

Serious and Otherwise

by ben dor

APROPOS OF BERDICHEV

AT the end of the solemn season of the High Festivals he was seen by his disciples looking pensively into the dark night.

"I think," he suddenly remarked, "that we are about to have a good year."

"Why?" asked the disciples.

"Because even if we had stood before a *Gazlan*, a cut-throat, and implored him the way we did in our Berdichev Synagogue this year, his heart would have softened and he would have responded to our supplications."

This is one of the many folk-tales associated with the name of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, who lived at the end of the eighteenth century. He, his tales, his good words and that gripping song "Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's Kaddish" is perhaps all that is left to us of a city which was lately stormed by the Russian troops and which, to the outside world, was merely "another great German bastion." To us it represents a tale of high spirit and great deeds. For 200 years Berdichev bore the name of "Jerusalem of Volhynia."

THE Berdichever's Song is almost as popular as Eli Eli. Paul Robeson sang it the other day at a Jewish rally in New York to the delight of all. Anton Rubinstein, the musician who was born in Berdichev, must have drawn inspiration from the chassidic tunes. But even more important is the place which Berdichev occupies in Jewish literature. It was, indeed, the cradle of modern Hebrew and Yiddish prose. Here Mendele Mocher Sforim, the father of the Jewish novel, wrote some of his best books; most of his characters were drawn from the people of Berdichev. The "nice" Jews and the "bad" Jews, the City fathers, the learned, the tradesmen, and the "luftmenschen" were all there. He saw the beauty and the squalor, the glory and the sordidness of the alleys of Berdichev, and built his stories around them.

Balzac, the French novelist, was there before. By the middle of last century he passed through Berdichev on his way to a beloved Polish countess. Afterwards he wrote a vitriolic piece about the Jews of Berdichev. He saw "the little houses dancing a polka," but could not appreciate the mob of Jews who surrounded him. A Jewish writer, Mendele, was the first to "discover" Berdichev. Very soon he was followed by that great humorist, Sholom Aleichem, who made the name of the town famous throughout the Jewish world. His brother, Wolf, described the visit in a book published in Kiev in 1939. Sholom Aleichem pointed to a little house in a narrow alley, and said, "Here begins the 'golden street' of our poor language and literature." It was the house

in which Mendele had lived.

He then elaborated on his own plans to describe Berdichev so that "it will ring out across the world" (*"Die Welt vet Klingen"*).

"If the river *Gnilopiakte* were full of ink it would not suffice to describe the whole of Berdichev . . ." he said to his brother.

AND then began a series of stories which did indeed "ring out." Expressions and phrases from the Berdichev stories have entered the language of the Jew and have become incorporated in it. If your car is on the retired list, a dilapidated old crock carrying a host of passengers from a Jewish party, you will say that it is "the Berdichev tramway." "Berdichever Hotel" needs no comment. It has come to sea resorts of the West.

In this city Sholom Aleichem undertook, in 1888, the publication of the "People's Library," a turning point in the history of Jewish literature. Many of our classics were printed in this "Library." This, however, was not yet the end of Berdichev's role in our literature. A modern work entitled, "The Family Mashber," has just been written by the Berdichev-born writer, Der Nister, and M. Meisel has published a monograph on the city itself.

A HUNDRED years ago there were some fifty thousand Jews in the town and an equal number in the surrounding district. By 1926, Berdichev's Jewish population had declined to 28,000, and there must have been a corresponding decline in the district.

But what of to-day? One waits with trepidation for the "Jewish" cables from Moscow with their usual gruesome details. Nothing was left of the great German fortress. Has anything remained, we wonder, of the citadel which harboured the Chassidic saint, the Hebrew novelist, the Yiddish humorist, and those many delightful figures who walked through the pages of Mendele and Sholom Aleichem?

Leopold Kessler

LEOPOLD KESSLER, whose death was reported recently from New York, played an important part in the early stages of the South African Zionist movement. He was a brilliant man, a noted mining engineer, an author of two books on the Witwatersrand gold fields, and had an interesting and adventurous career.

A member of a German-Jewish family, he was one of the numerous German Jews who drifted into South Africa's young mining industry. But unlike his other "landsleit," he retained a loyalty to his people which the glittering prospects of South Af-

rica did not eradicate. He studied mining in a German Academy where there were hardly any Jews. Nevertheless, even in those early days, he realised that the atmosphere in Germany was being contaminated by pseudo-scientists who preached the superiority of the Germans and the inferiority of other races, especially the Jews. This prompted him to study and think about Israel.

Later, when he came to South Africa and was on his way to Rhodesia, he picked up a "Jewish Chronicle," learnt of the existence of a Zionist movement in this country. He was in Johannesburg in 1893 managing various mines. Throughout he was associated with Zionist work, and six years later, in 1899, he gained the distinction of being the first direct representative of South Africa at a Zionist Congress. After this congress, he visited Palestine, and to use his own words, he went as an "independent private explorer and traversed the whole of the country, from South to North and from East to West, mostly on horseback." When he returned to South Africa, he continued to take an active part in the movement. In 1902, he led the expedition to the Sinai Peninsula in order to study the famous El-Arish proposal made by Joseph Chamberlain.

He also participated in Zionist propaganda activity in various parts of Europe, met Herzl on several occasions, and collaborated with him in various spheres. Though he visited this country again, his home was in London from 1903. Here he was asso-

ciated with the acquisition of the "Jewish Chronicle" by a Zionist group. (At the time of his death he was chairman of the journal's Board of Directors.)

During the Great War, Kessler was a member of the committee which negotiated with the British Government in connection with the Balfour Declaration. His last visit to this country was, I think, at the end of the last war. For some years past he lived in retirement. He remained interested in Jewish affairs, paid several visits to Palestine, and was proud of the fact that his three children had spent some time there.

Modest Einstein

WHILE posing for his portrait at the studio of Sir William Rothstein, Professor Albert Einstein had for his constant companion a solemn gentleman having something of the appearance of an old tortoise who listened intently while Einstein propounded to him certain tentative theories in the field of higher mathematics.

From time to time the stranger would shake his head, whereupon Einstein would pause, reflect, and then start a new line of inquiry. When the discoverer of the theory of relativity was leaving after the final sitting, the presence of the third party was explained.

"He is my mathematician," said Einstein, "who examines problems which I put before him, and checks their validity. You see I am not myself such a good mathematician."

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