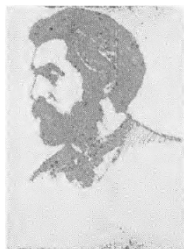


Abram Wiewiorka (A Chapter of Memories)

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Abram Wiewiorka

On the very first day Abram Wiewiorka, who was then a boy of twelve, came from Częstochowa to study at the *Rebbe's** *yeshiva* in Sochaczew, I made his acquaintance and we became friends - and this friendship endured until he disappeared behind the *Iron Curtain*.

This was in my childhood years when I was in Sochaczew, where I studied with the great [Torah] prodigy, the *Rebbe* Reb Awreme'le. [By which] I mean to say, that I was allowed to attend the lesson, which he gave every day in the morning. In those days, I was just pining for a friend with whom I could chat and spend time. But I searched in vain. This was no one's fault, including mine. It was simply due to the fact that I had been "brought" to Sochaczew when I was just a boy of twelve. Yes, I do say "brought", because neither I nor my parents had wished that I should travel there at such a young age. However, one of the fighters for the *Sochaczewer Rebbe*, who lived in our city - this was Reb Heskia *Kotzker* - kept badgering us, insisting that nothing else would do, unless I travelled with him to the *Rebbe* in Sochaczew, for there I would be made into a respectable person.

Almost everyone in Poland knew Reb Heskia *Kotzker*, because he was one of the last of Reb Mendele *Kotzker's* [original] guard - that group of young men with whom that *Rebbe* had encircled himself and with whom he had hoped to turn worlds, but which he did not succeed in doing. Reb Heskia was very scholarly, a sharp *Chassid* and also a wit - and he did a great deal for me. Thus, for instance, he arranged *days*** for me and also "made it", so that I could come to study with the *Rebbe*, meaning to listen to his lesson, to which only grown lads were admitted - the superior learners. But there was one thing he could not achieve - to make those pupils bond with me. [This is] despite the fact that he introduced me everywhere very grandly as "The Prodigy from Łowicz", who knew sixty pages of Talmud by heart. This was very simply due to the fact that all those lads were already grown-up, 17 to 20 [years old], while I was still only a pup - a child who did not yet even put on phylacteries. I was, therefore, just languishing for a comrade and a close friend. It was unbecoming for those youths to befriend a child and to become close with me. Thus I went about there, literally, like an orphan.

But, one time, I suddenly saw a young boy with curled sidelocks, of my own age, who made a good impression on me, sitting by one of the large study-hall tables. I approached him and gave him a "*shulem alaichem*" [peace be with you; traditional greeting] and he told me he came from Częstochowa and that he had nobody here. I told him that I, too, had no one here and that, if he wished, we could stick together. This was Abram Wiewiorka and we then became friends.

This was in the afternoon and soon Wiewiorka told me he was hungry. I was eating "*days*" at the time. Neither of us had any money, [or very] little at any rate, and, besides that, we had absolutely no concept of going into a restaurant. Furthermore, the *Rebbe's* study-hall was outside the town

* [TN: The first *Rebbe* of Sochaczew, Reb Awrum Borensztajn (1838-1910), who is known as the "Avnei Nezer", and was the son-in-law of Reb Mendele of Kock.]

** [TN: *Yeshiva* pupils from out of town would eat their meals each day at the house of a different family. This arrangement was called "*days*".]

and, if we were to go to a restaurant, we would have to look for one in town. I therefore told Wiewiorka to wait until I went to eat supper and, there, where I was eating my “day”, I would request they give him my supper and that I would go without.

We chatted and waited until the afternoon prayer service was concluded, after which I went with him to the [house of the] Jew where I was eating that “day”. It was at a tailor’s home, a kind Jew, who always took care that I should eat as much as possible, so that I should have the strength to study. When I entered with Abram Wiewiorka, I said hurriedly and embarrassedly to everyone, “My friend has only today arrived. He hasn’t eaten all day. I want to give him my supper. After all, I’ve eaten today already” - and I made a motion to leave.

The tailor and his family burst out in laughter. The tailor said to me, “Come inside, boy. You will both eat. That’s alright - if a young lad can hunger all day long to study in Sochaczew with the *Rebbe*, he should be given a meal”. And he did not leave us be, until we sat down at the table and had both eaten supper.

That same evening Abram Wiewiorka slept in my bed, even though the lady of the house did not wish to allow it. The following day, I spoke about him to my guardian Reb Heskia *Kotzker* and he ordered that lodgings and “days” be secured for him, which was done. Within several days, Abram already had a dwelling where to sleep and “days” also. Reb Heskia’s young men [viz. protégés] already took care of this for him.

From then on, Reb Heskia also became the guardian of Abram Wiewiorka and always inquired of him, exactly as of me, whether he was not lacking in anything.

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Abram Wiewiorka soon proved to be a “sharp head”. Reb Heskia bid his young men (they were called “Heskia’s suite”) to cross-question the young lad, meaning that they should make conversation with him in [Torah] study, to ascertain the extent of his knowledge. They soon reported back to him that, “He is growing into a [fine] vessel...”.

[By this] they meant that grand things were to be expected of him, that he would become a great man among the Jews. When Reb Heskia heard this, he showed him even greater favour and he would tell him Chassidic tales, to initiate him in Chassidism. He sometimes also played a [game of] chess with him.

Abram Wiewiorka was truly a genius at chess. Every time, after playing for only a short while, he would take the queen and the entire host of servants from the “old man” and then checkmate him. Reb Heskia told this to Reb Szmul, Reb Awreme’le’s son (who succeeded his father following his death, [and] who was also author of the book *Shem Mishmuel*), and Reb Szmul then instructed Abram to come to the *Rebbe’s* lesson, where we sat together. We were two children among a congregation of young bachelors and townsmen, none of whom were younger than seventeen.

At that time, I was studious and would study day and night (sometimes all night long, all alone in the large, dark study-hall, holding a candle to illuminate only the Talmud [tractate]). But Abram Wiewiorka was fond of roaming about in the spacious garden on the edge of the *Rebbe’s* court, and playing tricks and pranks on the *Chassidim* who promenaded along the alley, deep in study or recounting Chassidic discourses. For instance, he would suddenly throw one of the hard chestnuts, that were lying about, at somebody or sometimes even an actual small rock or some other thing. This went so far, that once, it even came to a whole brouhaha.

It was before *Rosh Hashanah*. Abram Wiewiorka suddenly felt an urge to climb a tall apple tree and to take his Talmud [tractate] up with him and study there. While doing so, he ate apples from the tree and also, sometimes, threw an apple at somebody's head.

This was in the afternoon, at the hour the *Rebbe* used to go out for a walk in the garden. All of a sudden, a fine tune was heard from above, "*Tuni Rabunon, di Rabunon hubn gelernt...**".

The *Rebbe* looked, but saw no one. He asked his *meshamesh* [attendant], Reb Icchok Bombas, as to who was studying somewhere up above. The *meshamesh* looked up and did not see anybody. But, immediately, a hard apple fell right on his head with such force that he yelled out in pain. The thing was that the *Rebbe* was standing not far from him and that the apple could have hit him too.

A commotion ensued. Wiewiorka was spotted up above and they brought the wild youth down from the tree and nearly tore him to pieces. But Reb Heskia *Kotzker* immediately came running and interceded on his behalf. He shouted out, "Leave him alone! He is wild, you say. Well, all wild children become important people! You shall see!".

This worked and everything turned out smoothly.



Abram Wiewiorka was born in 1887 in a small *shtetl*, Babiak (Kalisz *gubernia*), to a strict Chassidic family. However, when Abram was very young, his father moved to Częstochowa. He received his schooling in *cheders* and, later, as mentioned, at the *yeshiva* in Sochaczew. But, at the age of thirteen, he left the *yeshiva* and took to secular studies. He also immediately joined the Poalei Zion party, where he became a total activist. In that same period, he also began to write and print pieces - such as stories and poems - in the *Der Weg* [The Way] newspaper and in the *Roman Cajtung* [Novel Newspaper; a Warsaw journal].

When he turned twenty-one and needed to present himself for military service, he fled to Galicia [in Austria-Hungary], where he completely devoted himself to literary work. He participated in a literary contest of [*Dos*] *Yiddishe Wochenblatt* [The Jewish Weekly] which appeared in New York and won the prize. This further strengthened his desire to occupy himself ever more with literature. He began to writing for various Jewish periodicals in Poland and America and became increasingly popular.

In 1911, he began working for a newspaper published in Kraków, *Der Tog* [The Day], and, a little later, [he was made] that paper's literary editor. In 1912, he arrives in Berlin, where he makes an attempt to publish a literary monthly journal entitled "*Dos Buch*" [The Book], but no more than two issues of this journal are published. In this journal, he prints the first two chapters of a new novel he wrote entitled "*Der Misboyded*" [The Recluse]. He now prints numerous columns under the pseudonym "A. Bielko", as well as critical articles (one sharp article entitled "*The Art Philanthropists*" about Sch[marja] Gorelik^{*}).

At this point, Abram Wiewiorka wanders about [all] over Europe. He is in Paris, Antwerp [and] London and writes for several journals, such as *Sammelbuch far Literatur, Kunst un Kritik* [An Anthology of Literature, Art and Critique (London, 1916)], and many others.

* [TN: Typical opening of a Talmudic treatise; the first two words are what the pupil is reading written in the book "*Tuni Rabunon*" (תנו רבנן ; Aramaic; Our Teachers have learnt), and the rest is the translation thereof to Yiddish, "the Rabunon (Our Teachers) have learnt," which the pupil says out loud to himself.]

* [TN: Jewish literary critic and essayist.]

It is the period of the First World War. Abram Wiewiorka is in London when, in 1917, the news arrive that a revolution has broken out in Russia and that the Tsar has been arrested. This stirs up his blood and he decides to travel to Russia to rejoice together with the Russian people over the liberation of their large country. He remains there until after the Bolshevik Revolution, at which time it seems to him (as to many others then) that the "Redemption of Mankind" has arrived. But, when he realises his mistake, it is already too late.

In Russia, Abram Wiewiorka became a contributor to the Moscow *[Der] Emes* [The Truth (Soviet newspaper)]. He also participated in many compilations and journals, with stories and essays.

Abram Wiewiorka also wrote several plays there, a few of which were staged, such as *In The Dead of Night* [and] *Honenkrei* [Cockcrow] (a mystery in two acts, written in [first] person). This drama was later published by Kultur Liga [Culture League] (Moscow, 1923). In this play, Abram Wiewiorka attempts in a veiled manner to describe how the Bolshevik Revolution looks when it arrives in a small Jewish *shtetl* and how the Jewish shopkeeper experiences it. He also wrote *In a White Tree* and the play *[Naftoli] Botwin*, which was produced. He published a large compilation in the form of tales, titled "*Heaven and Earth*" and "*Extinguished Light*" (stories about Chassidic life). He also published several books of poetry such as *Benkshaft*** [Longing] and others. Several of Wiewiorka's tales and monologues, such as *Der Shiker* [The Drunkard] [and] *Der Ba'al-avayre* [The Sinner], were very popular in Poland, and they were often read at literary evenings.



Abram Wiewiorka had many capabilities and also a great talent, but he suffered from two faults. He possessed no systematic learning and, also, had no patience to review his works. He wrote lightly, straight off the hand. Thanks to his capabilities and sharp mind, he was always able to write something up quickly, but as soon as he had finished, he did not wish to return to it anymore. He did not hold with reviewing, polishing and completing works. He remained the same as in the childhood years at the study-hall in Sochaczew - when everyone sat and studied, he felt inclined to play about instead. He was like that later, also, during his entire life. He did not wish to exert himself in any way. He was not the studious type, the learner who strives for knowledge, nor was he an author who processes his work. He was only fond of play and levity.

In subsequent years, we met often. I once spoke with him regarding the fact that he should enter a university and study, to which he replied that he could not do this, as he hadn't a *matura* [Certificate of Secondary Education]. This was only a half-truth, however, and not the real answer as, with his bright intellect, he could have had a *matura* in a very short time, had he only wished it. Yes, had he been willing to exert himself a little, he could have achieved much - but he did not want this. He simply had no patience for it.

And, just like he had no patience for study, he also had no patience to review himself and, above all, to rewrite the things he had written. Many of his stories and dramas were simply begging to be polished a little, [for some] changes to be made, [in order] to become true pearls. But not Abram Wiewiorka - he could not do it. He was not fond of working.

And so we see him scattering his energy here and there. He wrote for newspapers, which was what truly pleased him. Written, handed over to the printer and finished.

"For a newspaper, there's no need to work too much over an article" - that is what he would say.

** [TN: Also published under the title *Liebschaft* (Love); Kraków, 1911.]

What Abram Wiewiorka was lacking was a good educator. [True,] Reb Heskia *Kotzker* had taken him under his wing in Sochaczew, but Reb Heskia was no educator. Besides that, after the incident with throwing the apple, something else happened. Once, he was [climbing a vine] picking grapes and would not come down under any circumstances, until the *Rebbetzin* [*Rebbe's* wife], Sura Cyna, Reb Mendele *Kotzker's* daughter, came out running, holding a broom and yelled at him to come down that instant. And yet other time, he smeared his face with black soot, resembling a Negro and, in this way, sat and studied the Talmud tractate of *Bava Kama*.

It may very well be that Abram Wiewiorka had something of an actor in him, because he was a clever fellow for acting out scenes and impersonating people. He was very playful. His head was truly sharp, but he himself did not want to think too much, but preferred to take life playfully instead.

We do not know how things went for him in Soviet Russia, but it can be assumed that he did not "lick honey" there either. It is unclear when and how he died, as he does not appear in the list of the [13] writers [executed on 12/08/1952] - Bergelson, Fefer, Hofstein, Peretz Markish and [the] others. It is, therefore, possible that he was killed earlier or that he perhaps died a natural death. It is also unknown whether he had a wife and if he left a heir. Regarding all this, Soviet Russia's "Iron Curtain" is silent*.

But Abram Wiewiorka was certainly a true talent and a force in our literature. Jewish Częstochowa may well be proud of him. He belongs among its best sons.

* [TN: According to <http://yleksikon.blogspot.com> (under "Avrom Vevyorke") he was married to Ester, the sister of the Soviet Yiddish writer Noah Lurye, and he died of a heart ailment in Kiev, on 15th December 1935. See also "Kahan, Abram" in the bibliography at the end of this article.]