

Literature with a purpose...

(for the 30th anniversary jubilee of the 'Bund.')

by Yisroel Shtern (1927)

Translated by Floris Kalman (2006)

What aspect of a political party matters most to a Yiddish writer?
Naturally his prime concern is their attitude to Yiddish literature.

There are two kinds of parties: those of the right and those of the left. Typically, the Jewish man of letters can spend his life in happy harmony with the first. He will not hear a single word of criticism from them. With the second however, he will often have to quarrel, engage in polemics, experience vexation and want to win them over. But in fact those very disputes and altercations create a sense of intimacy and friendly understanding. For each side senses that it needs the other.

I often reflect that some amongst our right-wing people might claim that our writers pay insufficient attention to religious themes. Others might accuse Yiddish literature of failing to place due emphasis on nationalist leanings and goals. But in fact one rarely comes across such articles – and then only from outsiders, unaffiliated with any party.

Where modern Yiddish literature does encounter severe criticism, it comes entirely from people on the extreme left. In both Russia and America, it is they who make every effort to bring literature under their influence. Here in Poland one gets the impression that the lawful¹ political party 'Bund' is the only one to make demands on writers and remonstrate with them at every opportunity. Whether pleading or punishing, the Bund make demands nevertheless.

It must be admitted that in Poland we writers are much better off than our colleagues in Moscow and New York. There preachers and propagandists make things difficult – they want to rob literature of its independence entirely. They make every attempt to enslave it – whereas the true art of words must itself be the one to enslave. I am not a believer in writing for the sake of writing. There needs to be an ardent yearning, a lively striving for words to have soul, for an image to be moving. Otherwise poems and stories become clichéd and boring, reptilian-cold, even if they sing of fires and revolutions. This is something the signed-up members of the political party forget. They don't comprehend that, willy-nilly, true art clothes in striking, vivid figures all the hidden longings that tremble in the lap of time. Art brings on their realization...

Can people who don't grasp this be trusted? Hardly. And our mistrust grows all the more when we become aware of the tendency in those circles

¹ (all footnotes by Ed.): the Bund, allied to the Polish Socialist Party, was legal in independent Poland, in contrast to the underground Communist party.

to belittle the importance of Yiddish; when we discover that those people (for whom Hebrew is as *trayf* as pork) try in every way to spread the view that Yiddish is of no great importance; and that Yiddishism, as they see it, is a shameful insult. You get the impression that there is some connection between their wish to put Yiddish literature behind a little shop counter, and their attacks on the Yiddish language... not a very savoury connection. 'We don't favour "Yiddishism" so much as "humanism"', they tell us. And we think: all right, not Yiddishism, more humanism. A fine word, but it's like the fine young man you discover in your own room, though you clearly remember locking the door. He may be well-dressed, but it looks suspicious all the same...

And when accusations come from these same circles that the 'Bund' is turning Yiddish into a fetish – it's no wonder that the 'Bund' comes to feel very close to us.

Because for writers who will devote an entire day to the beauty of a single line; who burn themselves out in red-hot inspiration, to chisel out a single word – for them the language they create in is a sacred thing.

Certainly the 'Bund' at times presents literature with unacceptable expectations. After all, so far as literature is concerned, the 'Bund' itself has the very same qualities and weaknesses as any Party, with many interests besides cultural and artistic pursuits.

But in the first place, the 'Bund' is not so absurdly devoted to proletarian culture, not mesmerised by it as if it were the *Shulkhan Arukh*². Secondly, one forgives the 'Bund' a great deal, when one considers its cultural activities over the period of its existence. For while the Shomers³ and the Bloshtayns were descending on the Jewish public like locusts, it was Bundist pioneers who were the first to form Workers' Circles, where they read Peretz's humoresques and Pinski's stories. Early modern Yiddish literature developed in harmonious proximity to the forging of modern Jewish socialism. At a time when on the one hand boorishness, ignorance, and mass illiteracy prevailed, while on the other – choking assimilation, with a Russified intelligentsia, the Bundists were the first to use the 'jargon' i.e., Yiddish, undertaking to enlighten the people in their own tongue. From their ranks came teachers who would labour all winter in a village somewhere for a pittance, just to have a quiet space to complete the translation of a science book into Yiddish for the public. Due to the immature state of the language at that time, this was a very strenuous task. They were the founders of the 'jargonist committees'.

² "The Prepared Table", by Joseph Caro (1488 – 1575), the authoritative Jewish code of daily practice.

³ Shomer was the pen-name of the most successful Yiddish writer of *shund* (trash) penny romances – see footnote 8, p.5, of Shtern's essay "Crowns" on this site. *Shund* was a preoccupation of Shtern's: see in "About Shtern" Y. Kahan's report of Shtern's lecture in Ostrolenka.

At first this was naturally only a means to an end. But gradually it became a goal in itself. At the beginning Peretz's 'Yontev'⁴ sheets were read out to workers for the purpose of political agitation. A piece like

A night to delight
such a darling night
mind the fire
be careful of the fire

or 'the ten Commandments of a small businessman', or 'The fast day', written in a radical spirit, or even the Hoshana Raba column entitled 'What should I want?' – all these writings were well-suited to arouse, to encourage, to set on fire and call to battle. But together with the propaganda of social ideas other things too slipped into the ear: the well-turned phrase, the refined style, the polished imagery. The workers became closer to the writers and the writers equally – to them. Our earliest writers could not altogether shake off the influence of our first street fighters. When our great Peretz fantasises his desires on the night of Hoshana Raba, at the very moment that the heavens split, he lists a number of wishes, ending finally with these words: '...but boots have ears, oxen – long tongues, and as for me – I am very, very frightened...'

Of course, the 'cell' members rejoiced, saying: 'he is entirely ours'. And this was not far from the truth – Peretz was theirs, to a considerable extent. He even began to experience similar difficulties: his story '*Bontshe Shvayg*'⁵ failed to pass the Vilna censorship.

True, he was with them. But was he really wholly at one with them? Well, it would have been no great service to Yiddish literature nor, in consequence, to the most sincere friend of our literature - the 'Bund' itself, if our greatest literary master had not progressed beyond '*The Shtrayml*'⁶ or '*Bontshe Shvayg*'.

And it came to pass that, among the very works which almost all had a bias and thus could be used by the earliest Bundists as propaganda, there suddenly appeared a piece of writing such as 'The Kabbalists'⁷...To this day we do not know what inspired Peretz to write this work. We only

⁴ see I.L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture, Ruth R Wisse (1991), p.41: seventeen issues of Yontev bletlekh (Holiday Pages) appeared, 1894 – 1896, edited by Peretz and D. Pinski (a Bundist); they were aimed at circumventing the government refusal of a regular Yiddish periodical, and Wisse calls them "the most radical Yiddish publications of their time, excepting only the illegal pamphleteering of revolutionaries."

⁵ 1894. Available in English as *Bontshe the Silent*; always among Peretz's most popular stories.

⁶ 1893. (the fur hat) – a tale of an impoverished villager, sustained only by his fantasies.

⁷ 1894. Another story available in English, not a novel as Shtern dubs it below. Shtern's reading of it is in interesting contrast to that of Ruth Wisse, op. cit. above.

know that it was intended as a kind of jest, a satire on Kabbalists and, quite by chance ... through his mighty talent it turned into a serious novel, and its wonder and profoundness will endure for generations to come.

It happened by chance. And in the same way, by chance and by stealth, Yiddish literature came to demonstrate that its individual struggles, and its seeking for perfection, were just as worthwhile as the battles of nations or the class struggle. A writer who can rise up to the realms of reflection and spiritual nobility, drags millions of kindred but frail spirits along with him, freeing them from the yoke of matter. In so doing he achieves something just as real and important as social reform.

Certainly at the time the workers' leaders shrugged their shoulders, not understanding Peretz: what did this have to do with the rest? What had suddenly got into him? But then one of the Bundists tells a curious story. There were two of them doing time in a Tsarist prison for political transgressions, two friends in adjoining cells. At the foot of the wall that separated them, near the floor, was a hole made by mice and enlarged by prisoners. In the evenings the two men would lie flat on the ground, each on his side, ear and mouth pressed to the hole, and carry on a conversation. On one occasion one of them spoke up: "You know, it is only here in jail where we have so much time to think that I have begun to grasp the meaning of Peretz's 'Kabbalists'..."

This is symbolic of the 'Bund' and its attitude to Yiddish literature. First comes incomprehension, but comprehension, astonishment and finally 'getting' the meaning follow; whilst expectations are still placed on the writer, at the same time his every talent is enjoyed; the demand that literature serve the proletariat remains, yet writing is loved for what it is...

When we realise that these expectations, linked with a love of literature, are seeping little by little into the hearts of the tens of thousands of supporters of the 'Bund'; when we see that the Bundist *Folktsaytung*— 'the people's paper' — is the only daily in Poland that tries — despite its poor finances — to maintain a weekly literary supplement; when we see that it is among the very few newspapers that devote space to the Yiddish school; when we hear how its detractors to the right and the left accuse it of making Yiddish into a fetish — then we think: if every Bundist regards as holy a Yiddish book, a Yiddish school, a Yiddish theatre — if this is indeed true — then if throughout its 30 years' history it had achieved only this, it would have done a great deal.

Let the 'Bund' go on seeking to use literature as a means, let it wish for a literature with a 'purpose'; for without doubt it is clearly sincere in its desire for the existence of literature, a Yiddish literature.
