

A. Chrobolovsky\*

## The Legend Lives

(Memory of the I.L. Peretz School, the Children's Home,  
the Teachers and the School Activists)

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*When you think of us, we emerge from our graves, and mingle with the living".\**  
(from Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird* [3<sup>rd</sup> act])

In those lively times, I once penned *A Day at the Children's Home* and I began thus:

*Tear yourselves away for a while from the hubbub of business and [of] running about, cast the burden of perpetual, arduous labour off yourselves for a minute, shake off the dust which has lain upon us for generations [and] let us go to a new, pristine, unique world of delicate creatures – the Children's Home.*

Now, a voice inside me says:

*Look not in the mirror, forget how old you are, forget the Destruction, leave the cemetery with the beloved graves which you carry inside your heart [and] arouse within yourself all the good forces - the tender, warm love to the child, to the person [and] the joy, hope and belief in a more beautiful world which the song of the children awakened in you.*

Let us return to that bygone world of the Jewish child - in the Children's Home [and] at the I.L. Peretz School, in the magnificent building which the brothers, comrades and friends in America built on ul. Krótka.

We were the lucky ones, to whom it befell to fulfil the most beautiful dream of our lives [and] of our time. But generations of Jewish children had dreamt of it before us. The Jewish child became *bar-mitzvah* [age of religious duty and responsibility] at thirteen, but he already carried the yoke of being Jewish, in exile and in poverty from *kumetz aleph*<sup>\*1</sup> onwards, as the folk-song goes:

*On the hearth burns a little fire,  
And in the room it is hot,  
And the Rebbe learns with the children,  
Learns Aleph-Bais.*

*Once you children become older,  
You yourselves shall understand,  
How many tears in these letters lay,  
And how much grief.*

[Mark Markovich Warshawsky]

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\* [TN: The author himself spelled his name Alkona Chrobolovsky once in the US, but it was originally Elkune (Kune) Chrobolowski.]

\* [TN: Loosely translated by the author in order to provide context. The 1913 English translation of the 1909 French original reads: "But you thought of us! And, every time you think of us, we wake up and see you again."]

<sup>\*1</sup> [TN: In traditional Jewish cheder learning, a boy's first lesson upon starting cheder, after his 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday, begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph, and the two ways it may be read, depending upon which vowel sign appears under the Aleph: if it is an Aleph with a "kumetz" (kamatz in Sephardic Hebrew) underneath, it is pronounced "u" (in Poland), and if it has a "pasach", it is pronounced "a". Therefore, a melamed teaching a boy his first lesson would start it chanting: "Kumetz Aleph – u; pasach Aleph – a..." ]

Once the child became older, he poured his sorrow out in *Der Gemore-niggun* [The Talmud Chant]:

*What are you whining then, by the Talmud?  
Pale kloyznik<sup>\*2</sup>, dear kloyznik;  
And your wailing chant  
Goes through my heart...*

(Abram Rejzen)

Or:

*What does the rain mean,  
What does it let me hear?  
Its drops on the panes,  
Roll like muddy tears.*

Or:

*The water in the river, how clear and how pure,  
Around in the fields, a magic spreads,  
And the study-hall is all the sadder,  
A permanent sorrow lurks from the winds,  
And looks with resentment at the new rays;  
Oy, Abaye<sup>\*3</sup> says, Abaye says...*

(Dovid Einhorn)

New times came, and S. Frug sang:

*The little bird is cooing, the little bird calls;  
Get up, children, the air is fresh and warm.*

The first to arrive was the grandfather [of Yiddish literature,] Mendele [Moycher Sforim], blessed be his name, with his Shloimele<sup>\*4</sup>. And what novelties, what wonders, a Jewish child saw and heard:

*Green meadows with blooming flowers, like embroidered carpets; fields with swaying stalks;  
a wonderfully beautiful chorus plays before him: the nightingale chatters, the goldfinch pours  
itself out in trills; the bleating of goats, the neighing of horses, [and] the shoifar-blowing of  
cows come up loudly.*

The Jewish child saw God's true world, which was completely alien to him.

Then came the immortal Sholem Aleichem with his *Motl, Peysi the Cantor's Son* and others. Together with the Yiddish literature, the rejected Jewish child went up onto the stage of Jewish life.

The great beginning, however, came in the years of the great awakening when, from the poor Jewish quarters were heard the sounds of the songs of freedom:

*How long, Oh, how long, shall you suffer and slave?* (David Edelstadt)

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<sup>\*2</sup> [TN: Person who is often at the prayer hall, or "kloyz."]

<sup>\*3</sup> [TN: Abaye was a Talmudic rabbi.]

<sup>\*4</sup> [TN: Protagonist in Mendele Moycher Sforim's autobiographical book "Shloime Reb Chaim's," as a child. The forthcoming quote is an excerpt from said book, chapter 9 (p.57).]

From these same years, with the freedom songs and the fight for liberty, a direct line is traced to the novel wonder in Jewish life - the workers' Children's Home and the secular Yiddish school for the Jewish child.

In 1918, I returned from the War and the POW camp. It was difficult for me to bind the thread of party work which had been torn in the few years of war and inside the [camp] fence. My heart and mind were as if atrophied to the former ideas and ideals. Only when I saw the first Children's Home, [which had been] created during wartime, [with] the cleanliness, the decorated walls and floors, the blinding whiteness of the children's benches, the toys, [and] the piano, then I felt the love for the child hovering here in the air, to be literally touched with the hand - it became bright in my eyes and in my soul. Only at the Children's Home did I feel that man's love, his idealism [and] his faith were not dead and I henceforth connected with this all my life.

The Jewish child was redeemed at the workers' Children's Home. Every normal child is born with talent. Every child, from the wordless years on, until he grows up, is an innovator. He wants to make things. Even in *cheder*, Jewish children secretly crafted, under the tables, the Chanukah tops, the rattles, the wagons with wheels of balls of twine [and], from paper, they made birds and ships and often received a beating for it from the *Rebbe*.

At the Children's Home, the crafts were done *on* the table and [sitting] at benches. There were plenty of boards, hammers, saws and blocks [of wood] to make boxes and chests, wagons and sleds, and to erect whole palaces. Work was done jointly and separately:

*One glues together a little house with a chimney. Inside the little house, a little table is made and, at the table, a tiny doll. They make a little branch with a little bird on it, a little plate with fruit, a cushion with a little doll and, into everything, they introduce their own style, talent, diligence and enthusiasm. After all the things dry, they are put in the display-case and they take pride: 'I made this, I made this!' (A Day at the Children's Home)*

From the children's homes in the dozens of cities and *shtetls* in Poland seven-class primary schools grew, then a Yiddish *gymnazjum* [and] a teachers' seminary. These schools expanded mainly due to the selfless devotion of the teachers and school activists. They were surrounded with a singularly warm affection on part of the parents, the Jewish workers, the professional unions, the common people and the intelligentsia. Inside the schools burned a great light, which shone over the streets and courtyards of the Jewish quarters. The Yiddish tongue in the mouths of the children had a thousand charms. The festivities in honour of the classics - Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, Peretz [and] Rejzen - together with the old-new Jewish holidays which were celebrated in the schools - shone with the joy and enthusiasm of the seven suns.

It was a young, wonderful world of children big and small - a newly-born world which, with children's songs and popular tunes, awakened joy, hope and belief in a happy, creative life for the Jew and for mankind - for us and for the world. The wailing of generations, those old and children, the whining of the Talmud chant, of "*Abaye says*", was exchanged for joyous, courageous songs of work and freedom:

*At the forge by the fire,  
Stands a smith smithing.  
The hammer strikes, sparks spray,  
And he sings a song.*

*He sings bravely, he sings hot;  
And he feels not the rivers running,  
Of perspiration from his brow.*

*Of the freedom that will come,*

In the higher classes, difficult things were learnt with great ease. Besides Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, Ancient and Modern History and everything a person needs to know in life - hygiene, chemistry (with experiments in the [school's] own laboratory) [and] botany (in an own garden) - they studied painting, singing, dancing and playing in a mandolin orchestra.

At the Children's Home and school there was also a theatrical studio. Very few Jewish actors had such a musical education, such a wonderful expression [and] such theatrical knowledge as did the more talented children of the school. Each of the children's performances was a huge event in town. Later, the school's actors and actresses appeared with great success on the Jewish stage.

There was no longer a dream of a new world. There was no longer any yearning for the "quiet *shtetl* evenings". It was like a dream come true - a real, living, newly-born world - the world of the Jewish child.

Jewish poets, old and new, were recited, [both which they] translated from the world literature and from [their] own, such as Moishe Kulbak's *The City*:

*And the bells were ringing;  
Brazen youths set out on the way.  
Hey, let us go, let us go!  
The doors from afar, are wide, are free;  
Our path is misty with dew and is new.*

*Let us open the dreams, and forge the truth;  
Let us seek the bright song for the generation.  
Maybe a lonely wanderer already keeps to his way,  
Maybe the sounds of a new prayer are being woven –  
Let us, Children of Stream,  
And of Night and Abyss,  
Let us go, let us go..."*

Together with this, every day, on every holiday [and] at every theatrical performance, the Children's Home's children's march resounded:

*One, and two, and three, and four,  
What we are, is what we are;  
Though we may be young and small,  
Like the heroes we must go.*

*Nine and ten, eleven and twelve,  
You find a peasant, tell him Godspeed!  
You find a flower, tell it Bloom!  
You find a birdie, tell it Fly!  
March, march, march, get going!  
With the drum, and singing!  
We don't need to ask,  
Let us go, let us go...*

Great guests came to visit the school - Sholem Asch from Warsaw, Dr Chaim Zhitlowsky from America, Dr Shabad from Wilno. Ruth Leviash and [husband] Moishe Rudinow, while on tour in Poland, gave a special children's concert at the school. From far away, a delegation of English Labour

members of the House of Lords came - Lord and Lady Marley. The important guests were welcomed with singing, plays and with the mandolin orchestra's playing, and greetings were sent to the children of England [and] to the children of the entire globe.

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Let us honour the sacred memory of the men and women teachers and the school activists - the martyrs who gave their lives for the sanctification of God's name and the sanctification of Humanity!

The editor of *Lerer Yizkor Buch* [The Memorial Book of Teachers], the prominent writer and leader of the Yiddish secular schools in Poland, Ch. Sz. Kadzan, in his introduction to that sacred book, quotes the words of Szlojme Mendelson:

*This was a wonderful group of people who lived with a great ideal and served it with all their soul.*

*These teachers' outings and conferences were always so festive and permeated with inner excitement and glowing creativity. It is difficult to write and to think about this - one becomes torn with inner yearning and sorrow!*

The *Lerer Yizkor Buch* mentions many of the teachers of the Częstochowa schools. We shall at least mention a few names here:

The first whom we must mention is Rajzla Fajertag-Berkensztadt, who was nicknamed "Che-che-che", because when she saw a child in the street, she would run up with outstretched arms. During the Nazi occupation, she managed the Medem Library. She died a martyr's death.

Proud of her Siedlce lineage, Rywka Cuker spoke [with] a bit [of a] Lithuanian [accent]. When Kope'le heard her teaching for the first time in class, he slammed his hands on his knees and quite brazenly declared, "We don't understand German!"

[And] Pola Fridman, one of the pearls in the family of teachers - her sister, Mania Friedman - the "blonde Gentile girl", the liveliest Fröbelian at the Children's Home - Bronia Lipszyc from Warsaw, the favourite of her pupils - Szlojme Melman, who worked on the Ringelblum Archive, his wife, the charmingly dark, popular, and enthusiastic Itke Lazar and, the last, the dearest Terenia Fajgenbaum-Kopinski, whom the children always so joyfully greeted with, "Terene'le, Terene'le!"

From the large number of annihilated school activists, let us at least mention Abram Bratt - Honoured be his memory. Bratt began his communal work almost as a child. He was killed together with his wife Róża Plawner and their sixteen-year-old daughter. At the *Judenrat*, they suggested he become a policeman, in order to save himself. He answered, "I prefer to die, before laying a hand on Jews!" The second one is, Herszele Erlich - the funny, quiet and pious soul who, under German occupation, stole bread-coupons somewhere in Warsaw in order to aid refugees from Częstochowa. He is one of those to whom Dr Józef Kruk dedicated his book *Independence, Terror, Freedom*.

May the names of those mentioned and [also] those not mentioned be blessed for generations and generations.

Now, they all belong to Eternity, to the hallowed and legendary Land of the Void. But the legend of that life lives, the legend of the Yiddish Secular School, as a verse in Maxim Gorky's poem *Fairy* [?] says:

*"And Mark is no longer here;  
His grave – no one knows where it is.  
His spirit still hovers above us;  
A legend after him lives..."*



*Mojsze Kopinski, Nutka Kromołowski, Mojsze Kremski, Markus Herszlikowicz, Gucza Sztajnic (his wife), Szmulewicz, Sztajnic, (Name Unknown), Herszele Fajwlowicz, Szoszana Częstochowski, (Name Unknown). Last row: (I do not recall name), Plawner, Prentki*



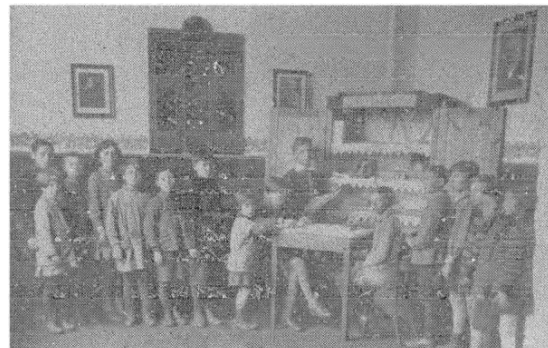
*A group of female Vereinigte and Independent members, upon mbr. A. Chrobolovsky's departure to America. Rywka Weksler (lives now in Częstochowa), Róża Plawner-Bratt (Abram Bratt's wife), her cousin from Radomsko, Fajgla Berliner (lives now in Paris), Helencia Plywacz, Riki Gross, Szlezyngier (Dudek Szlezyngier's wife), A. Chrobolovsky, Nirenberg (Szyja Nirenberg's wife)*



*Vereinigte Workers' Primary School (2<sup>nd</sup> grade)*



*Vereinigte Workers' Primary School (3<sup>rd</sup> grade)*



*I.L. Peretz Primary School's school-cooperative, 1928-9*



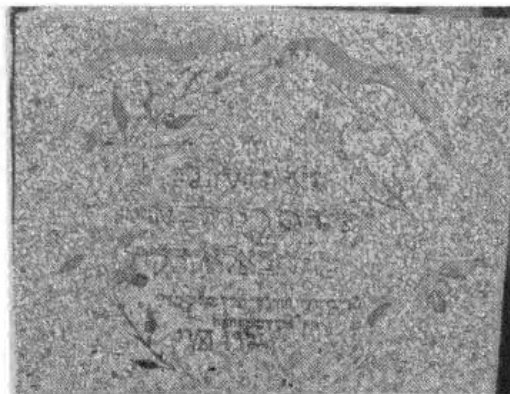
*Children's celebration for the end of the school year  
at the I.L. Peretz Children's Home*



*[Parents' meeting at the C. Ratner Workers' Primary  
School, 27/06/1925]*



*A group of students who graduated from the I.L.  
Peretz School. In the photo are seen the teacher  
Zarski, Szymson Berkowicz, and others*



*[Illegible]*



*A group of agitators for Vereinigte. Sitting from the  
right: Rele Amsterdam-Frajmauer, Boms, Fajgla Frank,  
Lapides [and] Fajertag*



*Fajgla Berliner-Zelwer on a visit to Częstochowa in 1936.  
Abram Bratt, his daughter, Stefa Jesionowicz, Rywka  
Weksler, Plawner, Plawner's sister [and] Szajn*