

S.D. Singer

On the Shores of the Warta and East River

-by Raphael Federman



Raphael Federman's memoirs [which were] printed in the book *Czenstochover Yidn*, were very interesting to read. It was evident from those autobiographical pages that Federman had much more to relate - so much so that rather more than just an autobiography of a Jewish cultural activist in Poland could emerge. Federman's experiences in Soviet Russia, during the years of the Second World War, which he only mentions in passing; his travels throughout Russia; the hopes and disappointments of a Jewish socialist and social activist - all this demanded that he write in a more detailed manner about those fateful days through which he and his close ones lived.

Federman, therefore, had a good idea when he decided to elaborate on his memoirs. In fact, Federman re-wrote and changed [them] such that a completely new and unique book emerged. This is a cultural-historical chronicle of the life of a man, written in the form of a long story, with a protagonist - Józef Szalit - and with descriptions of dozens of other Jewish personalities.

The book *On the Shores of the Warta and East River* is interesting in that, instead of relating about himself, Federman truly took upon himself the work of a writer to also tell about others. He did what every writer does - he put himself, as it were, to one side of the events and the people about whom he tells. But Federman did not forget to also interweave, into this book, a significant part of his own life, his faith and the contrary - his doubts, his numerous social endeavours for the public and his personal wrangling for his own bit of fortune, of the good deeds, and the contrary also, of the blunders for which one pays so dearly and for which no remorse can later be of any avail.

In this book, Federman did not end off in 1939, when the book's main character, Józef, was forced, as were thousands like him, to flee the burning city of Warsaw, which the Nazi planes had pummelled incessantly with fire. The route Józef's of wanderings had just begun. The book contains images and scenes which depict the life of the Jewish refugees who were miraculously saved, first in Soviet Russia, and later in free and democratic America. Together with the joy of having survived, we also become aware, here, of the refugee's loneliness in the great city of New York - the alienation of the refugees and their difficulty to adapt to the new life, after so many years of suffering and pain in the German concentration camps.

In this book, Federman does not propose to just present the reader with an interesting novel. Instead, the storyline - the events themselves - psychologically force him to examine the characters he describes and their thoughts. Precisely the unassuming, simple style of narration, the depiction of events and situations like he, the author, remembers them - make for very interesting reading. In a light manner, Federman often succeeds in conveying the unclear, troubled feelings of the Surviving Remnant, the newly-arrived immigrants.

The life of an entire generation is factually described in this book. The first part of the book describes the generation of Jewish youth brought up in the religious-Chassidic environment, in the years prior to the outbreak of the First World War. The Russian Tsarist regime represses every free thought of the young and the old. The boy, Józef, gradually becomes involved in the Jewish Revolutionary

Movement - first in the SS Party, and later in the Bund. Józef grows up within the Movement. He is frequently arrested by the Tsarist authorities, but he is released on the grounds that he is a minor, [too] young. He studies and develops, and grows spiritually mature [enough] to become one of the leaders of the Jewish workers in the town of Warta.

The chapters of the book in which Federman describes the cultural activity of Jewish youth in Poland, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th[century], are of [particular] interest. These were the "Renaissance Years" of the new Jewish literature and the rise of a better Yiddish Theatre in Poland and in Russia.

The sections where Federman describes the joy of Yiddish-secular youth, when Jewish writers and actors came down to the town to give talks on literature or to stage theatrical performances of pieces written by the newly risen Jewish dramatists, constitute especially interesting reading.

"It was then", Federman recounts, "that the poet and actor Mark Schweid and Miriam Izraels, the wife of the painter Kratka, came to the town of Warta. It was a great, joyous occasion for the youth in town. Józef, too, participated in a few of Perec's one-acts, together with the visiting actors, and under their direction. Józef looked upon Miriam Izraels as a biblical character".

We become increasingly acquainted with Józef, the protagonist, who is portrayed as an idealist. He literally sacrifices his own fortune and quite often forgets about himself and his own future, if only to do something for civic welfare and, especially, for the Jewish worker. In that respect, Józef was one of the hundreds of idealistic, Jewish, young people in the beginning of the 20th century, who awoke to a new life in the cities and *shtetls* of Russia, Poland and Lithuania - that generation of young, Jewish people, who possessed in their hearts a faith and elevated ideals to build a more beautiful and better world.

This was a new Jewish generation - a generation which had torn itself from the old Jewish world, but which still remained loyal to the Jewish People, holding high the flag of Socialism, which should, and must, come for all mankind, including the Jews! The history which is Józef's life, in content, is the history of the life of that same idealistic Jewish generation. Every Jewish Socialist born in the 1890's may, to a certain extent, recognise himself in this book.

Among the numerous characters in this book, one intensely recalls the young Jewish schoolmistress Mirl, whom Federman describes with such understanding and sympathy.

Federman tells of Józef's love for this quiet and good Jewish daughter. The Jewish workers and middle-class intellectuals in the town of Warta open a Yiddish secular school - one of the schools known under the name CISZO [Centralna Żydowska Organizacja Szkolna - the Central Jewish Scholastic Organisation], which were then being opened, after the end of the First World War, throughout the whole of Poland. This same teacher, Mirl, with her idealism and devotion, calls to mind the hundreds of Jewish male and female schoolteachers like her, whom the Nazi barbarians annihilated with such savage cruelty.

In the book, the type of Jewish workers' leader, who had freed himself from religious Judaism, but had taken, upon himself, a new yoke of a new faith, to serve the working class and the great idea of Socialism with all his heart, is lovingly portrayed. This new hero - in this case, the workers' leader Józef - freed himself from all the religious restrictions regarding what one may and may not do. Quite often, however, his lot was no better than that of the religious Jew. The freedom, which the secular Jew had been granted, actually generated countless new complications in life.

Józef is a romantic by nature. He is always in love - first with Mirl and later with the teacher Rywka, whom he marries. Matrimony brings neither of them any happiness. In due course, Józef becomes enamoured with many other women, who bewitch him with their beauty, but who bring him no happiness in life. Quite the contrary - all these love adventures leave emptiness within Józef's soul. Only in his later years does Józef find his true soulmate - the young woman Golda, who had lost her husband in a Nazi camp in Germany. She becomes Józef's life partner. With Golda, Józef lives the calmest years of his life, until he dies suddenly.

Józef leaves a written will and a manuscript, which consists of a thick folder of memoirs, which he asks, in the will, to publish after his death.



The part of the book, in which Józef's escape from Warsaw in September 1939 is described, makes for particularly interesting reading. He arrives in the cities of Wilno, Kowno and, later, Moscow. Józef passes through all the seven lairs of hell, which every Jewish socialist and Bund member passed through during the time in which he found himself, during the years of the Second World War, on the soil of Soviet Russia.

This book mentions the deaths of martyrs Erlich and Alter, whom the Soviet rulers killed for no reason. The part of the book which recounts how Józef obtained the transit visas for himself and his girlfriend Miriam, the young Victor and the young girl Stefa, is also interesting to read. Józef applies to the Soviet authorities, in Wilno, for a permit to travel outside Russia via Japan, in order to be able to then reach America. Here, Federman describes the Soviet bureaucratic officials, the rulers of the new order whose hands hold the fates of millions of human lives. These are portrayals and scenes which engrave themselves in one's memory. There are portrayals and scenes which will remain as documents from a terrifying era, when the human being was *hefker*^{*1}, where they did whatever they wished with him, allegedly in the name of a Socialist Fatherland. Federman describes the fear of his hero Józef, when he stood face-to-face with the Soviet investigator with such simplicity and nobleness, that it provokes a sense of terror in the mood of readers.

After numerous petitions, Józef and his close friends are, at long last, allowed to leave Russia. Józef's entreaties even touch the hardened, Soviet officials. However, when Józef arrives in America, he does not feel more at ease. At this point, evil tidings begin arriving from Poland about what the German murderers are doing to the Jews! *En masse*, in the thousands, every day, Jews are killed for the only crime of being Jewish. The world keeps its silence! And Józef's heart threatens to burst from the pain. The suffering, which he and all the Jews are experiencing, combines with his own unsuccessful life. Józef carries a sense of guilt in his heart – Why did he deserve to survive? And when the news of Artur [Szmul Mordechaj] Zygielbojm's martyr's^{*2} death in London reaches him, Józef is unable to find peace. The martyr Artur [Szmul Mordechaj] Zygielbojm! What a heroic man he had been! With his death, [Szmul Mordechaj] Zygielbojm wished to shock the world and to remind it about the indifference of the democratic countries to the slaughter of the Jews in Poland. But also, the demise of the martyr Artur [Szmul Mordechaj] Zygielbojm was to no avail.

Thousands of Jews continued to be annihilated in Poland - every day, every hour. Józef was crushed and despairing. What had remained for him to do in his lonesome life? Józef throws himself into communal work, as in his younger years. He finds a little meaning to life in the work for his

^{*1} [TN: Abandoned, ownerless; up for grabs.]

^{*2} [TN: An elected leader of the Warsaw Ghetto, [Szmul Mordechaj] Zygielbojm was on a mission in London when he heard about the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto. That same day, 12th May 1943, he committed suicide in an act of protest.]

hometown Warta. He travels around throughout the country, collecting money for the "Landsmannschaft Book", which is to be a memorial - a headstone for the annihilated Jews of Warta. At the same time, Józef is also occupied with collecting funds for the Jewish refugees who are still in the German camps, even though the War is long since over. He does everything to aid these surviving Jews, so that they should be able to come to America, Canada or the Land of Israel.

The death of his only little daughter, Szajndla, often comes to Józef's mind. He is definitively separated from his wife, who lives somewhere in France. Józef's loneliness in New York, his walking about alone in the streets of the big city, without being able to adapt to local life and, later, the [final] split with his wife Rywka, who comes to see him from Paris, are all told in a simple and noble manner.

The book contains chapters which depict tragic-comic situations of the newly-arrived refugees in New York, who are unable to immediately adjust to the new life. And, exactly like him, they are also lonely in the new country, without relatives and family. Hitler, may his name be obliterated, had killed off those nearest to them. These lonely men were now looking for matches in the newspapers. Józef, too, becomes acquainted with several women - divorcees and widows. Józef hopes that, after having divorced his wife, he will perhaps find a woman to his liking, with whom he will be able to get married and build for themselves a bit of a home. All these acquaintanceships came to nothing. For the reader, nevertheless, the descriptions of the different types of women, which Federman writes, are in themselves of interest - both the practical and the impractical, who seek an appropriate match. They, the women, are also looking for their own happiness and, sadly, they seldom find it.

The book ends in good spirits - at least, not completely in sorrow. In the last sections, we are made aware of a letter which Józef writes to the daughter of his good friend of his in the bygone *shtetl* of Warta. Her name is Golda, as we have mentioned earlier. She and her brother Mordche miraculously survived. Following the Liberation, Golda lives in her hometown Warta. But she travels to Germany to meet with her only brother Mordche, who is the only one left of her entire family.

The correspondence between Józef and Golda is very informative. Through these letters, we become aware of the great destruction, of the cruelties the Nazis perpetrated and, at the same time, what the surviving Jews feel and think following the destruction. Golda shows herself to be an interesting person. She gradually returns to life, although her gruelling experiences remained etched into her soul. Golda's life, her suffering and the suffering of her brother Mordche, are but a drop in the ocean of ordeals and pain that the surviving Jews endured under the bloodied claws of the Nazi beast. Those saved from death could still not detach from the horror, from the poison of death which the Nazis, may their name be obliterated, had force-fed the emaciated, famished Jewish body.

Furthermore, the story about the brother Mordche and his love for the German girl Lotta uncovers the whole traumatised state and imbalanced moral weakness of the majority of the survivors in the DP camps. The Nazis poisoned more than one surviving Jew, morally and spiritually. With the surviving Jews, the sense of good and evil and of national pride, were washed away - except for the cruelty of the Nazi barbarians.

Mordche miraculously stayed alive in a Nazi camp. He had not waited for the American and French troops to come to liberate him. Emaciated and starving, due to going for days without food, Mordche fled from the camp which the Nazis had left a few days earlier, abandoning the unfortunate Jewish captives without food. Debilitated, without any strength, Mordche goes to a German peasant's cottage. He hides in a stable, waiting for the liberating army - the Americans or the French - to arrive. The hours and minutes seem like an eternity and, when the French finally come, they find Mordche [almost] unconscious, unable to stand on his feet - emaciated and weak.

This same Mordche, however, who had suffered so much at the hands of the Germans, found it impossible to forget the girl Lotta, the German farmer's daughter. He confesses this to his brother-in-law Józef.

"I am disquieted", says Mordche to Józef. "I go about as if not in this world. I know what it means for me, as one who has suffered at the hands of this murderous nation, to go around day and night thinking about a German girl. But how am I to blame? My mind tells me one thing, but my heart another".

It turns out that Lotta had helped keep Mordche when he was in hospital. Neither Lotta nor her father had had anything to do with the Nazis. But, notwithstanding, under Józef's influence, Mordche discontinues his correspondence with the German girl Lotta, until he forgets her altogether.

The book's last chapter is dramatic and touching. Józef's death, his will [and] the thoughts which arise in this idealistic person's last minutes, evoke emotions and a deep sadness and Józef's last words to Golda and Mordche are, "I leave this world with the good feeling that I have, after all, been able to act both for myself and for just regular Jews, and especially for the surviving townspeople of my dear, unforgettable town Warta.

"I am the last of a generation - a generation which desired to see a new world of honesty and uprightness. Mordche and Golda, be my successors and do everything to root out the evil from among mankind."

Federman's book *On the Shores of the Warta and East River* will definitely elicit great reverence from his friends, the *landsleute* of his hometown, the hundreds of Bundist comrades and, most particularly, from the newly-arrived refugees here, in the State of Israel.

Without doubt, this book belongs to the small number of post-Holocaust books, in Yiddish, which have both a storytelling value and also a cultural-historical one.