

HEBREW SONGS ON THE RHINE

by C. Gershater

THE Palestine Maritime League struck on the novel idea of inviting some of the people at Congress to a reception, not in the usual surroundings of the Mustermesse, but on a motor boat.

As the vessel moved out of the jetty, near the Herzl Hotel ("Three Kings") we found ourselves in an atmosphere somewhat different from the usual Congress proceedings. Everybody was in a good mood. We told the distinguished speakers that here they could talk as long as they liked—nobody would walk out. Looking round I noticed that none of the guests bothered to look through the windows at the smooth waters of the Rhine; everybody was engaged in animated conversation. There might even have developed a discussion of "Congress problems" if a group of young Palestinians had not started to sing.

And now we were reminded that this was the seventh day of Congress, yet it was the first time that we heard Hebrew songs. Some ten years ago it would have been impossible for 3,000 Zionists to meet under the same roof and get away without a couple of hearty sing-songs; but now things are different, and the young people are different. At this Congress there were more young men and women than at any previous Congress, but they did not sing, excepting at the outing on the boat, which offered a little relaxation and a pleasant exception to the general rule.

There was something else about this brief journey on the waters of the

nificantly, but nobody worried about the past of the Rhine.

The jokes were part of our "galgen humor" ("Are we being taken to Cyprus, or to Mauritius?"), and Brodetsky recalled that one time there was a scheme to hold the Congress on a boat, on the high seas—all this because there are always so many difficulties when you have to bring together 3,000 Jews into one place. He also spoke of the need for maritime research, and another speaker made the important point that while in the case of land some areas are already occupied and no longer free to us, the position is quite different in regard to the sea. Here we must not miss the boat, in a literal sense. At the moment there are unlimited possibilities of turning the sea into the hinterland of the Yishuv.

This was the keynote of the gathering, and it was typical of each and every assembly of people in Basle. The decorative aspects of the gatherings were left to the historians: nobody was out to create artificial inspiration. Life is too harsh and the problems far too immediate.

By Far The Most Interesting Room

During Congress there were numerous other conferences, and press conferences and receptions, but the most important gatherings were those held in the minor hall of the Mustermesse, important not as part of the proceeding of the Congress, but as a running commentary on the talk and the speeches. Loud speakers had been installed in the minor hall for those who could not be accommodated in the main hall and for those who got tired of the main hall. Here you could obtain refreshments, smoke your cigarette, talk to a friend and all the while listen to the speeches. Jean Joffe, of the New York "Tog" rightly remarked: "Ah, this is the most interesting room."

Never mind about the numerous offices where all the Parties and caucuses and officials did their work, the Congress post office where people rushed about with their letters (on the wall was an exhibition of our absent-mindedness: letters, wrongly addressed, which illustrated the excitement of some of our people. One illustrated post card carried the legend: "Rivkah"—no surname, no name of town, no country, just to Rivkah. I took the liberty of reading the rest of the absent-minded post card. It said: "Po hakol nechmad—here everything is lovely . . .")

Never mind the telegraph office where correspondents crowded to shoot off all the latest; never mind the Palcor room where a couple of hours after they had been delivered you could get reports of the speeches in



Reuven Rubinstein, King of Lithuanian Zionism.

four languages — Hebrew, Yiddish, English and French; you need not even worry about the main hall, where the ushers are strict and the chairman bangs with his mallet each time you say a word.

Here, in the minor hall you are free and here you see the world pass by, literally the whole Jewish world.

Here are a couple of boys from Italy. They had clubbed together the cost of the fare and brought with them some bundles of food, cheese and tin stuff, in the good old Russian style. They came to attend a world conference of Jewish partisans. Some of them are delegates to the main Congress; others are delegates to Party conferences. They had plenty to do here. But in between they managed to get away from all the meetings and to have a "shmues" in the minor hall under the sound of the loudspeakers. Do I need the inspiration of their Hebrew songs, if their very faces, their proud bearing, their cheerfulness, their independence of spirit are an inspiration—they who had spent years in the forests of White Russia, killing Germans and rescuing Jews. They are not keen on talking about their exploits, but in the course of conversation, as you mention a name of a man, or a town, or a village they recall an incident, not about these big things, but about the trifles, minor events which came to the memories of heroes and of simple people and of traitors, and, casually, how they avenged the murder of the Rabbi of Zhettel.

In a corner are some of the old guards of Zionism, gentle and old and forgotten. For obvious reasons their names cannot be mentioned, but they recall romantic days of the movement when they were known to all, and the usual story of the old horses who excite themselves at the sound of the trumpets. The battle is no longer for them, but the fire still burns in their eyes. These are changed times and the contrast between the old and the young is not one of a generation or two, but of a whole millenium. Those who were "faren mabul"—before the flood—and those who came after.

It is not only the Zionists who mingled in this hall. Everyone whose name has some meaning in the Europe of to-day deemed it his duty to come to Basle. The orphaned Yiddish writers, now busy picking up the threads of the past—Sutzkever, the poet who held a rifle in the forests of Vilna, and later was a witness at the Nuremberg trials testifying about the

murder of children, and next to him Professor Liebman Hersch, of Geneva, brother of the Johannesburg Hersches, talking about new plans for the publication of books in Yiddish and of new scientific ventures.

Here is a bright lad carrying a batch of typed papers—the songs he had written in the concentration camps. The familiar face of the Chassidic child, as portrayed by Lilien and Struck, the lively intelligent eyes and the drawn cheeks. When he came to see me the other day, I assumed a somewhat patronising air and suggested that a writer could achieve fame only through a serious course of study. The boy lives in Switzerland and works as a clerk in a Jewish institution. Why should he not study at the University? He said that he had no time after his day's work. He wanted to go out in the evenings. Whereupon I drew his attention to the fact that half of the "big people" at the Congress hall made their way in life by working in the day-time and studying in the evenings; that Switzerland has quite a tradition of starving Russian students who, at the beginning of the century, built Parties, made revolutions, sipped tea and in

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Mr. Rivlin who visited South Africa recently in connection with the Palestine Maritime League.

Rhine: not one of the speakers referred to the strange fact that here was a boat flying the blue-white Zionist flag on the sacred river of Hitlerdom. Our old friend Mr. Rivlin and his lieutenant, Mr. Frishman, were busy looking after the arrangements, so as to make the gathering as sea-minded as possible; the speakers and the other passengers responded mag-

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between managed to get a doctorate in some faculty or other.

The boy looked at me bitterly. "Did they spend the best years of their youth behind barbed wire, in stinking barracks, on a plate of watery soup,

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locked out of the entire world? When I am in the office I am locked up again and when my work is finished I want to breathe fresh air again, to move from one street corner to the other to make up for the best years, between 16 and 18, that I spent in a camp."

I was sorry I spoke and may this be a lesson to anyone who forgets himself when he meets a lad that quotes the Tanya and the Kahalah, who at the age of 16 was kicked into the hell of Europe.

Nazi Propaganda

Professor Hersch told me that even in Switzerland they could not believe the reports of the massacres when they first emerged from the occupied territories. They thought that Goebbels had deliberately spread this news through Jewish channels in order to show later that the Jews had been responsible for false propaganda about the New Order—a famous trick of the Nazi propaganda machine.

But I turned the conversation to a subject which must engage the attention of every Zionist: How does the system of government in Switzerland apply to the conditions of Palestine? Here you have in practice the cantonisation system which Ben Avi had suggested for Palestine some years ago. A happy community lives on a peaceful island in the stormy seas of Europe. Here are some 25 cantons, each one perfectly autonomous; some are of a single linguistic group, others of mixed languages, all living happily together.

The proportion of the nationalities is almost the same as in Palestine: 71 per cent. German-speaking, 21 per cent. French, 7 per cent. Italian. How do they manage it so that the majority does not dominate the minority? I recalled a speaker at Congress who said that even in Switzerland the majority decides. I asked the Professor if that was true and he denied it, insisting that my question was purely metaphysical. The question of domination could not at all arise in Switzerland, because if that domination were tried Switzerland would disappear as a State.

The minor hall of Congress was hardly the place for a detailed discussion of the subject, but one point made by Prof. Hersch, who is not a Zionist, is worth noting. He said that while in Switzerland the cantonisation system was the result of a marriage between the parties, in Palestine it would be the result of a divorce. The system could only grow out of existing goodwill and not of friction.

With this thought in mind one turns to cross swords with a leader of Hashomer Hatzair who stands next to the buffet munching a sandwich: "How could you visualise a bi-national State in the present atmosphere of Palestine?"

He replies that atmosphere is created by man, and can be changed by man. There is not much point in arguing with him: the people of Hashomer Hatzair are very reminiscent of our ancestors. They possess enormous faith and there is a certain saintliness in their approach to problems of the day which emanates from their peculiar way of life, from the fact that they live up to their ideals, a saintliness which deserves respect and admiration even from opponents.

You are joined by an American delegate, and it is pleasing to note the good humour of our friends from the States. Together with the charming Hadassah group they are a most impressive team of men and women. One is particularly interested in those

who do not get the headlines abroad, in the rank and file. Edward Silver, chief assistant of the District Attorney in Brooklyn, is the chairman of the Young Israel Association of U.S.A. His committee controls 85 Synagogues and some 40 Rabbis. No man could hold office in their synagogue committees unless he is a Shomer Sabbath—Johannesburg congregations please note.

Mr. Silver stays away from work on Sabbath. If you ask him how he manages it while holding public office, he tells you: "That's America, a free country."

In an adjoining room the journalists assemble for their world conference. A moving speech by Reuven Rubinstein of Kovno, and the touching reunion between him and Leib Jaffe. Rubinstein was of the latest arrivals in the camps. He had been repatriated from Russia only recently and all are happy to see this king of Lithuanian Zionism. A sad tribute to the fallen comrades, and much talk about destruction and extermination.

But there are many compensations. Looking around one feels the vitality which the Jewish newspaper still possesses. New papers in the camps, scores of periodicals in Paris, large circulations in South America, a new press in Poland. If only Rubinstein had a linotype machine in Munich he could print his Munich paper every day—the irony of fate: a Yiddish daily in Munich! The story of the Hebrew press is astonishing. Only 30 years ago a Hebrew journalist was obliged to get a steady job for the daytime and do his journalism as a hobby. To-day some of the Hebrew newspapers make huge profits.

Dr. Carlesbach, who is one of the chief organisers of the conference, edits an evening newspaper in Tel Aviv. He is a Hamburg Jew—A "Yeke ben Yeke," as he puts it. For some fifteen generations his family had lived in Germany. Yet his Yiddish is so richly idiomatic that he could dance rings round some of our best Yiddishist friends at the Deputies' meetings. Mr. Finkelstein, a Bundist from Poland, gave a most moving description of present-day conditions of Polish Jewry. He is a profound writer and a brilliant publicist. He quoted Chassidic lore and referred to famous Talmudists in a most expert fashion. He emphasised the feasibility of continued Jewish life in Poland, and the essential unity of Israel. Absolute freedom of expression existed at the conference for those who were not Zionists. There were several Communist writers, notably B. Mark from Poland.

**Yiddish Daily in
London**

Some paradoxes of our day emerged at the Congress. For example: The only Yiddish daily in Europe is now published in London! In Poland many organisations print their organs in Polish because there are no printing facilities for Yiddish. The Anglo-Jewish newspapers were poorly represented at the conference. These newspapers, which are read by the richest section of the Jewish people, were apparently the least able to afford correspondents at Congress. There was hardly a sign of the 75 Jewish weeklies published in English in the U.S.A.

We get back to the minor hall. A middle-aged couple ask you if you could spare a few minutes on an important matter. They represent an important cause. The husband is a

Doctor of Demography and the wife a school teacher in the city of Paris. Both have something to do with the problems of children. The husband begins with a longish exposition of the value of Jewish Demography, the wife prods him: "You see that the man is busy, come to the point." And so they come to the point. They represent a new movement started in France with the object of raising the birth-rate among Jews. They gave me a cyclostyled list of figures. With the amputation of 30 per cent. of our people, we lost the most fruitful section of the community, apart from the loss of one and a quarter million children who had been exterminated by the Nazis.

In Europe the birth rate had dropped everywhere and the Jews are no exception. In addition, many parents do not bring up their children as Jews. In Sweden there are 6,000 refugee women against 1,500 men. With the passing of years these women will either remain spinsters or marry non-Jews.

The young couple have, therefore, established a Keren Hatoldot, an organisation with the object of studying the problem of Jewish birth-rate and of encouraging marriage and family life amongst our young people. It is active in France, but hopes to extend its activities to other countries. It offers a premium for every birth, free medical assistance for the expectant mother, and propaganda material for young people urging them to marry early in life. Hachnosath Kaloh in a modern form!

Parliament of Jewry

This organisation is only one of the numerous movements seeking the support of newspapermen, delegates and visitors at the Congress. Everybody realises that this is the Kibbutz Galuyot, the parliament of Jewry. Everything can be settled here. When I heard the woman from the Keren Hatoldot talk about our children "who are lost to us" with the concern of a mother in Israel, I recalled the Polish Zionist to whom I spoke of the children for the South African orphanages. He sneered and said: "Oh, die Tzdokegeber was zeinen gekumen keifen kinder in Europa" (the charitable busy-bodies who came to buy children in Europe). I told him that he was a little unkind, that we are animated by the best of motives; I urged him not to insult our good-hearted people, but he said that children were too high a reward for charity.

The children belong to us, he said, and added that even if the children could not go to Palestine they should remain in Europe. "Did we lose children or did you? If you want children why don't you bring them into the world. We lost everything . . ."

No wonder that in these surroundings nobody was impressed by the Zionist flag on the Rhine. Somebody said in a speech at Congress that in these days every Jew is 6,000,000 times dearer to us than before, and their problems are 6,000,000 times greater. Rubinstein's linotype and the Paris Keren Hatoldot and the rehabilitation work of the partisans. And the big things, the huge plans of Kaplan for a great budget, worthy of the hour, and the plans of the political committee of Congress how to attain our goal now, immediately—they are all concentrated here by the waters of the Rhine and they all wait for the new Psalmist who might be able to give expression to the poetic and tragic beauty of the Zionist Congress in the year 1946.