

Else Lasker-Schüler

Germany's Poetess Laureate

By

David Ewen

AS a personality, Else Lasker-Schüler is almost as intriguing and as arresting as her poetry. I met her by arrangement in Berlin, to discuss her verse, and we have been in communication ever since. I am able, therefore, to understand something about that personality which produced some of the most authentic lyrics of our time. And just as the poetry is strikingly distinctive, so is the personality that produced it.

HER very appearance makes a definite and instantaneous impression upon her visitor. Her features are glamorously Semitic — (there is no mistaking the origin of this dark-eyed, dark-haired, aquiline-nosed and square-jawed poetess even at first glance!) — and they have indefinable strength. Obviously enough she is a woman of power. Her eyes have a piercing electric quality; her lips droop at their tips into a proud self-affirmation, her square jaw suggests dominance. And what her features suggest, her personality fulfills. This—one learns after contact with her—is a woman of great masculinity. Feminine softness does not enter into her make-up. She is a veritable dynamo—a person of energy, electricity, to possess a vitality that is tempestuous. She has temperament and colour, as well as firmness. She is, obviously, a woman of freedom, who asserts her vibrant personality at every turn; an “emancipated woman,” about whom we hear so much. She is, obviously a woman of marvellous strength of character. She seems to be, finally, a veritable tempest in abeyance—and one has the feeling in being with her, that were the tempest of her personality to explode, then it would be more terrible than a volcano.

And as is her personality, so is the poetry. Although, I had known Lasker-Schüler's poetry before I met her, I do not think I ever understood it thoroughly or intimately. It is only after one has met this human dynamo, this woman who is so little the woman in character and personality, that I came to get a real insight into the sombre, tempestuous strains of her poetry. Usually, one expects a Debussy softness in the poetry of a woman; one expects soft shades, subtle nuances, pale colours and shadows, a light touch of feminine fingers. But Else Lasker-Schüler's poetry is not the music of Debussy. Rather, it is the virile, assertive,

Else Lasker-Schüler, the Jewish poetess, has won for herself universal recognition in the German world of letters and has recently been awarded the Kleist Prize.

proud music of Beethoven. Her verse has a virility and magnificent sweep. Like the personality that created it, it has a power that is overwhelming. No soft music of violins and harps here! There is rather the raucous blare of trumpets and grandiose sonority of brasses. Else Lasker-Schüler's pen has as much of the forceful as has the person who guides it.

THE finest of Else Lasker-Schüler's poetry is collected in two slim volumes, “Hebraische Balladen” and “Die Kuppel.” But it is “Hebrew Melodies” that contains poetry of such genuine warmth and passion, of such sombre yet arresting colours, of such intricately contrived music as to stamp her a poetess of the first order. As Else Lasker-Schüler told me, she feels her racial kinship very keenly. She has absorbed the spirit and the heritage of her race so thoroughly that anything her pen yields must inevitably give expression to these. She has been deeply influenced by everything Hebrew—the Bible, Jewish history, the problem of the modern Jew in exile. Her poetry is, therefore, a voice of Israel—past and present.

In these poems there is much to remind us of that other Hebrew cycle of another great Jewish poet, Heinrich Heine. Else Lasker-Schüler may never become another Heine. The Heines, in poetry, are few and far between even in several generations; but the best of her “Hebraische Balladen” compare favourably with the best of Heine. In her verse too, she has given poignant expression to the pain and pathos of a race. Sometimes her voice is proud and exalted—as in her poem, *Mein Volk*, which opens the book of poems. At other times she gives unforgettable poetic interpretations to the great Hebrew characters of the Bible: her short poems *Jakob and Esau*, *Abel*, *Esther*, *Boas* and others give the reader a new insight into these timeless characters of the Great Book. More often her poems sing about the longings of the present-day Jew, his faith in his God, his devotion to his heritage and his past, and his optimism in the future.



Else Lasker-Schüler.

ALTHOUGH Else Lasker-Schüler has distinguished herself primarily as a poetess—and it is solely upon her poetry that she will have to depend when modern literary figures are evaluated for their permanent importance—we must not forget to mention and discuss also briefly her prose works. She is gifted with a remarkably energetic and living prose; her ideas are expressed forcefully, succinctly, often eloquently. It has, moreover, a music and rhythm which only a poetess can carve out of words. Among her more famous prose-creations there is, first of all, *Der Wunder-Rabbiner von Barcelona*, one of the most precious gems of our folklore which Lasker-Schüler has endowed with a new life and an altogether new beauty. This, in its present form, is certainly one of the most haunting of our legends; one regrets deeply that it has not, as yet, been translated.

Finally, I should like to mention that autobiographical fragment *Ich Räume Auf!*—which she wrote as an accusation against her publisher—in which a fiery personality asserts itself proudly and fearlessly. For those who cannot come into personal contact with Else Lasker-Schüler, a reading of *Ich Räume Auf!* is a most felicitous substitute. Few autobiographical works give us such an insight into the character and personality of an author as this short volume does. Reading this volume shortly after meeting her, I almost felt as though our contact with one another were being renewed, and that I was once more at the side of this remarkable lady.

ELSE LASKER-SCHÜLER'S life has not been very eventful, and there is little, indeed, that can be said about it. She was born in Berlin about 40 years ago to Jewish parents, and as a child she distinguished herself as an artist rather than as a poet. Such was her facility with crayon and charcoal, that her parents sent her to art-school. Little Else loved her art, and therefore absorbed all of her studies. Before long she revealed unmistakable talents. A career as artist seemed to be stretching inevitably ahead of her.

The ways of Fate, however, are

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strange. Her whole childhood and youth had been spent in the study of art technique and art theories. Yet in maturity Else emerged not as an artist but as a poet. Truth to tell, she had always played with words; very often she would compose little ditties to accompany her drawing. But verse was only a hobby. As Else grew older, she turned more and more seriously towards poetry. She found that she had an even greater skill with words and verbal images than with crayon or charcoal. Now that she had found poetry, she realised emphatically that here lay her heart. Henceforth, it was art that would be a hobby; and it was poetry that would be her serious life's pursuit.

Recognition did not come to her overnight. She had spent years in fashioning verses and stories before any one recognised a latent fire in this temperamental woman. A volume of poetry had been accepted for publication by an enterprising Berlin publisher, Paul Cassirer. A few critics were drawn to

the passion of those burning lyrics. After that it was a slow and painful struggle: writing books, getting them published and increasing her circle of admirers.

ELSE LASKER-SCHÜLER is now being acclaimed for a sixteenth published work, which has been awarded the Kleist Prize. Her latest book is called "Arthur Aronymus: Die Geschichte Meines Vaters." The roots of this prose work are Westphalian peasantry, Catholic mysticism, and Jewish tradition. The bloody past towers into a present whose mood is reconciliation. Bishop and rabbi sit at the same table. The Christian Christmas and the Jewish Passover festival are portrayed with the same reverence and with the same artistry. How the peculiar events have their roots about the figure of the father of the poetess, "my little Pa-pa," both a real child and a true philosopher will equally enjoy reading.

From the description in her latest book of a Seder evening at the home of her grandfather Rab-buni, at whose house the bishop was a guest, we quote: "It affected

His Grace, the Bishop, in a sympathetic manner, that the poorest members of the Jewish community, seven Israelites, were invited to participate at the Passover (Easter) meal; and Father Schüler and his gracious wife most tactfully seemed to concern themselves with these very guests . . . He requested his honoured host to proceed exactly as on the preceding Passover evening with the ceremony, and not to shorten it; otherwise he would feel like an intruder, and he did really feel as though he were at home. The father and the bishop had a discussion over the words of the Torah, which was written by God himself with thunder and lightning . . . "And the Law is observed," declared her father. With a benevolent gesture, His Grace attentively affirmed every word of the wise father, of my father's father, and both gentlemen agreed "that with a little bit of love Jew and Christian will easily be able to break their bread in common and in harmony," "even if unleavened bread is put on the table," agreeably added the mother of my father, who also is now resting in peace." —*The American Hebrew.*

HITLERISM A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

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Von Stein exercised influence on Russia in the Jewish question are so important that it appears that we must accept them as actual historical facts. And from these documents we see that the notorious discriminatory anti-Jewish legislation enacted by the Russian Government in 1835 corresponds word for word with Von Stein's anti-semitic legislation in Germany in 1826.

There is only one difference between the two. The anti-Jewish legislation in Prussia did not last

long, and in Russia the policy of the Jewish Pale of Settlement remained law for about 85 years, right up to the day when Czarism collapsed.

But the contention of the Hitlerist writers that having regard to the friendly relations between Freiherr von Stein and Czar Alexander I., and the close relations between Freiherr von Stein and the leading Russian statesmen, many of the Russian laws enacted against the Russian Jews probably emanated from Von Stein's brain, seems more than proved.

It is the fate of Europe that every great political and nationalist victory won by Germany is followed by general reaction and a widespread anti-semitic offensive.

Freiherr von Stein's victory over Napoleon and the Vienna Congress of 1815 enslaved many peoples and robbed the Jews of the vital rights which they had gained under Napoleon's emancipation. And the present offensive conducted by Hitler on his way to the Third German Reich is part and parcel of a terrible anti-semitic movement, aiming to deprive the Jews of their equality of rights. And if Hitler should reach his goal, as Von Stein reached his goal, not only the Jews in Germany but the Jews in many other countries will have to suffer in consequence of the victory of Hitlerism just as the victory of Steinism a hundred years ago brought suffering for almost a hundred years after to the Jews of Russia.

PALESTINE IN 1932

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Difficulties of the Farmer.

THE situation of the farmer, excluding the plantation zone, continues to be unsatisfactory, although not to such a marked extent as in former years. The increase in the Customs duties of cereals and flour during seven months of the year, June to December, when local produce is being harvested and put on the market, coupled with an imposition of restrictions on the import of cereals and flour, have led to a rise in local prices. Even after some slight decline afterwards a generally high level has been maintained. The Government has this year come to the assistance of the small farmer by commuting 70 per cent. of the tithe (many of the poor felaheen were exempted altogether) and by the granting of loans to the extent of some £P71,000 for seeds, livestock, fodder, etc.

Prospects of Continuing Prosperity.

THE opinion of many economists, Mr. Neumann concluded, is that Palestine is entering the year 1933 with a fairly good prospect of continuing prosperity. However, one should not lose sight of a number of factors which should be considered in all seriousness. First of all, there is the question of organising our exports, consolidating our position in existing markets and capturing new markets. In this respect Palestine has met with formidable obstacles; the tariff wall in Egypt, protective tariffs in Great Britain, restrictions in imports in a number of countries in Europe. But despite these difficulties Palestine exports are extending in such directions as lesser obstacles obtain, notably in Syria, Iraq and the Jewish consumers in other countries. In addition, there is still hope that Palestine will finally secure the same standing in Empire tariffs as other British Dominions and territories.

Another problem requiring serious attention is the plague of speculation

which always appears during periods of increased immigration and economic progress. This evil may bring serious consequences in its train if public institutions should fail to exercise the necessary vigilance and fight it actively. For many reasons, the present speculative activity is not as alarming as the speculative wave in 1925.

The work is proceeding on a much sounder basis than it did then. Nevertheless, the outcome cannot be left to the free play of uncontrolled factors. There are signs that responsible public bodies see the dangers and are beginning to deal with the problem.

To be sure, the present gratifying development which permits the immigration of a thousand and more per month cannot solve the problem of many more thousands of Jews in the Diaspora who are eager to reconstruct their lives in Palestine. This development indicates the presence of a solid foundation. Its extension is largely in the hands of the Jewish people.