

Conference To Promote Yiddish Culture Held In Johannesburg

A DECISION to form a South African Yiddish Cultural Federation which is to co-ordinate, strengthen and expand the activities of the various literary and cultural societies and circles, was taken at the first Yiddish Kultur Konferenz, which was held at the Jewish Workers' Club, Johannesburg, over the week-end.

The major aims of the newly formed Federation include the establishment of a network of Yiddish folk schools, a Yiddish theatre, library and magazine. Delegates from all parts of the Union as well as Rhodesia took part in the conference.

Mr. M. Szur in opening the conference called on delegates to stand as a mark of respect for the great Jewish cultural centres throughout Europe that had been destroyed. This was followed by the singing of the Partisan song "Never Say It Is The Last Road" with the accompaniment of Bruno Raikin and the Jewish Workers' Club choir.

Mr. Szur said that many Jews had been duped into the idea that the days of Yiddish were numbered. He assured the delegates that all that was necessary to save the Yiddish language in this country was the creation of an organisation which would unite and consolidate the activities of those interested in the promotion of Yiddish language and culture.

Mr. Barski, who presided over the first session, said that if the conference had been called 40 years earlier, Yiddish life in South Africa would have had a different colour.

The highlight of the evening was an address by Mr. I. Charlash, Principal of the Yiddish Folk School, on "The Yiddish Language in South Africa." He struck an optimistic note by citing

examples from history to prove that the destruction of one civilisation always heralded the beginning of the next and served as its foundation. The small Jewish communities of to-day, he said, would become big communities, and in twenty years' time these communities would once more form a nation.

Mr. C. Gershater, in a brief address, appealed to the newly formed Federation to steer clear of politics. The question of culture, he said, had to be separated from that of politics, otherwise the purpose of culture would be frustrated. He pointed out that whereas the Jewish people had lost one-third of its number, the Yiddish language had lost as many as 90 per cent. of its speakers. Yiddish should become our second "loshen kodesh" (holy language).

Reports were then delivered by M. Lazar (Poale Zion), J. Batnitsky ("African Jewish Newspaper"), A. Pinkus (Jewish Workers' Club) Mr. Rogoff (Durban), J. L. Segal (Pretoria), Dr. M. Myers (Rhodesia), Mr. Leibowitz (Eastern Province), Mr. Lewinsky (O.F.S.), Mr. Awerbuch (Cape Town Literary Circle), Mrs. Turok (Cape Town Dramatic Circle), Mr. Barski (Friends of Biro Bidyan), Mr. C. Gershater (Ophir), Mr. Charlash (Yiddish Folk School), Mr. Szur (Johannesburg Literary Circle), Mr. Kagan (Humanistic College), Mr. B. Lazersohn (Federation of Lithuanian

Jewry), Mr. K. Winik (Vilner Society), Mr. Zelikow (Ort Oze) and Mr. Alexander Lewin (S.A. Jewish Board of Deputies).

Resolutions

It was decided that the Yiddish Cultural Federation would be an impartial organisation which would exclude politics.

Mr. Bennun (opposing this resolution) said that it was necessary for culture to have a political background. He suggested that a common political programme should be worked out. He was supported by Mr. Buirski.

The original resolution was adopted by a majority vote.

It was decided that the Cultural Federation should establish Yiddish secular schools in which Hebrew would be a subject. Hebrew would not necessarily be introduced immediately but at a time deemed suitable by a committee of pedagogues and parents.

This resolution evoked much discussion.

Mr. J. Batnitsky opposed the original suggestion that Hebrew should be introduced only in the higher classes. Mr. B. Gersman said that many parents would be antagonised if Hebrew was introduced into the curriculum only as an afterthought. Mr. A. Lewin said that without Hebrew the study of Jewish history would be unreal.

Mr. K. Winik said that if the Yiddish Folk School had devoted a few minutes each day to the study of Hebrew it would have attracted many more children to its doors.

Mr. Awerbuch said that the Jewish people possessed only one culture which could not be split into separate Hebrew and Yiddish components. The Folk School, he said, should concentrate on Yiddish and Hebrew would automatically follow.

Mr. L. Feldman said that if children were taxed with both Hebrew and Yiddish from the start they would end up by knowing neither language.

Ultimately the resolution was amended as stated above.

It was further decided that the Cultural Federation should devote much of its activities to Jewish youth, and, if necessary, should try and approach them also through the medium of English; that the Cultural Federation should pay special attention to cultural work among Yiddish-speaking women; that it should establish a permanent Lecturers' Bureau to supply the towns and villages with a constant flow of Yiddish speakers; that it should create a library and also help spread Yiddish books and progressive Yiddish journals; that it should strive towards the establishment of a Yiddish publishing house and possibly also the creation of a Yiddish literary magazine; that it should establish a Yiddish theatre and that it should make efforts to bring out to this country well-known Yiddish artists, writers and lecturers from overseas.

The Federation adopted a budget of £2,500 for administrative and organisational work during its first year of office. It will further inaugurate a fund of £10,000 which is to be used in its initial work.

Elections

The following Executive was elected:—

L. Feldman, M. Szur, D. Fram, Ch. Achron, J. Fine, M. Lazar, B. Levenberg, Z. Levy, F. Zygielbaum and J. L. Segal. In addition one member is to be appointed from Port Elizabeth, one member from Bloemfontein, two members from Cape Town, one member from Durban and four more to be co-opted later.

SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS

At the meeting of nominees for the elections to the Rand Central School Board the following were selected to figure on a special "ticket" (six of these are at present members of the Board and were chosen for the interest they have already taken in educational affairs):

Mr. John Duthie, M.E.C., who served for 12 months with the London School Board, and for 12 years with the Cape Education Department.

Mr. I. Harris, a past principal of the Park School, Turfontein, and the Jewish School.

The Rev. J. B. Webb, minister of the Methodist Central Hall, Johannesburg.

Mrs. H. M. McKay, past principal of the Malvern West Primary School, who has been a member of the Central School Board for about 15 years.

Mrs. S. H. McKechnie, a former teacher.

Mr. H. A. Jack, M.P.C., a retired school principal and former secretary of the Transvaal Teachers' Association.

Miss K. N. Ramsbottom, former principal of the Parktown High School for Girls.

The Rev. Mr. Wessels, vice-president of the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa.

Warsaw Ghetto Commemoration Evening in Pretoria

Organised by the Pretoria Zionist Council, a Warsaw Ghetto Commemoration Evening will be held at the Jewish Memorial Hall, Pretoria, on Thursday evening, June 12. Addresses will be delivered by Dr. S. Rappaport and Mr. S. Zygelbaum, and Mr. Zygelbaum and Mr. J. Movzon will render various items.

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