

Wolf Wiewiorka (Pages of Memories)



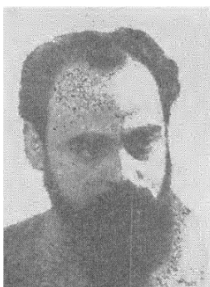
Wolf (Wewcie) Wiewiorka was born in 1896. He lived in the city of Częstochowa from his earliest childhood. He received a strict Chassidic upbringing. Even while still studying at *yeshiva*, he began writing stories.

They were two brothers - Abram and Wolf Wiewiorka. They both enriched Jewish literature with their works. The elder, Abram, was a renowned Yiddish writer, whose works were read in all circles, wherever the Yiddish book was only introduced. Several of Wiewiorka's greater stories were, at the time - in the years when Yiddish literature was being developed - very popular.

At a young age, A. Wiewiorka left for Berlin, from where he worked with various periodical publications. He later wandered off to Russia, where his dramas *In the Dead of Night*, *Honenkrei* and *In a White Tree* were staged. In particular, his two great [collections of] stories *Heaven and Earth* and *Extinguished Light* made an impression. The book *Extinguished Light* is a collection of Chassidic tales, written in a lyrical-poetical style. The Jewish characters in the book *Extinguished Light* are wonderfully depicted. They are elevated, refined characters from a more beautiful world. Abram Wiewiorka's pieces were also staged at the Jewish Theatre in Warsaw and in other cities. Wiewiorka's last play, which he wrote in Soviet Russia, was entitled *Botwin*. Following the production of this drama, the author, Abram Wiewiorka, disappeared together with the majority of Jewish writers in Soviet Russia.

Another tragic lot befell the younger brother - the writer, storyteller and essayist Wolf Wiewiorka. At a young age, he left his hometown of Częstochowa and wandered off to Berlin, where he made the rounds of the Jewish literary scene. After spending some time in Berlin, he came to The City of Light - Paris. He arrived, equipped with knowledge and talent and hopes, which gave him the confidence that he would be able to manage well in Paris and dedicate himself to his literary creations.

These hopes were kindled in the young Wiewiorka by wonderful dreams of a new life - a creative life. He remained living in Paris, until 12th June 1940, when the Germans flooded Paris and Jews fled as far as the eye could see and to any place where the world only has an edge.



In the years during which Wolf Wiewiorka was to Paris, an emigration of Jews was taking place from the most remote, isolated towns and *shtetls* in Poland, Romania [and] Lithuania, who were running to Belgium [and] to France, to find refuge and a roof over their heads. Young Jewish people tore themselves away from their established homes, where they were set for unemployment, imprisonment, hunger and other calamities. With hearts filled with hope, with wonderful dreams of a new, bright future, they took refuge in France. [They] settled and spread out over the grey coal-fields in the Nord territory and on the sunny coasts of the Mediterranean Sea, in the vineyards of Bourgogne and in the industrial centres of Alsace-Lorraine, in the prosperous Normandy region, as well as in the rich, picturesque districts of Massif Central, France.

The Jews from Eastern Europe took to commerce - stall-holding [and] peddling - and they opened shops in Paris and throughout the provinces. During this same period, a great Jewish life began to flourish in France, filled with charm, fashion and genteel refinement. The little *shtetls* of Poland, Romania and Lithuania were transplanted, [together] with the tune and [its] movements, with the sorrow and the joy, over the length and breadth of France, which was friendly to all guests and welcomed the newcomers with open arms, with support and with a good promise.

The city of Paris, with its noise and size, with its cosmopolitan broadness, did not, however, smile upon the writer and dreamer from Częstochowa, Wolf Wiewiorka. For him, a hard life began, full of stumbling and dashed dreams. Wolf Wiewiorka conducted a bitter struggle for [his own] existence and for that of his household. His financial situation was a shocking one. Need never loosened its grip on Wiewiorka. [It] followed him like a gloomy shadow and settled in every little corner of his house.

Remarkably, it was precisely during that period of his bitter struggle for his daily income that W. Wiewiorka's talent bloomed. At that time, he wrote fine stories and essays. He also printed correspondences in the *Forverts*, describing Jewish life in Paris. He signed these correspondences "J. Feldman".

In 1924, W. Wiewiorka attempted to publish a literary journal in Paris, under the name "*Die Nest*". The name characterised both the mood of the Jewish writers in France and the sentiment of the hundreds of immigrants, who had streamed in and found a nest in the new land. But the journal did not exist long. Nevertheless, Wiewiorka was not unnerved, but went on to publish the *Pariser Blätter* [Parisian Pages]. These "Pages", however, did not have a long life either.

After some time, W. Wiewiorka became the editor of the journal *Illustrated Jewish Press*, in which he published essays on the works of famous Jewish writers. To this purpose, W. Wiewiorka contacted several prominent writers from Paris and from Warsaw.

His material situation at this point improved somewhat, which enabled him to dedicate himself more fully to literary work. In 1936, a Wolf Wiewiorka Jubilee Committee was formed in Paris to celebrate his fortieth birthday. The committee was comprised of several renowned writers, painters and sculptors. At the head of the committee were Zalman Shneur, Daniel Charney and the famous Jewish sculptor Nachum [Naoum] Aronson. The committee managed to publish a volume of W. Wiewiorka's stories entitled "*East and West*". In 1937, W. Wiewiorka's second volume of tales appeared, entitled "*Landless Men*".

In these two volumes of stories, Wiewiorka displayed, in an artistic manner, Jewish life in contemporary France. He brought out the light and shadows of the Jews who had immigrated between the two world wars. In addition, he also described the lives of the long-established French Jews. Wiewiorka depicted all types of Jewish characters - the ragmen, the stallholders, the antiques dealers, the Jews of Belleville, [the] Pletzl [Paris Jewish Quarter] and also the artists' quarter - Montparnasse.

W. Wiewiorka was often under the strong influence of Abram Rejzen (of Rejzen's lyricism and of the humour found in Rejzen's short stories) and also under the partial influence of Yona Rosenfeld's writing style.

W. Wiewiorka's tales always have a plot - a certain elegance in the dialogues and in dealing with the hero, an opportune action which reaches a certain height and [then] rounds itself off with a fine

collapse. W. Wiewiorka also endeavours [to ensure] that the dramatic plot should contain a certain humour, in order to find balance in the story's course.

Both Wiewiorka's books met with success. The Jewish press in Paris responded very warmly to his tales and considered him one of the best Yiddish authors.

His lodgings were in the quarter where Jewish life clamoured and jangled with all bells and whistles. It was about 1933, when I made the acquaintance of Wolf Wiewiorka and his family. His dwelling was in Belleville, the Workers' Quarter of Paris, in which hundreds of Jewish families, [who had] arrived from remote towns and *shtetls* in Poland, Romania, Lithuania and Hungary had settled. The Jewish immigrants had crammed themselves into the small rooms of old dilapidated houses, which stood in the steep, winding, little streets. There, in Belleville, the Jews set up tailoring workshops and produced goods for the whole of France - ready-made garments, suits, coats, raincoats, etc. There, they also built the purse industry - the ladies' handbag trade. They elevated this occupation literally to an expert craftsman's profession. There were also little Jewish shops there, where all foodstuffs were sold - familiar dishes and delicacies from the old home.

Wolf Wiewiorka's house was a "house of meeting for the Sages" [*Pirkei Avot 1, mishna 4*]. It was rare for Jewish writers or cultural activists - both those who had come as guests, as well as those who were already Paris residents - to not have visited Wiewiorka's small but homely, tidy and snug dwelling. There, discussions on literature and art would always take place and it was there, in fact, that every new Yiddish book published in Paris at the time or which had arrived from any Jewish locality, would be handled. At Wiewiorka's house, the lonely, itinerant Jewish writer, whose little loft apartment's four walls drove him into the street, felt more at home than in his own place. Wiewiorka's wife, Gittele, was a true "virtuous woman" [Proverbs 31:10]; she did everything - she simply went into "fire and water" to make her husband comfortable, to take the yoke of livelihood off his shoulders and the bitter worry for a daily income, so that he should be able to dedicate himself more to his literary work. This praise may be said of her - that she did not wish to be more than her husband's footstool in Paradise, in merit for [her part in] his creation.

From Wiewiorka's house in Paris, the verse, *Anyone who is famished should come and eat* [*Pesach Haggadah, Magid, Ha Lachma Anya*] let itself be heard. Seldom did a writer leave there hungry. And seldom did a lonesome, sorrowful writer, or any Jew, leave his house with the sadness with which he had entered it. The grief was wrung out at Wiewiorka's doorstep.

W. Wiewiorka had a large household. In his home, the laughter and chatter of his sons and daughters were always to be heard - beautiful children, well-developed spiritually and physically. They received a fine Jewish upbringing, in the best possible manner.

For the Passover *Seders*, Wiewiorka would invite many guests - writers, painters, actors and just regular Jews. During these *Seders*, a wonderful atmosphere reigned in the small dwelling - a holiday cheer. This "literary house" breathed with homeliness, the likes of which it was truly hard to find in other homes in the great Paris.

During that period, W. Wiewiorka also published stories and articles in the New York *Forverts* and in other Jewish publications throughout the world. He was also the literary editor of the Parisian Jewish daily newspaper *Pariser Haynt* [Parisian Today].

The Second World War breaks out. Wiewiorka was then living in a quirky little alley, near the Place de la République - there, where thousands of Jews from all corners of Paris and France found themselves; there, where in the streets around, the air was charged with a healthy, strong Jewish life - Jewish theatres, Jewish newspapers, *cafés* - and where Jews gathered on weekdays to drink a small

glass of wine, to take an *apéritif*, just like the French; there, where from all arteries of Paris surged an intensive tempo of humanity from the entire globe.

Wiewiorka's "literary house" was, during those first few war months, filled with writers and regular Jews who were just passing by. In the evenings, both voluntary and conscripted French soldiers could also be found in his house. In the evenings, the *City of Light* turned dark. Not a shred of light could be seen in the streets, boulevards and squares. On the streets, the police searched for foreigners, demanding papers and catching people, just like the dog-killers once used to catch hounds in the streets.

At Wiewiorka's house, it was both cheerful and gloomy. One of his sons-in-law was off to the War. Outside the darkness loomed, but notwithstanding, here, a newly-published Yiddish or French story was being wrangled with.

Then, the Germans entered France and marched towards the gates of Paris. It was on the evening of 11th June 1940.

Paul Reynaud, the contemporary Home Secretary [sic Prime Minister], spoke to the citizens of France [saying] that they were not to lose morale, fortitude. He concluded his pathetic speech [by stating] that only a miracle could save France [and that] such a miracle could happen. But no one believed in any miracles. The Germans stood almost at the gates of Paris.

That evening, a large number of Jewish writers were gathered at Wiewiorka's house. Plans were made of how to clear out of Paris. Each made a different plan. Each spoke of how to save himself. But nobody knew what to start doing.

We, a group of Jewish writers, settled on leaving Paris the following day and to take the road to the Spanish border, through the cities of Orléans, Blois, Tours [and] Bordeaux, until reaching the Pyrénées Mountains - Spain.

The next day, all Paris swarmed towards the city's exits. Hundreds of thousands of people left their homes, abandoning everything and fleeing to wherever the eye could see.

I met up with W. Wiewiorka and his eldest son Abraham. We took the *metro* (subway) to the last station, the way leading to Orléans. We travelled for several dozen stations [and] got off. We found ourselves at "the gateway to Orléans".

We said farewell to Paris, the city where Wiewiorka had already been for eighteen years, and I - for eight years. The way out of the city, the long road to Spain - about one thousand miles - was jam-packed with people - young and old, men, women and children. A large number were also Jewish. Everyone was loaded with bags and baggage.

We set out on foot, mixing with the hundreds [and] thousands of people, wagons, carts, horses and military. We made efforts to be in a good mood, [but] it was difficult. Wiewiorka carried a rucksack on his shoulders with some provisions for the road. I hauled a heavy satchel and we walked and conversed quietly among ourselves, in a mood of sorrow and despondency.

Wolf Wiewiorka spoke much on the road about his literary plans, about his hometown of Częstochowa, about people in general and about anything that allowed itself to be discussed. He was in anguish, due to the fact that his whole family had remained in Paris - exposed to the Germans.

At night, we lay for some hours in a haystack, just like the great wandering masses. Over our heads flew aeroplanes - French, German and Italian. Battles took place in the sky. Over our heads bullets hailed and, from time to time, bombs exploded.

The following evening, dead tired, with swollen feet, famished [and feeling] faint, we arrived in the town of Étampes, forty-eight kilometres from Paris. Thousands and thousands of people passed through this commune, eating up everything, gobbling like the locusts in Egypt. We could not even buy a few carrots [or] any raw potatoes. At the bakeries, giant queues of people stood, waiting for bread to be distributed. Wiewiorka's son and I queued up at one of these bakeries. Perhaps we would be able to receive a chunk of bread after all. We stood pressed in amongst angry, gloomy people. [Each] one suspected the other. They were prepared to hang one another over nothing. Just then, several French soldiers passed by escorting a German paratrooper, who was disguised as a [female] French nurse, [with] make-up, lipstick, a cap on the head and a blue dress. This German had been found with bombs, [with which he had planned] to blow up the Étampes airport. He was being taken to receive his due.

Wiewiorka's son, a young, sentimental lad, turned pale. He called out in French, "He is going to be hanged!"

The surrounding crowd took up the innocent words and were convinced that he, the foreign boy, was deploring the death of the German. The people around [us] were ready to trample us on the spot, to give us our due, as fifth columnists deserve. We barely made it out of that queue alive. We [then] also heard several shots. Somewhere [back] there by a wall, the German had been finished off.

The next day, in the evening, we reached the city of Orléans. The railway station was burning - half the city stood in flames. We met dozens of Jewish acquaintances [and], among them, the renowned artist and sculptor of metal Arie Merzer, who lives now in Israel. We spent the night in a field. The ground trembled all night from the bombardment that were going on over the city.

Before daybreak, I managed to climb up onto a wagon, which set off along a road flooded with people. I lost W. Wiewiorka in the great panic. Only two days later did we meet up again in the famous ancient city of Blois, which lies on a hilly height, encircled by gardens and vineyards. The great River Loire cuts through the city. The city of Blois was overcrowded with military, wagons and with dismal, sick, wandering folk. There was such a bleak terror in Blois that one cannot imagine at all.

It was dawn. The sun was just beginning to light up the little turrets of the old French castles, with the weathervanes on their pinnacles. A cool breeze freshened up the swollen eyes, the inflamed face [and] the bruised lips. I suddenly noticed Wiewiorka with his son.

"Dear Wiewiorka!", I shouted out. Our joy was immeasurable. He quickly told me he had managed to scramble up onto a military transport headed for Bordeaux. This had not come easily. Because of his little black beard and strong accent [in] French, they had suspected him of being a spy. By moaning, and by showing his press card [stating] that he was a journalist, the French captain [in charge] of the truck took him on, together with his son, and now they were travelling to Bordeaux. "Perhaps there will be place for you, too", Wiewiorka reassured me, with his permanent, optimistic smile.

Three dots appeared in the clear, blue sky. I instinctively raised my eyes up.

"French aeroplanes!" said Wiewiorka, "There's nothing to be scared of."

Before he had even finished speaking, we heard frightful explosions. Before our eyes, chunks of fire fell from the sky, grisly lightning tore the air apart [and] terrifying screams accompanied the explosions. Here, already a house was burning, an automobile, a horse. Above us, machine-gun bullets ripped from the German and Italian aircraft, which had come down low. I ran breathlessly, together with a company of startled people. The bridge over the river was already burning. One thousandth of a minute and I had managed to run across the blazing bridge, over France's most beautiful river - the Loire.

I did not see Wiewiorka anymore.

All day, I ran towards Tours. [I] ran through fires [and] bombs. [I] ran from death. Houses were burning, the trees stood fully in green, flowers rustled over the fields and gardens, birds flew with startled cries. The grasses were moist with the night's dew. The sky was extraordinarily beautiful and blue. Death hovered and dragged itself over our heads in a thousand uncommon forms.

After, fate brought me to the shores of North Africa, to the land of Morocco. In Casablanca, the news came to me that Wiewiorka and his family were in Montauban, not far from Toulouse. Afterwards, the news reached me that they were in the city of Nice in the French Riviera.

I arrived in America and settled in New York. In 1942, I received a letter from Wiewiorka from Nice, in which he informed me that he had great hopes of coming to America. Great efforts were being made on his behalf. The letter made me very happy. I replied at once and assured him, in my letter, that everything would be done here to enable him and a group of other Jewish writers to come to America.

Everything was done and maybe not everything. I ran to organisations, made inquiries, pleaded. I, myself, had only been in the country a few months. I never heard from Wiewiorka again.

Some years later, I found out that, in October 1943, Wolf Wiewiorka, together with his wife and daughters, had been deported in October 1943. From that point on, no further information came. Wolf Wiewiorka's life was cut off in the middle of his most beautiful blooming. He and his wife as one - they were annihilated together with the larger part of the Jewish people, together with millions of innocent Jews.

The great dream had been extinguished; the song was interrupted in its middle.

His place in Jewish literature has remained unfilled.