

Lotty Malach

Icek Jurysta



Icek Jurysta lived [his life] as peacefully as a willow by the river. Great storms passed over his young head - wars, pogroms, hounding and persecutions. But he withstood all this, until - until the sword, which so gruesomely cut our folk down, reached him.

He was born in 1903, in a middle-class Jewish home in Częstochowa. [He was] one of the enthusiastic Jewish youths whom Częstochowa produced in the years following the First World War. His parents, father Mojsze [Moszek] and mother Chawa drew [their] livelihood from a little factory shop, in which they themselves manufactured and sold sweets. Icek was the second child in a household of nine - five brothers and two sisters. The Jurysta family - simple, hearty folk of the people - was much loved in the city, with their warm home and open door.

The quiet Jurysta grew up in a lively, active, radical Jewish environment - Poalei Zion. His closest party comrades, at the time, were Gerszon Prędko, Józef Częstochowski [and] Leon Zajdman. But he also had many friends amongst the activists of other parties, with whom he collaborated in the field of Jewish secular education and other community activities. Among them [were] Michał Alter, Raphael Federman, Szmul Frank, Maks Eryk, Leo Asz (the Rabbi's son) and others.

This young, willow sapling, Jurysta, from his earliest youth, overloaded himself with ideas, until his branches bent all the way down to the ground. It is obviously as clear as day that the capitalist order will develop to such a point, until its foundations will be washed away. The Jewish people can wait no longer. It must fight a double battle - both for its redemption as a people and for its social liberation. If this is the case, then Dr Ludwik [Łazarz] Zamenhof is a thousand times right - we indeed need to have a common language, Esperanto, with which to be able to communicate with all the peoples of the world and to explain this to them. That is how it was laid out in his young mind. And his heart soared with enthusiasm and firm was his faith - "The Jews, [as] a nation among nations, and freedom to suffice for all the children on God's Earth..."

When Jurysta went out on the street in his beautiful city of Częstochowa, he looked upon his Polish neighbour literally as a biological brother. Only that "the brother" and his friends threw stones at him in broad daylight. And when his boss at the iron factory, a Jew, informed him that, according to the new laws, he was required to "shrink" the number of his Jewish employees and that he, who went about with booklets in his pocket and capricious ideas in his head, was in fact not one of the most desired ones - Jurysta sighed deeply and, along with the perfume of the blossoming lilac, he took on the heavy yoke of the Eternal Jew.

The Polish police began to "take an interest" in him. Their suspicions were aroused by the articles which he published in those years (1923-26) - *The Hunger Strike, Free Youth, Twenty Years Jewish Workers Movement, Workers Culture, The Year 1918, Ber Borochov* and an array of other articles in the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, [as well as] a series of essays in *Literarische Blätter - The New Romanian Literature* [and] *The Birth of Esperanto*. In addition, he translated *The Oath of Youth* by Leib Malach into Esperanto and other Jewish workers' songs, which were included in a collection [entitled] "*Proletaria Kantaro*", published by the Universal Esperanto Association in 1924. Also, on top of all

this came his ramified correspondence with writers from abroad, such as Paris, Japan, Holland [and] India. The Polish police began to spy on him and persecute him - him, that young dreamer, that Polish Jew from generation upon generation.

The city of Częstochowa was bathed in the spring sunshine, as never before – or so it seemed to Jurysta. He looked to the gates of the city's various factories with a warm longing. Whom would it inconvenience, were they to allow him (and others like him) to come inside, that he should be able to do a day's work and bring home the bit of a wage for bread and a roof for himself and his beautiful, young lady Bracha, to whom he was engaged to be married? He had never strived for more than a modest life. His great aspirations lay elsewhere.

But the factories only hired [a handful of] individuals from the youth willing to work [and] he was not among them. He packed his valise, gave his father and mother the unavoidable tidings and went out to the street to bid friends farewell. Fortunately, he was not the only one. Many among the growing youth gazed with loving eyes at their fine city of Częstochowa, at the clear River Warta and set out on the road. Where to? To wherever the opportunity arose [to travel to]. And those who did not succeed in making it to any place, remained stuck along the road - in the ports, by the borders, in unfamiliar, dilapidated hotels. Jurysta and his young wife managed to arrive in Paris.

Here, he found something better than he had expected. First of all, he encountered here many of his Polish countrymen and friends from Częstochowa. Furthermore, the fellow countrymen here stuck together, like one family. One destiny had driven them together here, in the narrow alleys of the Pletzl in Belleville (an specifically Jewish area in Paris). The majority lived in the confined little rooms of the immigrant hotels. Others lived in lofts with slanted ceilings under pointed roofs. All searched for work, all ran to the *préfecture* for papers - a few received, but most were turned down. This meant hiding out, guarding oneself from the police and being prepared to jump out the window in the middle of the night, in case of a search.

Nevertheless, the mood was hopeful - travelling youth! An idealistic, willing, virile, work-seeking youth.

Icek Jurysta, after he and his young wife had passed through the seven lairs of hell, eventually received papers – i.e. the right of residence. He never did receive a work permit. He opened a small workshop in the Pletzl. His employees - his workers - were himself and his wife, Bracha. According to the law, an immigrant had no working rights, but did possess contractor's rights and Jurysta became a "contractor". And here begins the period of the best fifteen years of his creation.

On a Jewish-immigrant street, a broad social life develops. Institutions come up, like the fruits in lush, dewy fields - cultural centres, Jewish newspapers, theatre, federations, sports clubs, workers' homes, supplementary schools and public kitchens. This was at the start of the 1930's in tempestuous Paris - the Paris of demonstrations with millions of people, the Paris of [André] Léon Blum and the *Front Populaire*^{*}, [which] ignited even further the fantasies of our dreaming youth. The dream of generations of the fraternity of peoples was practically being realised before the eyes - well, yes, how could it have been otherwise?

Three different storms threaten to flood our quiet Jurysta - the raging Workers Movement, with which Jurysta had been connected all the years, French culture and the National Esperanto Society. But the great strength which Jurysta displays is remarkable. He takes in all these influences, extracts from them the best and [yet] remains in his Jewish essence.

* [TN: The Popular Front; an alliance of left-wing movements.]

It is S. Ansky who arouses his fantasy. It is *Alters Yugnt-yorn* [An Old Man's Youth] ([by] Leib Malach) which he retains as his own. It is with Mani Leib's children's poems that he plays out his permanent childlike [nature].



Icek Jurysta

He translates, [he] brings into the Esperanto language Jewish ethics, the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible, Chassidic enthusiasm, the ideas of Ber Borochov and the folksy nature of Abram Rejzen, David Edelstat's workers' songs and the fine publicist [writings] of Dr Hoffman (Tzivion) and Moissaye [Joseph] Olgin. He translates many of the classics and even more of modern Jewish literature and also pens his own original articles.

In the quiet evenings (they were quiet for Jurysta, that is), on his way home from the *maison* (the house from which he drew work), he would stride over the joyous streets of Paris, "his" Paris, of which he had become truly fond. [This was] the Paris which gave him bread to satisfaction, a couple of francs to send home and a roof on the third floor on Rue Vieille du Temple 34. This Paris also gave him momentum to create and translate.

Already in Poland, the barely twenty-year-old Jurysta had translated S. Ansky's *The Life of a Man*, which had been immediately published in *Literatura Mondo* [Esp., World of Literature]. In 1924, *The Jewish Joke* [sic *Jewish Jokes*] - fifteen anecdotes by A. [sic Y.H.] Rawnitzki - was published in Esperanto. In 1926, a translation of Sholem Asch's novel *Men and Gods* was printed in *Heroldo* [Esp., Herald]. Here, in Paris, he translated and printed an entire series of excerpts from the works of Sholem Aleichem, Mendele Moycher Sforim, Dovid Pinski, Józef Opatoszu and eleven stories by Yitzchok Leibisch Peretz.

The poets whom he translated to Esperanto included Mojsze Lejb Halpern, H. Leivick, Bovshover, Itzik Manger, Josef Papiernikow and Eliezer Steinbarg's parables. He translated and propagated writings by Ber Borochov, Ahad Ha'am, Y.Ch. Brenner, Nachman Sirkin and others. In 1939, he translated Leib Malach's *Mississippi*, which the Parisian Esperanto group published in book form.

With a rarely [seen] piety towards each author, the zealous Jurysta presents his introductions and remarks. With a wonderful reverence to the [Jewish] people, he presents his insights into its lifestyle and his interpretations of the Jewish collective psyche.

Following ten-twelve hours of work a day, after standing for hours at the *maison*, he would first sit down to the Torah and the service of God*.

Dr Ludwik Zamenhof had left the skeleton of a language. His inspired his followers (among them also the famous Esperantist, Chaim Kerber) to give it blood, flesh, and content. Icek Jurysta, quite especially, enriched it. He breathed into it his deeply-rooted Jewish ideals.

He was preparing to write and translate much, much more, when the Nazi [beast] stretched his bloodied paw after him. When the Gestapo entered Paris, it "chose" him as one of the first to be arrested. What Jewish society perhaps did not know, the Gentile world in fact estimated very well - that Jurysta was a man of very special qualities. Piłsudski's Secret Police and, later, the murderers of the Third Reich, knew the significance of Jurysta's quiet pen, which reached the remotest corners of the world with its "hateful" Jewish ethics.

* [TN: Figuratively speaking; viz. spiritual-cultural undertakings.]

In the Jewish surroundings in Paris, not much attention was paid to him. Who had the time, in such a hurrying, tumultuous Paris, to look at such a naïve young man the likes of Jurysta? He did not occupy anyone's seat. He had no elbows [to push with]. He did not even have a loud voice - very much [like] a willow in the middle of Paris.

In France, a memorial book for forty annihilated Jewish writers was published. The name Icek Jurysta is not mentioned in it. Why? Our martyrs fell as the victims of one enemy. Our survivors, deplorably, are divided according to the parties to which they belonged.

The entire Jurysta family perished in Częstochowa. Only two brothers, Jakow and Lajbisz, and one sister, Chaja'le, were saved. They are all now in the State of Israel. His wife, Bracha Jurysta, survived by a miracle - she is now in Paris.

Icek Jurysta was detained on 14th May 1941. He was sent away to the Pithiviers concentration camp, where he remained for thirteen months. On 26th June 1942, he was deported to Oświęcim [Auschwitz], where he was killed together with thousands upon thousands of his brethren and countrymen.

Icek Jurysta will not be forgotten. He will remain in the memory of the people, among all the bright figures of his generation - a saint among saints.