

Some Jewish Contacts

By

Louis Golding

*An illuminating article by the author of
"Magnolia Street"*

WE Jews are accustomed to strange meetings. We give a silken side-glance out of our Rolls Royce window and find something disturbingly familiar in the way that the masked ex-officer in the gutter is playing with the matchbox he is trying to sell. Hasn't he forgotten himself for a moment? Where are his wits wandering? He is reversing the matchbox as if it were an esrog. And didn't you ever hear the tale of the Italian Cardinal and the Spanish Bishop meeting in the Vatican for the first time? Excellent reports had come through to Rome of the Spaniard's zeal in the faith. There was every chance of his promotion to the Red Hat. It was evening, and the two dignitaries were strolling from opposite directions in the Corridor of the Maps, where they met for the first time. Nobody will ever know what impulse brought the words "Shalom Aleichem" to the Italian's lips, and we can only guess just why the Spaniard replied, "Aleichem Shalom." History only records that the Spanish Bishop got the coveted Hat a month or two later. A cynical story, of course, but then we have had a rather tangled history.

For my own part, I found the meeting in Salonica strange enough for my less sensational tastes. It was during the war and the first evening of Passover. We all got leave from our respective units to attend a service directed by the Grand Rabbi of Salonica—Greek highlanders, English insurance agents, French bankers, Russian maize-merchants, Serbian pedlars, even a few Bulgarian woodcutters, prisoners on parole. We were all Jewish soldiers. The situation lacked the element of surprise yet it was fantastic enough.

But on my late wanderings in Greece I was concerned in such incredible contacts of Jew with Jew that I could not help being profoundly sorry for the members of all other races, to whom such experiences, or anything remotely resembling them, may not happen. Can you conceive a Christian Scientist or a Plymouth Brother suddenly becoming aware that another gentleman is a Plymouth Brother or a Christian Scientist, and deeming that the world's foundations are toppling, so wild and visionary it is?

I WILL not tell you about the pale lad from Dedeagatch travelling steerage on the boat that coasted the Gulf of Corinth, and I will no more than mention the little Greek murderer I met at a port in Eprus; how we coasted together among the Ionian Islands from Leucadia to Ithaca,

from Ithaca to Cephalonia; how he told me with innate indignation that they had kept him in prison in Albania for two and a half years for no more serious a crime than murdering an Albanian sergeant. I still remember the earnest courtesy with which he bade me go ashore with him at the little port which was the goal of his journey, and how he said he had taken a great fancy to me, and couldn't we go tramping together over the mountains for a few days. I remembered the Albanian sergeant, and declared sorrowfully I had other engagements. Whereupon he produced his card, and said that if ever I wanted to do business in hand woven rugs, native cheeses or cattle in gross he was the man. His name was Levi.

It was that strange night in Andritsaena that obsesses my imagination. I have known it a proud thing to be a Jew, a sorrowful thing, embarrassing, intoxicating but never till that night did I know what a mythological romance it is.

There is nothing Judaic about Andritsaena, nothing Hellenic. It is an eagle's nest among cities, lost among the high mountains of the Peloponnesus. Century has succeeded century elsewhere in the world, but this city still lies ineradicable at the heart of the middle ages. It is forgotten. The world has passed it by. The ravens circle slowly over it. The sheep drift timelessly along its barren pastures.

NOW, everywhere in Greece, the stranger is received with a hospitality to which no other country in the world offers any parallel. To find anything resembling it, he must go back to the customs of the Classical Greeks or the Biblical Jews. In no city or village that I visited was there not some one to take me in hand, give me food if I arrived hungry, give me drink whether I was thirsty or not, and make it his business to entertain me. It was an owner of many sheep who took me in hand in Andritsaena, who wore a white kilted skirt when I first met him and held a great shepherd's crook in his hand. I met him on the mountain path with another shepherd, and when I appeared they talked to each other in undertones. Whilst I was making up my mind whether they would both rob and murder me, the shepherd approached me, and asked was I tired. He said it with so much kindness that my suspicion left me, and before long I found myself pleasantly in his charge. Later in the day he appeared in ordinary trousers and in the com-



pany of his small son. I really should have known at once, the moment I set eyes on that small son. I have met that small son before. I have eaten salted herrings in his company. I have played nuts with him. But the revelation was reserved for that fiercely dramatic moment, two hours later, in the café that looked out upon the serried mountains hurling the sunset fires from peak to peak.

The great attraction of the evening was a Turkish minstrel, who wandered from village to village throughout Greece singing to his guitar. Now it is to be expected that Turks are not popular these days in Greece. A particular odium surrounds them. The Greeks do not find it easy to forget the monstrous outrage of Smyrna. But this particular Turk had won the suffrages of these people by espousing a Greek maiden and repudiating Mohamet. He had (as they expressed it with a confusion of b's and v's common to Greeks who speak English) "made a vaptise." He sat on a platform in the right hand corner of the café, as fierce a bewhiskered Turk as my patron was a blue-eyed Greek shepherd. Gradually the shepherds and goatherds filled the place. Dusk fell upon us. The landlord brought each his favourite hookah from the rail where it hung upon the wall. Carefully we placed the lit cinder in the stuffed bowls of our pipes and drew the smoke through the bubbling water. Bottle after bottle of wine, the harsh resinated wine of Greece, was laid before us. It was Easter, and we peeled the scarlet-dyed Easter eggs, and mixed mustard and salt and pepper to eat with them.

AND strange song after song mourned that Turkish minstrel to his guitar—now a Persian song of bulbuls and roses; now a harsh Arab song of deserts and the sword. Then it was a pretty tale of Greek peasants courting; then a Kurdish mother crooning to a child. Now he suspended the twanging of his strings, and crouching over the instrument, he lifted his face to the invisible roof and howled like a jackal. Wild and lost he seemed, uprooted. A strange unease communicated itself

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to us all. The sunset was quenched upon the vast bulk of Mount Erymanthus. There was no warmth in the world.

There was a silence. It seemed that the power of song was gone from him. Then suddenly the strings shuddered into life, desperately, joyfully. His voice was soaring through smoke and darkness. He had found joy. His heart was at home. For my own part, when I realised how immortally familiar to me the music and words were, it seemed I must be struck dumb for ever. In this place, in this fortress of the middle ages, engirdled by the mountains of classic Greece . . . it was not merely grotesque. It was not true.

But it was. And only when I made out that the heads of the peasants near me were all turned curiously in my direction did I realise that I, too, was singing to the twang of his guitar. And then I was conscious that not only two voices were engaged upon the song, the voices of Turkish minstrel and English writer. There was a third, as lusty as ours—and it was the voice of the blue-eyed Greek peasant. Together we chanted gloriously the battle chant of Chanukah: "Mo-ouz tsur yeshuoose: Lechoh no-eh lehshahbe-ach. . . ."

Diverse had our wanderings been, each of us in a greater or lesser degree had betrayed our heritage. But we proclaimed it then, in the darkness, with the moon rising over Hellas and the owl hooting in her hills. We proclaimed Zion. We sang as if we were children again, each in the ghetto out of which we had wandered. The candles flickered in the seven-branched lamp again. The men from the Greek mountains listened and wondered what strange spirit was this that had seized us, that we sang so proudly, but there was heartache in our voices . . .

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Off to Palestine !

A Chalutz Takes Leave of South Africa

CHARLES FRIEDMAN, of Durban, one of the three successful applicants for the Chalutz certificates on the last six-monthly schedule allotted to South Africa, sailed on Wednesday for Eretz Israel. He is a son of Rev. Isaac Friedman, who himself hails from Palestine and who is well-known in communal and Zionist circles in Johannesburg and Durban.

Just prior to embarking, Friedman sent the following telegram to the Zionist Federation: "Sailing Piave to-day. Shalom Lehitraoth Beeretz Yisroel. Chalutz Friedman."

North-Eastern District Judean Society

The annual general meeting of the above society will take place at 8.15 p.m. on Sunday, May 6th, at the Communal Hall, Orange Grove. Many matters of interest will be dealt with, and an open discussion will take place as to the advisability of centralising the society's headquarters, so as to make it more convenient for Yeoville members to participate in functions.

The Talmudical College in Johannesburg

APPEAL TO THE JEWISH PUBLIC

THE South African Talmudical College, while one of the most unobtrusive institutions in Johannesburg, is perhaps one of the most important ones. Here pupils who have completed an elementary course in Hebrew, are given an opportunity to study the language further, and are given the opportunity, almost unique in this country, to study the Talmud in the original.

Established some ten years ago, the College has already proved that it is possible to educate Jewish young men comprehensively in their national language and in the creations of their ancient sages as well as of the most modern of Hebrew writers. Some of the young men, who studied in this college, to-day occupy prominent positions in Johannesburg's Jewish cultural life. And the Hatechiya organisation which has done so much for the spreading of a love for the Hebrew language and culture among the Jewish youth can also be regarded as a child of the College.

As is unfortunately the case, however, with Jewish education in general in this country, there has been little support forthcoming for the institution; the committee is appealing to Johannesburg's Jewish public for their support.

On Sunday, May 13th, a house-to-house shilling day will be held in Johannesburg. It is hoped that the Jewish public will assist to make this collection a success.



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COMING INTO PALESTINE

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thousand Jews entered Palestine. During the last year the number stood at over forty thousand. Many of these, it is true, were private investors, with adequate means for settling. But even to these immigrants the Keren Hayesod is of the utmost importance, for it is always at their service to advise them in regard to local conditions and the especial requirements of the Palestine population.

The bulk of the forty thousand newcomers, however, do not belong to the capitalistic class. And to settle them on the land and in trades, as the Keren Hayesod does, is a colossal task. In many cases the newcomers are totally unprepared for the peculiar requirements of Palestine, and it is part of the Keren Hayesod's work thus to prepare them. In such cases the immigrants are received at the Palestine ports, Jaffa and Haifa, in special hostels, where they obtain board and lodging until they have learnt to fit themselves into Palestinian life and positions have been found for them. The immigrant is aided in finding work and granted loans to tide him over the first difficult period and thus enable him to find his feet in the country.

And as the years go by, seedtime and harvest and seedtime again, and the earth gives of its goodness, and the new settler lives in comfort and happiness, he will come to appreciate more and more the ramifications of the Keren Hayesod—how it underlies the whole system of life in Palestine, like some strange, vast guardian spirit watching over the destinies of the land, moulding the fate of its people.

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