

Interpreting Fifteen Nationalities

A CHAT WITH ISA KREMER

Her Recent Visit to Palestine

MEETING Isa Kremer in a hotel sitting-room (as I did at the Carlton Hotel on her arrival in Johannesburg on Wednesday morning) is meeting her in a false environment, because Isa Kremer really belongs to the stage. She is a child of the people—or rather, I should say, she is a child of the peoples—since she interprets the heart-throbs of many nations. Whatever language medium Isa uses in which to paint a picture of a folk, through its ballads, she impresses one as being a daughter of that particular race. Having an international mind, she understands different people as we ourselves could never understand them. Yet when she presents them to us in songs, we feel that we must have known them all our lives.

It happens that I had the pleasure of hearing Isa Kremer sing. She was starring at the Colosseum in London, when I visited the great metropolis some five years ago. I had, however, never met her off the stage until I saw her in Johannesburg.

It is not difficult to interview Miss Kremer. Her life has been so full of happenings she can go on talking for hours. One does not ask her the usual questions, for a flow of talk of the most interesting character emanates from her. She is a vital and gifted personality and is at present greatly enthused by her recent visit to Palestine.

When I told her that I have not yet been to Eretz Israel she could not understand it.

"You will love Palestine," she said to me enthusiastically, "a visit there is an experience that you will never forget. You are in an enchanted atmosphere all the time. Of course, I liked the successful concerts arranged for me, but what I loved most was visiting the Emek and singing freely to the Chalutzim."

Without questioning Isa Kremer, she went on to say: "The development there is almost incredible. It was my first visit to Eretz Israel, but I assure you I look forward to going there regularly."

Miss Kremer added the interesting information that, apart from any sentimental reason for visiting the homeland of her people, a tour of Palestine was today quite profitable for an international artist. The concerts and recitals are largely attended and great appreciation is shown for real talent.

"As a result of my visit to Palestine," declared Miss Kremer, "I have been able to bring to South Africa a number of new Hebrew, Yemenite and Chalutz songs. All these I will render at my recitals. I

shall also interpret Yiddish folk songs, for which, I am sure, there is a sentiment of affection here as there is among all Jewish audiences in the countries I have visited."

The Inspiration of Bialik.

HAVING heard that Isa Kremer had studied for the operatic stage, I asked her what had determined her to go into concert work, and particularly into the study of folk singing.

"It was Bialik, the great Hebrew poet, who urged me to take up the study of Yiddish folk-songs," she answered. "It was at a concert in Odessa, that Bialik was introduced to me by Mendele Mocher Sefhorim, and he said, with that earnestness that is characteristic of him, 'Why do you waste your time doing this? Anyone with a voice can sing classical music. Why don't you do something for your own people? Why don't you sing the songs of your own people? Then you will be interpreting your people to others.' His words affected me deeply and I acted upon them. The study of Yiddish folk songs led me to the study of the folk songs of all nations. I now know three hundred of them."

The mention of Mendele Mocher Sefhorim, the veteran writer, in Russia, who has since died, brought to Isa a train of pleasant reminiscences, some of which she told me.

"At one concert, at which Mendele and Bialik were both present, I had given a large repertoire of Jewish folk songs, when Mendele exclaimed 'I must go up and kiss her!' 'Not so fast, Zaida,' said Bialik, 'if you intend to go up on the stage and do it in front of everybody, all right. But if you intend to go behind the scenes, don't forget there are many younger men here to do it.' Mendele didn't do it that time," ended Isa naively.

National Songs.

THE Jewish national idea can be impressed upon all people by means of the Jewish folk songs," said Miss Kremer, and went on to illustrate her point:

"The year after the signing of the Armistice, the wife of the President of the Duma, decided to hold a large concert in the Philharmonic Hall in Moscow, in aid of the War orphans. It was to be of a decidedly national character and representatives of the twenty-two nationalities that inhabit Russia had been invited to take part and to sing their own folk songs. Only the Jews had been left out. The date of the concert was drawing close, but very few tickets had been sold and the committee was beginning to grow anxious.



Interpreting a Yemenite Folk-Song

"I arrived in Moscow a few days before the event, as I was scheduled to give a concert on the same evening. Hearing that I was in town, some of the committee waited on me, told me of their dilemma and asked me to help them out. I pointed out to them that they had completely ignored the Jews, although over 100,000 Jewish soldiers had given their lives for Russia. I would sing for them, I said, if they would allow me to sing Jewish folk-songs and advertise the fact beforehand. After several hours of deliberation, they notified me of their willingness to take me on my own terms.

"The event was extensively advertised, especially in the Jewish press, and a number of wealthy Jews bought out about half the house. I was the twenty-third on the programme, and I did not appear till after my own concert was over—that is about 11.30. The house waited for me. I wore a simple black velvet dress with a large diamond brooch in the form of a Mogen Dovid on my breast. As I came forward the Jewish people arose as a sign of respect to the Mogen Dovid. And, *noblesse oblige*, the others arose too. Amongst them were some of the best known anti-Semites in Russia. It was a great triumph for the Jews."

IN the short conversation I could have with Isa Kremer, she related a number of other interesting incidents in her life as an international artist, but space does not permit me mentioning them here.

In all, she impressed me as an enthusiastic daughter of Israel—a talented and dynamic personality. She is likely to make a host of friends in this country.

In her recitals she gives folk-song interpretations of some fifteen different nationalities. I feel though that her heart is in her Hebrew and Yiddish songs. It would not be a bad idea if during her short stay in South Africa (she opens her Paris season in October) arrangements are made whereby she can give one or two recitals *exclusively* devoted to the interpretations of Jewish songs.

D.

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