brothel in which it takes place. And what a strong conception is the Holy Scroll, itself one of the chief characters, and how frightfully eloquent in the mysterious, religious power that the dramatist has woven around it!*

*The Holy Scroll, the religious significance of which is fully explained in the course of the play, is a parchment manuscript containing the first five books of the Bible, together known as the Torah, or Law. (Pentateuch).

INTRODUCTION

First produced by the famous director Max Reinhardt, at the Deutsches Theater, Berlin, in 1910, Ash's powerful play quickly made its way to the chief stages of Europe. It has been played all over Germany, Austria, Russia, Poland, Holland, Norway, Sweden and Italy. In Italy it created a marked impression during the entire season of 1916. "The God of Vengeance" has been translated into Hebrew, German, Russian, Polish, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, Italian and French.

Ash himself is yet a young man, having been born near Warsaw, some thirty-seven years ago. He is at present settled in New York, where pages flow in rapid succession from his prolific pen. Among his better known works are the following:

THE TOWN. A collection of sketches depicting Yiddish life in the "staedtil" of the Old World. It was this work that brought him into prominence at the age of twenty-four.

MERI and THE ROAD TO SELF. A pair of novels forming a continuous whole, in which the author, with a wealth of color and episode, depicts the wanderings of Jewish souls in search of self-realization. The background, mainly that of the Russian revolution of 1905, shifts to various parts of the globe. The books are rich in poetry and movement, and have been referred to as the epic of the Yiddish part in the revolution of 1905. Besides this the love story of Meri Rosenzweig and Misha, and the figures of Rachel and Kovalski the

INTRODUCTION

artist, lend to the novels all the charm that love can add to adventure and beautiful language to both.

MOTTKE THE VAGABOND. (Translated into English.) A powerful tale of life in the underworld of Warsaw, and the career of a Yiddish "cellar-child." American critics have found Ash, in this book, comparable in various respects to such authors as Hugo, Dickens and Gorki.

THE SINNER. (Translated into English.) A one-act symbolic play of intense power, which has been likened for its atmosphere to certain of Maeterlinck's dramas. The story, which deals with the refusal of a Jewish grave to receive the corpse of a man who has sinned by marrying out of the faith, is developed with penetrating skill and impartial outlook.

OUR FAITH. A full-length drama upon a theme similar to that just touched upon. The author's refusal to cater to orthodox views shows his artistic independence.

SHORT STORIES. The best of the numerous short stories that Ash has published in his various collections attain a high degree of artistic excellence. That same nervous prose as distinguishes his longer pieces, that same linguistic iridescence,—one might term it,—as he achieves in such remarkable places as Chapter XIII (Part One) of "Meri" and Chapter XLI (Part Two) of "The Road to Self," are encountered often in his many shorter tales.