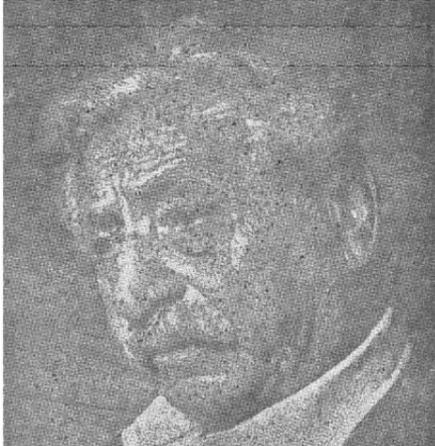


Raphael Federman

## Sholem Asch [Szalom Asz] z"l in Our Częstochowa of Old (Pages of Memories)



*Sholem Asch*

This was in 1908, a mere 49 years ago, when a Tsarist General Governor ruled Poland. The Polish intelligentsia and the working class were inclined towards radicalism. Amongst the various radical newspapers and journals, Polish journal appeared entitled *Myśl Niepodległa* [Independent Thought]. This journal promoted free, independent thought. It was the journal of the "freethinkers" - an anti-religious journal, edited by Andrzej Niemojewski. Polish intelligentsia, students and also the assimilated Jewish intelligentsia grouped themselves around this journal. Niemojewski's lectures were also always well attended by the Jewish-turned-Polish intelligentsia.

Once, the Częstochowa Jewish assimilationists organised a lecture by Andrzej Niemojewski at a theatre. I do not recall exactly the subject of the lecture, but I well remember that the speaker advocated the Yiddish language as a language, equal to all other languages. The hall was overfilled.

On the very same day that this lecture was taking place, Sholem Asch happened to be in Częstochowa. I believe that he was passing through Częstochowa on his way to the Czernowitz Conference [in Bukovina], as Częstochowa was a border city. Częstochowa residents were entitled to a *półposek*<sup>\*</sup>, which enabled them to cross the border to Germany without unnecessary difficulties. Sholem Asch availed himself of this opportunity, as did hundreds of other revolutionaries who stole across the border via Częstochowa. Nobody knew that Sholem Asch was in Częstochowa. He was the rabbi Reb Nachum Asz's personal guest.

Asch came to that lecture accompanied by the rabbi's son, Mendel. No one in the hall was aware that Sholem Asch was in the audience. After concluding the lecture, Niemojewski was warmly applauded by the crowd. At this point, one of the organisers of the lecture suddenly announced that Sholem Asch was in the hall, and that he wished to say a few words. The name Sholem Asch was already famous and, understandably, due to the great curiosity to see Asch and also out of courtesy towards the renowned Yiddish writer, he was given the floor. A tall young man, not too richly dressed, appeared on stage. The *yeshiva* student was still apparent in his face. He commenced his speech in Yiddish. I remember the contents of his talk. Asch spoke with a certain degree of irony.

"I do not understand what has happened here", he said in a perplexed manner. "So many Jews, *keinehora* [no evil eye], come here to be convinced that Yiddish is [in fact] a language and that Jews need to speak Yiddish. This is such an obvious thing - no one needs to be convinced it is so. What would the Poles say, were a Jew to come to them and tell them that Polish is a language and that they should speak Polish? Does a *Gentile* need to convince Jews of this?", he asked ironically.

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<sup>\*</sup> [TN: Permit to cross the border and stay shortly abroad, granted to residents of the border belt.]

The Jewish assimilationist intelligentsia felt a bit sickened by this speech. But the supporters of Yiddish, the Yiddishists, a small number of whom were at the lecture, felt uplifted by it and strongly applauded Asch. For weeks on end, Sholem Asch's appearance was the topic in the circles of the city's Jewish intelligentsia. In the Jewish workers' circles, the fact that they had not known Sholem Asch was a guest in town was greatly lamented. This was due to the fact that Asch needed to be smuggled across the border. By the way, later, when Poland became an independent state, that same Niemojewski - the freethinker - became a hard-bitten hater of Jews.

Does anyone, nowadays, need convincing regarding the huge influence which Sholem Asch's works had on Jewish youth during Yiddish literature's renaissance period? Jewish youth truly lived with Asch's works. We not only read his works, we even endeavoured to put them on stage and we became actors. The theatrical talent of more than one of us was [thus] revealed.

The writer of these lines had the opportunity to participate in a piece with a group of amateur [actors]. This amateur group had performed Yiddish theatre for a long time and had earned recognition. I recall how, in 1911, Sholem Asch's drama *With the Stream* was performed. To stage the drama, the renowned Jewish poet and actor Mark Schweid was specifically engaged as producer. Mark Schweid played the role of David in the drama and the writer of these lines played that of the rabbi - Reb Zerach. The enthusiasm of the hundreds of young people who attended this performance was great.

Very often, Sholem Asch voiced his views on different social questions. His word was always of importance and it carried weight. It was necessary to consider everything he said. People did not always agree with him, but they heard him out with the utmost deference - that was only natural. Thus, the writer of these lines, in December 1926, reprinted an article by Asch in *Forverts*, entitled *The Jewish Worker in Poland*, in the Cześćochowa Bundist weekly *Die Arbeiter Zeitung*, of which I was the editor at the time. It is worthwhile to quote here some sentences from this article, as they characterise Asch's thoughts and feelings in those years regarding the Bund. We, Bundists, were very displeased with that article, but we needed to take his word into consideration notwithstanding. The article was a negative one, in which he criticised the Bundists for their approach to Jewish questions. But Asch also had good things to say of the Bundists. And this is what he wrote in that article:

*The Bund has always had the good fortune to attract to itself noble, idealistic children of the Jewish people, who were educated in a foreign atmosphere, distanced from the Jewish masses. These same idealists then came [back] to the Jewish worker, bringing to him their lives, like a gift.*

*No other party has been able to show such dedicated and loyal 'returnees' as has the Bund.*

*After them, others came. And although the majority of the Bund's leaders consist of the self-educated children of the Jewish masses, some of them - precisely those most active - are these 'returnees' or 'finds', so to speak." [Forverts, 13<sup>th</sup> November 1926]*

Jewish Cześćochowa received Sholem Asch in 1925. Officially, he was invited by the Jewish Sport and Gymnastics Association, because the Jewish Sport and Gymnastics Association was a neutral institution at the time, to which belonged members of almost all the po[litical parties\*]. A special welcoming committee was formed in Sholem Asch's honour.

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\* [TN: In the original, "po-" is at the end of a line, after which the subsequent line begins with the next sentence. Obviously, some text is missing.]

The Jewish workers' institutions wavered, for some time, over the question of whether to participate in the work of the Sh. Asch Committee and its undertakings or not.

There were sharp battles between the workers' parties and the Zionist organisations and Asch's political sympathies towards the Pilsudski's regime [also] pained us strongly. The only thing which moved the Jewish workforce to participate in the welcoming of Asch was the love for the Yiddish language and culture and the personality of the guest himself. Asch's visit generated an unprecedented interest in the city and we, the Bundists, could not just stand on the side-lines.

[At the reception,] Aron Perec and Alkona Chrobolovsky spoke about Asch. The writer Jakier Warszawski was in town just then and he spoke at length regarding Asch's works. He maintained that Asch owed a debt to the Jewish peasants in the new Land of Israel! He needed to write about the Jewish builders and farmers in the new Land of Israel!

When Sholem Asch took the floor, he replied to all the salutations and speeches in a very successful manner.

I remember Asch's speech; he said:

*The poet is likened to a bee, which flies about amongst the flowers, collecting the honey. Woe to the bee that draws its entire intake from just one single flower! That is a bad bee. The poet is interested in the ideals of mankind. Both are dear to me - the idealists who sacrifice themselves in the Land of Israel and the Bundists who fell at the barricades in the battle for the revolution. Those who wish to confine me within the narrow frames of Zionism or Marxism are mistaken.*

And Asch told the anecdote about the in-laws who feuded at a Jewish wedding, but became united at a funeral. Asch said that it was the same case with the life of the Jewish People:

*The Yiddish secular school, the renaissance of Yiddish culture - these are our festive occasions. Nowadays, we fight among ourselves.*

Asch concluded with the words:

*The Jewish people will lead its generations-long struggle to an assured victory.*

Following the ceremony, a banquet in the great guest's honour was held at the premises of the Association of Commercial Employees. Dr Markowicz, Szmul Frank, Engineer Przysuski and Dr Rozen proposed toasts at the banquet. In his response to the toasts, Asch touched on the attitude of the Jewish intelligentsia to our literature. He said:

*I am the poet of the folk-masses. The intelligentsia knows my name from the non-Jewish press, but it does not read me in the same manner as [is done] with all other peoples.*

Among the nations of the world, also, the higher echelons have been forced to turn and face the people. It was thus with the Italian intelligentsia which, since Dante, has acknowledged the Italian "dialect" as its language and has done away with the Latin of the Middle Ages. Such was the case with the Russian and Polish intelligentsia which, in the times of Pushkin and Mickiewicz, acknowledged their own national cultures. The same must also happen with us - the intelligentsia must turn to face the people and its culture.

The following day, on Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> February 1925, Sholem Asch visited the Jewish workers' primary schools and the Children's Home, where he was warmly welcomed by the children. That same day, in the afternoon, Asch gave a lecture on the tasks of Yiddish literature. Following the lecture, he read some of his, then, yet unknown smaller pieces, such as *The Blind Watchman*, and others. The next day Monday, Asch travelled to Piotrków.

May these few episodes about Asch serve as an expression of the deep sorrow of all the Częstochowa townspeople everywhere, who remember Asch's visit to our now destroyed home.

May his memory be honoured!