

The Hebrew Scene

by "REGESH"

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The Serpent Speaks

IN their laments on the martyrdom of man upon earth, poets have often taken the story of Adam and Eve as their text. To the pensive bard, Adam has served as a personification of the futility of human



David Shimonovitz.

life. What hope was there for man? "Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life . . . In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken . . ."

The leading actor in the paradise-drama was, however, not Adam, nor Eve. The serpent—more subtle than any beast in the field which the Lord God had made—the moving spirit in the prologue to human existence. What if he were to rise from humility and speak of his reactions to the progress of his companions in Paradise?

David Shimonovitz, the Hebrew poet, whose fiftieth birthday was just celebrated in Palestine, has taken this question as a theme for one of his major poems. "In the Snake Park" is a thoughtful piece of verse describing a series of conversations between the poet and a descendant of the ancient serpent. Escaping from the weariness, the toil, the cruelty and the sorrow of the great city, the poet flees to commune with a serpent. From the cage come forth the hissing sounds: "Long have I wished to speak to you, son of man, child of affliction, king in captivity . . . like you, I am a stranger amongst brothers."

With bitter irony the serpent reviews the pace of man: if man had eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil—how is it that he has not as yet chosen the good and cast away the evil in his life? How can one reconcile the knowledge of man with bloodshed, cruelty, stupidity, and cowardice which pervade his life? Why is his life a chain of vacillation, doubt, despair and disillusionment?

The theme is evidently an ambitious one, and Shimonovitz tackles it with fine poetic skill, with pathos and irony which is worthy of a modern Job. It is one of his best and biggest poems, and it deserves special mention because Hebrew poetry is often being accused of shunning universal themes and restricting itself to Jewish subjects. The "Snake Park" should help to refute this fallacy.

A Palestinian Poet

BY his Jewish themes, Shimonovitz is considered the first truly Palestinian poet. Unlike Bialik and Tshernichowsky he had breathed the air of Palestine in the prime of his literary life. The former have merely expressed the Jewish longing for Palestine, whilst Shimonovitz's poetic experience includes actual life in Eretz Israel.

At the age of twenty-two, Shimonovitz went to Palestine as a Chalutz—at a time when the term Chalutz was not yet known in Zionist vocabulary. He worked as a labourer and watchman in the colonies and there he developed what he describes as a sixth sense—the "Chush Hamoledet," the homeland sense. His poetry is rooted in the soil of Palestine and is animated by the spirit of its people. In a series of Idylls—"In the Forest of Hederah," "The Jubilee of the Wagon-drivers," "Jardenit"—written in a finished and graceful Hebrew style—he gives a vivid portrayal of the Yishuv, the old and the new, the Chalukah mendicants and the smug colonists, the eastern Jew and the modern Poel and Shomer, workman and watchman. His descriptions of the Palestine landscape display a keen and observant eye, a fine understanding for the beauty of nature. Shimonovitz is also eminent as a translator in Hebrew literature. He has rendered into Hebrew a number of Russian classics and has written a most competent Hebrew version of Heine. He is still in the prime of his literary career and new poems of his often grace the pages of Hebrew literary magazines.

AN organisation of Hebrew youth was created in New York recently with the object of disseminating Hebrew culture. The first meeting was attended by a large audience of young people, especially pupils of the Rabbinical and Teachers' Seminaries. It was decided to create a permanent Hebrew Theatre in New York, to establish an orchestra and a choir and support a Hebrew newspaper for the youth.

REUBEN BRAININ, whose visit to South Africa some years ago created a great deal of controversy, has just published a second volume of his collected works in Hebrew. Brainin has wandered away from the fold of Hebrew writers and the appearance of the present volume is a reminder of his past contributions to Hebrew literature. The book contains a number of essays, including an article on the Gaon of Vilna, a monograph on Bialik and short articles on Brandes, Rathenau, Maeterlinck and others.

Songs of Zion

"Mizimrath Haaretz," by S. Rosowski (Jewish National Fund, Jerusalem).

THE Palestine song has found its way amongst the Jewish youth of South Africa. At conferences, meetings, banquets and camps Hebrew songs are now being chanted with enthusiasm and gusto by an increasingly larger number of young people. Complaints are often heard that the melodies lose much of their contents on the way from Palestine, especially when sung by musically untrained people. Since most of the songs are picked up by heart scores of grammatical and textual errors creep in, and the pedant Hebraist has to spend many an uncomfortable hour in listening to mutilations of an originally beautiful Hebrew song. It is for these reasons alone that a standard collection of Hebrew songs should be welcomed.

In the volume under review, Mr. S. Rosowski, a noted Palestine composer, has set himself the task of "familiarising the Jewish youth in the Diaspora with the songs which are now (or were until recently) sung in Palestine and in which the pioneering spirit is manifest to a lesser or larger degree." The bracketed remark is significant, for unfortunately the Palestinian song is subject to the whims of fashion. A tune which is a "hit" to-day may be out of date to-morrow. Many of the songs collected in this volume will indeed be considered stale even by singers in this country.

NEVERTHELESS there is plenty of good fare in the ninety-six songs which Mr. Rosowski has collected. Opening with the national anthem *Hatikvah* and the Zionist labour-hymn *Techezaknah*, the book contains nine songs collected under the heading "Longing for Zion," eighteen songs portraying the upbuilding of Palestine, no less than twenty-three dance songs and melodies, most of which are Horahs, a number of religious and eastern tunes, as well as a few children's songs. The musical setting has been carried out in a most competent fashion and the transcription of the Hebrew words was done in accordance with the system of Dr. I. Epstein, the famous Hebrew linguist.

A special supplement entitled "For Choir and Piano" will be of value to our choirs and concert performers. The songs in this section are arranged for several voices with piano accompaniment. With two exceptions they were set to music by the late Joel Engel, that brilliant composer and pioneer of modern Jewish music. The book, which is meant to be handled and fingered at the piano should have had a better binding.