

The Romance of a Great Hebrew Publishing Firm

A South African's Impressions

By

J. Sack

IN Wentworth Street, London, there is a modest-looking shop which has become one of the institutions of English, nay of world Jewry. There is nothing to indicate its importance; its stands in the shadows of big warehouses and clothing factories; and street-hawkers park their barrows right in front of the entrance with impunity. But once you enter, you become aware that there is something different about it, and that there is romance in the place. For it is the Hebrew publishing establishment of Shapiro, Valentine and Co., and for 98 years has occupied a place of extreme importance in the life of the Jewish community.

Here innumerable Hebrew readers and text-books have been published, most of them destined to become standard works. Here Rev. da Sola together with Mr. I. Valentine published the famous Festival Prayers in use everywhere to-day; here Rev. A. P. Mendes broke new ground with his translation of the Pentateuch. And here, too, over 100,000 copies of the Seder Tefilah have been issued and dispatched to every quarter of the globe. So you see, there is some reason for the importance of that modest-looking shop.

Recently, I called in to have a chat with Mr. Barnett Samuel, M.A., head of the firm. It was just before Rosh Hashonah.

"Could I see Mr. Samuel?" I asked the girl at the counter.

"Yes, will you come this way?"

I did. I passed through a series of rooms each packed with books, and at last came to the office of Mr. Samuel.

I knocked at the door.

"Come in," said a tired voice.

I entered.

I found Mr. Samuel at his desk. Papers and catalogues were piled up in front of him; to his left stood a pyramid of books, in peril of collapsing at any moment; and everywhere there was confusion.

"Are you shifting?" I asked. "I'm sorry to have come at so awkward a time."

"Shifting? Oh no!" he replied. "We get this every year before the high holidays. You see it is a Jewish characteristic to leave things till the last moment. Jews from all over the world (including South Africa) wait till a week or two before Rosh Hashonah, to order their Prayer books, taleisim, and so on, and as a result we are rushed off our feet trying to cope with our orders."

I looked at the perspiring face of Mr. Samuel and then at the confusion in the room, and I believed him!

"But surely you can make your preparations long before the rush?" I asked.

"We do. We begin preparing for Rosh Hashonah immediately after the Pass-over. . . ."

Mr. Samuel could go no further. There was a knock at the door. An old customer, a Persian Jew, was waiting to see him. He went out.

I sat speculating on the romance of the firm and its history. On the desk before me were letters . . . letters from all parts of the world. Letters in a dozen different languages. Letters from University professors, from pedlars, from pugilists, from musicians. Yes, here was romance, and in this unpretentious office the needs of all these Jews were attended to. Sidurim had to be sent to Aden, taleisim to the Canary Islands. . . . Idle speculation, you say? Day dreaming? Oh no! When Mr. Samuel returned, I said:

"You must cater for a very cosmopolitan public. Am I right in thinking so?"

"Yes, you are," he replied. "My experience has taught me that the Jews are really a wonderfully cosmopolitan race. There are all kinds of orthodox Jews, too. Not only *Chassidim* or Jews from Eastern Europe, as some people fondly imagine."

He took up a letter.

"This," he said, "is from one of the firm's best customers. He is a Scotch converted-Jew and has lived for many years in the Fiji Islands. He is constantly buying the most profound works on Hebrew Religion, as well as taleisim, and other requisites."

He held up another letter. "This," he said, "is from one of that strange race of black Jews who live in Southern India. Their observances are a trifle different from ours, but they are Jews, and often ardent ones as well!"

And Mr. Samuel has the unique privilege of meeting all these different types of Jews, and also of helping them to form cordial friendships among themselves. For not only do they write, but they often come personally to the establishment. Thus on certain days you will find aged Jews talking to smart young Americans; chutzim from Palestine, discussing with young Anglo-Jewish students, problems of irrigation and agriculture; sephardim and ashkenazim chatting amiably. It really is a miniature parade of World Jewry, with this particular spot as the rendezvous.

And this is the impression I carried away with me when I left Mr. Samuel, passed through the shop and out into Wentworth Street. The firm is known all over the world for its fine publishing record. But how many people know that this is one of the most romantic spots in London; and that here the most curiously assorted members of the Jewish faith meet on terms of cordial intimacy?

In the Garden

A Song of Palestine

by

RACHEL BLOWSTEIN

(Translated from the Hebrew by Maurice Samuel.)

Calm is the garden with blue and gray

In the peace of dawn.

I will rise from the dust of yesterday

To faith in the morn.

Accept with humble heart and free
The judgment that was given me.

A girl walks through the garden
beds

And scatters rain;

The withered leaves lift up their
heads

And live again.

The bitter things that God must do
I will forgive and start anew.

Recent Gramophone Records

COLUMBIA.

IN Columbia's Collector's List there is a record that ought to be in every Jewish home. It was made by members of the famous Habimah Players of Palestine and I presume this one is the forerunner of a series. On one side, Rowena, one of the principals of the company, declaims and partly intones a piece taken from the play, "Der Golim," which is a kind of prayer given at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. It is a long time since I have experienced so deep an emotion as this disc has given me. Rowena has a very beautiful voice and the Hebrew words are uttered with such effect as to compel a new respect for the language. If Hebrew sounds like this! On the opposite side is an arrangement of a well-known folk song from the opera "Elihu Hanovi," sung exquisitely to a well recorded organ accompaniment. D.B. 1186.

A new recording of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony was overdue and now Columbia supplies it and in a manner that leaves little to be desired. It is to the good also that it is issued on black discs which ensures a wide sale. The orchestra is the London Philharmonic and the conductor the famous Felix Weingartner. The reading is straightforward throughout, though I have never heard the bridge between the third and fourth movements taken with such thrilling subtlety and, at the climax, with such tremendous forcefulness as in this present version. The recording is superb. D.X.516-519.

A.A.H.

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