

The Renaissance of Hebrew Literature

Mr. D. Mierowsky Lectures To Women Zionists

That the renaissance of Hebrew literature had nothing in common with the Renaissance of Humanism in the 15th century was a point of view expressed by Mr. D. Mierowsky in the course of an address delivered by him last Monday afternoon at the monthly meeting of the Johannesburg Women's Zionist League held at the Langham Hotel.

THE Renaissance of Humanism was a movement of a select few and not of the masses, said Mr. Mierowsky, and it never succeeded in making Greek or Latin the language in which the masses expressed themselves again. This was not the case with Hebrew, for the simple reason that the Hebrew language had never been dead. It had not only never ceased to be used but it had always contained within itself the germs of natural growth.

Mr. Mierowsky went on to show how great strides had taken place in the development of Hebrew between the Biblical and Mishnaic periods. Then, when Hebrew had given way to Aramaic it had again reasserted itself and shown its vitality by Hebraising the Aramaic language. When at the end of the tenth century Aramaic gave way to other languages, we were faced with the wonderful efflorescence of Hebrew in Spain. It was only at the end of the thirteenth century that it seemed as though the life of the Hebrew language was gradually ebbing away — but then a wonderful thing happened. Hebrew resumed its life in a new form — within the Yiddish language. To-day Hebrew forms over 30 per cent of the Yiddish language, and it managed to survive through this medium.

In the same way as the Hebrew language had never been dead, so Hebrew literature had never been dead. It was only from the thirteenth century to the eighteenth that it seemed to be in a state of suspended animation, and except for this period it had been a faithful mirror of life as a whole. But in this period the Jews withdrew into their ghettos and, shut out from the rest of the world, their literature, too, became exclusive, confining itself to scholasticism, casuistry and Rabbinical pilpulism. Anything not of a religious nature was taboo.

The renaissance of Hebrew literature was in reality a shifting of emphasis from the religious to the secular. In Germany the Haskalah movement collected round itself a number of intellectuals who cherished the illusion that if the Jews raised themselves culturally, political emancipation would follow automatically. The leader of this movement was Moses Mendelssohn. The Haskalah then shifted to Galicia where Rappoport and Krochmal were its most outstanding representatives, and then to Russia where Izchak Behr Levinsohn was the principal exponent of its ideas.

By this time the Reform movement in Germany was beginning to take shape, and it attacked with all the strength at its command the old

forms of life and the obscurantists who opposed Haskalah. The result was that from the sixties to the eighties of the last century the Haskalah was a movement of the strongest revolt against everything traditional and conservative. As a consequence a period of extreme assimilation set in and there were hundreds, and even thousands of conversions to Christianity.

The reaction came from two men — Peretz Smolenskin and Eliezer Ben Yehudah, and there blossomed forth a galaxy of Hebrew writers of which any literature could well be proud. Among the writers of this time were Bialik, Schneier, Tchernichovsky and Shiminowitz in the realm of poetry, Mendele and Berkowitch in the realm of fiction.

One of the greatest stimuli to Hebrew literature undoubtedly came after the Great War and at this stage Mr. Mierowsky referred to the notable work done by Abraham Shtiebel who, in his publishing houses in Moscow, Warsaw, Berlin and Tel Aviv, made possible the translation into Hebrew of some of the finest classics of several languages.

But since 1920 Hebrew literature had developed altogether along new lines. To-day there were over 500 leading writers and journalists in Palestine — in fact there were more writers to the square foot in Palestine than to the square mile in any other country in Europe.

Mr. Mierowsky proceeded to mention the more outstanding of these writers — A. D. Gordon, Brenner, Fichman, Shiminowitz, Rachel, Agnon, Sh'onsky, Lamdan and others — and to expatiate briefly on the nature and value of their works. To-day there were also Yemenite writers in Palestine, and recently he had even come across a volume of poems in beautiful Hebrew by a Samaritan.

"Whatever happens in regard to Palestine," concluded Mr. Mierowsky, "of one thing we may be sure: What we have accomplished in the realm of Hebrew literature will become the inalienable property of the Jewish people for all time and will make a valuable contribution not only to Jewish literature but also to literature generally."

DR. DEBORAH KATZEN presided over the meeting and during the course of the afternoon a short talk on the present position in Palestine was delivered by Miss Zelda Kirschner. Miss Kirschner's vivid description of the Yishuv's morale, of its heroic self-defence and its wonderful spirit in the difficult period through which it was passing was most impressive and deeply stirred her audience.

The meeting was brought to a close after a vote of thanks to the speakers had been proposed by Mrs. Joffe.

More Bloemfontein Activities

The monthly meeting of the above society was held at the residence of Mrs. S. Lewis on Wednesday, 23rd November. Mrs. L. Kramer, the chair-lady, presided over a well attended meeting of members and several visitors.

Mrs. Fogel, convener of the National Fund Boxes, reported that the last clearance held in November, yielded the sum of £67/2, but there were still several more boxes to be cleared.

Mrs. Berman undertook to convene the Sewing Circle. She will be assisted by Mrs. L. Reichenberg.

The card evening in aid of the inscription of Ussishkin's name in the Golden Book on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, which is being organised by the ladies of the Zionist Council together with the Women's Zionist Society, with Mrs. M. Kibur as convener, will take place on Wednesday 30th November. The chairlady announced that Mrs. T. Saphra of Johannesburg, who is a member of the Women's Zionist Council of South Africa and the Chairman of the Union of Jewish Women of South Africa, would address the Society on Tuesday evening the 6th December.

Mrs. Jack Simmons delivered an interesting paper on "The rise of Opera" and gave a summary of the achievements of some world famous Jewish musicians. Miss Betty Flink delighted the audience with two songs and a vote of thanks to Mrs. Simmons, Miss Flink and Mrs. Lewis was passed by the chairlady. Mrs. Kramer also asked for sport for the morning market to be held in aid of the Austrian-Polish Relief Campaign, which is being organised by the local branch of the Union of Jewish Women.

A Great Boxing Contest

City Hall To Be Filled On Saturday Evening

The eliminating contest for the South African heavyweight boxing championship will take place on Saturday evening at the City Hall, Johannesburg. The present holder of the Transvaal Heavyweight Championship, Tommy Bensch, will meet Dave Carstens. The result will bring a new champion to South Africa.

Bensch has won all his contests by the knock-out route in the early rounds. It will now be seen whether he can eliminate Dave Carstens in the same manner. The latter put up an excellent contest recently against Nick Wolmarans, the hard-hitting ex-amateur, whom he knocked out.

The trial of strength between these two heavy hitters should draw an enormous crowd to the City Hall. The promotion will be under the auspices of the Transvaal National Sporting Club and there is an excellent series of preliminary bouts.

BENNY LEVY MATCHED

The Johannesburg and District Amateur Boxing Association have received notification that the immigration authorities have granted permission to Benny Levy, the Lourenco Marques boxer, to appear at their next tournament at the City Hall on Saturday, December 17.

Benny Levy has been matched with George Bushney over six two-minute rounds.

HABONIM (South Africa)

Habonim (South Africa) is holding an Investiture of Officers on Saturday evening, the 3rd December, 1938, at 8 p.m. The Ceremony takes place at the Wolmarans Street Synagogue and all friends are invited to attend.



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