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Israel Zangwill - a tribute, 1926.

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"ISRAEL ZANGWILL--A TRIBUTE."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING

OCTOBER 17, 1926, CLEVELAND.O.

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WRHS



JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND

One of the great dreamers of the Ghetto passed away recently, and it is altogether fitting that we should pay our bit of tribute to him. Israel Zangwill was so very much a child of the Ghetto. His career abounds in all the colorfulness, the anomalies, the lights and the shadows of that Ghetto in which he was reared, and which now claims him as one of her immortal children. Born in the midst of great poverty, the child of refugee Polish parents, Zangwill rose to the front ranks of English men of letters. Classed by some as belonging to the three greatest modern English writers, one of the masterful interpreters of English thought, of English speech, he was yet denounced as an alien and an enemy when he dared to castigate the faults and the sins of his own country. A dreamer of delicately spun dreams, a man of rare vision, he was, nevertheless, a practical man, an activist individual who participated in every great social movement of his day, and who organized and led and administered a great international movement among his own people.

So that the life of Israel Zangwill reflects all the contrasts and inconsistencies, if you will, of the light and the shadow, the tragedy and the comedy of that Ghetto which he so remarkably depicted. Born sixty-three years ago in London, his family moved while Israel was still a baby to the city of Bristol, and there as an infant

Israel already experienced one of the tragedies of the Ghetto. On Atonement Day his mother, in order that she may go to the synagogue, left him in charge of a young girl, a stupid girl of sixteen,--a non-Jewish girl. During the service in the synagogue the mother suddenly became very much concerned about the welfare of the child that she had entrusted to the care of this young nurse maid, and returning, she found the girl playing in the street. She inquired about Israel and was told that Israel was well. She went into the house and she found Israel desperately crying, his head under a pillow, his face black, his mouth full of blood. This idiotic nurse maid had pricked his tongue with a needle and imprinted on it a bloody cross, "in revenge for the crucifixion of the Lord."

The lips of Isaiah were touched on a burning coal; and he prophesied. The tongue of Israel was touched early in life; and he prophesied.

The persecutions of the Ghetto evoked the strongest reaction throughout his life. The early days of Israel Zangwill were spent in London, where his folks moved back to the metropolis. He attended the Jews Free College, or the Jews Free School in London, and early in life distinguished himself as a precocious and brilliant lad. He became a pupil teacher after a while, and as he grew into manhood he joined the staff of the Jews Free School. He also graduated from the London University.

Zangwill received in his youth an excellent Hebrew education; and I should like to underscore that, because no man can understand that fine and discriminating scholarship which Zangwill displayed in his works, especially in his essays in defense of Jewry and Judaism, unless he remembers this fine early Hebraic training which he received, both at school and at home. And that is perhaps why Israel Zangwill was able to become the champion spokesman of our people, and that is perhaps why so many American Jewish writers fail to become the master interpreters and spokesmen of our American Jewish life. With the best intention, the native American Jewish writers are superficial, shallow, inaccurate and misleading, because they are not grounded either in the life or the history or the literature of their people. Three million Jews in America have not produced any Israel Zangwill or anyone remotely approximating Israel Zangwill, in talents, in comprehensive understanding, in Jewish life and thought.

Zangwill was a perfect writer very early in life, but it was at the age of 28, in 1892, that he wrote that great classic which permanently placed him as a leader in Jewish life and as a master artist in the world of literature. I refer to that book which he never quite surpassed in all his subsequent writings--"The Children of the Ghetto." Someone has well said that this book is more than a book: it is an event. And the "Children of the Ghetto" was an event in Jewish life. Up to that

time the Ghetto was mute. Israel Zangwill discovered its voice. In Zangwill "die Judengasse" began to be articulate; that his contained little understood world was full of color and romance, and pathos and tragedy; that world of drabness and glory, of meanness and greatness, of hawkster and peddler, and genius and dreamer; that variagated world that suddenly, through the magic pen of Israel Zangwill, stood revealed to the world at large. It was as if someone had lifted a curtain and revealed a new world to the astonished eye of mankind.

Zangwill wrote about the Jewish Ghetto sympathetically but not uncritically. He was an artist and not a propagandist in his novels. He depicted the life, the whole of life, the whole panorama of life, the saint to the sinner; the ugliness and the beauty, the crassness and the spirituality of the Ghetto; the craftiness and the guilelessness of the Ghetto, and pervading it all that spirit of the Ghetto compounded out of the dreams and the hopes and the sorrows and the disillusionments, the tenderness and the wistfulness which are the Ghetto's own; and in doing this Zangwill rendered a beautiful service to the cause of Israel. He not only won for the Ghetto a sympathetic interest, but he pointed the way for other Jewish artists to do likewise, to imitate him.

There were many Jewish artists, some of them of great ability, contemporaneous with Zangwill, but they did not deem Jewry worthy of their talents. They sought

for their inspiration and their subject matter elsewhere, in alien cultures, in worlds other than the world of their own people. They rather regarded their Jewish extraction as a handicap to an artist. Israel Zangwill showed them the way to greatness and to success on the road leading right through the Ghetto. Israel Zangwill devoted his colossal talent to Jewry, and before long many disciples arose who followed him and gained distinction for themselves, and reflected credit upon their people by depicting in book or picture or sculpture or music the soul of Jewish life, the soul of the Ghetto.

Other studies soon followed. Two years after "The Children of the Ghetto" appeared, "The King of the Schnorrers" appeared, that inimitable tale of Jewish wit and gaiety which reflected the Ghetto in its happier moods. For Zangwill knew Jewish life, and Zangwill knew there was much more in the Ghetto than tragedy and pathos; there was laughter there, and raillery and gaiety and brilliant banter and wit; and in that proud and arrogant, preposterous beggar, the King of the Schnorrers, who went by the glorious name of Manasseh Bueno Barzillai Azevedo da Costa, -in that character Zangwill focused so much of the keen, oftentimes mordant, wit, that incisive humor, which are the Ghetto's. Some years thereafter Zangwill produced another work, --"The Dreamers of the Ghetto," a series of studies, some historical and some semi-historical and some fictitious. And typical dreamers of the Ghetto,

of souls that could have been fashioned nowhere else but in the Ghetto. Unforgettable are the stories of the misery of L and of Spinoza, or that remarkable bit of writing called "From the Mattress Grave," a description of the last days of Heinrich Heine on his mattress grave in a garret in Paris; and Zangwill in so many ways resembled Heine. Unforgettable, too, is the picture of the Turkish Messiah, Shabbethai Zebi, the false Messiah of the seventeenth century. And perhaps the most soulful and touching of his studies is "Joseph the Dreamer," the story of a Jewish lad who sacrifices his faith in order to save his people. In this book Zangwill revealed that in all his craftsmanship he also has profound knowledge of Jewish history and Jewish literature.

Zangwill was not only a novelist; he was a poet, an essayist and a dramatist; and in his essays, especially those collected in the volume called "The Voice of Jerusalem," which ought to be in the possession of every Jew and of every non-Jew, Zangwill appears in another role. He is now the champion; he is now the defender; he is now the knight errant of Jewry; his are now the winged words of challenge and defense, the tribune of our people. But no one in the last hundred years has championed the cause of his people as courageously, as zealously, as powerfully and effectively as Israel Zangwill.

Now, Israel Zangwill names the faults of his people, and Israel Zangwill never condoned these faults.

He was not an unthinking partisan of his people; he chastised his people with the chastisement of love; he railed against their weaknesses and their failings; he lashed to scorn those of his people who were steeped in materialism and dwelt in ease in Zion; he prodded the people and goaded them and spurred them on to their high destiny. Because he had a marvelous conception of what the role of the Jew in the world today ought to be. And so Israel Zangwill was not a partisan, an apologist for his people; but neither was he a cringing sycophant to the non-Jew. He measured out the same measure of justice to the non-Jew; he lashed them with the fury of his righteous indignation; he denounced the oppressors in high places and in low places; he exposed to scorn all forms of anti-Semitism, the lower anti-Semitism of the pogromist and the higher anti-Semitism of the scholar; he ridiculed all those various and preposterous theories of racial superiorities and national selection which are the basis of so much of anti-Jewish propaganda and legislation in the world. And Israel Zangwill was feared and hated for his outspoken courage; for he brought to his task not only an amazing erudition, not only an incomparable style, but a wit which cut deep into the flesh of all sham and of all deceit and of all hypocrisy. He had a marvelously exalted conception of the role of the Jew in the world. The Jew, to Israel Zangwill, was the very keynote of the Almighty; the Jew was a Messianic power for salvation and universal spiritual

resurrection. And he was impatient with the Jew when he fell short of his high calling and his high destiny. In one of his remarkable essays he thus defines the career of the Jew and his destiny in the world. He says:

"The mere existence of the Jew today has been a triumph of idealism; it marks a dissent for the sake of an idea from the dominant forces of Asiatic or European civilization, a protestantism persisted in despite the ceaseless persecution of all the centuries of Pagan or Christian supremacy. The real story of 'The Wandering Jew' remains, when every deduction has been made, the story of camps of idealists entrenched everywhere in enemy's country, practising those Hebraic principles of human brotherhood which are now only beginning to work their way from the creed to the life of Christendom, and organizing existence round the synagogue and the Talmudical college so democratically that the beggar considered himself the equal, if not the benefactor, of the philanthropist he helped heavenwards. The popular idea that Judaism has remained stagnant since the birth of Christianity, if it had only given the impulse to that great current of emotion which has produced Catholicism and Protestantism, stimulated Mohammedanism, and moulded the national character of the Anglo-Saxon race in Britain, Australasia and America, it would have been revered today as we revere Hellenism. But the Jews, unlike the Hellenes, survived by a continuous tradition their greatest period,

and, though scattered to the four corners of the earth, went on developing their old faith on its own lines, side by side with the development of Christianity, producing a wilderness of codes and commentaries, mysticisms and cabbalistic theosophies, poems and pseudo-Messianic movements, evolving unique types of character and unique racial humours, and pouring out a Hebrew literature so voluminous that the catalogue for the last century alone fills an octavo volume of one thousand pages.--no bad record for a 'dead race' writing in a 'dead language.'

Curiously intermingled with the picturesque panorama of the mediæval, bringing the mystery of the Orient and the youth of the world into an atmosphere of barons and crusaders, friars and schoolmen, popes and artists, this strange race moves,--or rather is 'moved on'--across the stage of the Christian era, always fantastic and fascinating, never out of danger of pillage and massacre, always ground between Church and State, always the unavowed tax-gatherers for kings and emperors, everywhere forced into usury, slowly changed from the peasant warrior breed, that fought the Greeks and Romans, into a meek commercial people, forbidden by Papal bulls to deal in anything but old clothes and old iron, stunted and contorted in soul and body, bent from poring over the Law or making feigned obeisance to the persecutor, often clothed literally with shame as a garment, and finally shut up in Ghettos; yet always, somehow, somewhere, rising through individuals to

wealth and distinction,--viziers in Turkey, hidalgos in Christian Spain and Ministers of State in Saracenic, masters of the mint in Egypt, astronomers royal in Portugal, royal physicians at every court in Europe, putting forth a Maimonides in Cordova and a Spinoza in Amsterdam, and a Heine in Düsseldorf, and finally surviving to attempt its national renaissance in the Palestine lost eighteen and a half centuries ago, and to contribute who knows what clarified gospel to a confused world. For the stress of the centuries has exhausted neither the intellectual nor the ethical strain in the race, and while Bergson, Freud and Einstein have revolutionized modern thought, there has glimmered in every country of the Diaspora, as in France through James Darmesteter and Joseph Salvador, the dream of a new prophetic Judaism, a characteristic example of which has just reached me in the proposal of an obscure London Jew for 'A Covenant of Goodness' with a Universal Religion and a Universal Citizenship as the path of Creative Peace. The Jews, who, even Mr. Wells admits, introduced into the world two thousand four hundred years ago 'the idea of the moral unity of mankind and of a world-peace' begin to recognize that they must see it through."

And that last phrase sums up the whole prophetic passion of Israel Zangwill. He wanted the Jew to be a moral force, a leading moral force in the world; and he, in one of his poems, calls upon his people; he says:

"Set your lips to the Shofar,  
Waken a fiery blast,  
Shrill to the heathen nations  
This slaughter shall be the last!  
And send our old Peace-greeting  
Pealing from cot to throne,  
Till mankind heeds the message  
On the Hebrew trumpet blown,  
And the faith of the whole world's peoples  
is the faith that is our own."

Therefore his people prompted him to translate many of his immortal hymns of our liturgy into the English, so as to make them available to the English-reading public. He translated the works of that immortal Hebrew poet Gabirol into the English. But Israel Zangwill, I said, was not a Protestant, and his talents were not exhausted in the cause of Israel alone; wherever there were men and peoples oppressed, they found in Zangwill their most faithful defender and spokesman. The persecuted people of Roumania found nowhere in Christendom a voice as potent and as challenging in their defense as that of Israel Zangwill. And the cause of universal peace,-- how dear that was to the heart of this child of the Ghetto! Read his book, "The War for the World"; or the great dramas, "The Forcing House," or "The Cock Pit," and see with what a hatred he hated war and all that leads to war, and with

what a surpassing and overwhelming love he loved peace and all that is conducive to peace. Zangwill spoke for pacificism, for international comity and international righteousness,--not in years of peace when it is easy to speak of these things, but he spoke of them during the dark and tragic days of the war in England, in war-ridden England, and he was damned as alien and foreigner and enemy; but Zangwill dared to stand alone in behalf of the golden heresy of truth; Zangwill dared to stand alone with God; he persisted in his faith and in his cause.

I said that one of the anomalies of his character was that he, being a dreamer and a visionary, was still a man of practical affairs. When the Zionist movement, through the voice and the personality of Theodore Herzl, first flashed upon the Jewish world, Israel Zangwill was among the earliest to join the standards of this immortal son of the Ghetto. Israel Zangwill was deeply distressed by the misfortunes of his people in Russia; Israel Zangwill was deeply impressed by the spiritual homelessness of his people everywhere, and he sought to reconstitute their national life somewhere,--in Palestine, preferably, but when the dream of Palestine seemed too distant and too impossible of realization in the immediate future, and when the English government offered to set aside Uganda for Jewish colonization and settlement, Zangwill became the protagonist of Uganda; and when the Zionist Congress in 1907 refused to accept the British

offer, Zangwill became the leader of a new movement to Jewish territorial accession. The as it was called, sought to divert Jewish thought and Jewish immigration to the Uganda, or into other territories into other parts of the world where settlement seemed to be easy and quick. He failed, of course; and Zangwill remained to his dying day a severe critic of Zionism and of Palestine, but never an opponent and never hostile to the movement. He was a Nationalist, a believer in a reconstituted Jewish people somewhere in the world.

And lastly, friends, Zangwill loved America. Most of you have, no doubt, witnessed his great play, "The Melting Pot." It took an Englishman and a Jew to portray in drama the destiny and the mission of America,--that which we all felt but could not make articulate, this masterful son of Israel made articulate. He saw in America the hopes of the world; he saw here the gathering place of all the peoples of the earth; he saw here a great melting pot where all peoples and all races were fusing and blending into one super-race--a new type of people, a new type of manhood and womanhood, and he hailed it with joy as the beginning of a new era in mankind; and when his dream of the melting pot seemed to fail of realization, when during the war and after the war he beheld Old World tendencies, Old World prejudices and hates and bigotries making their inroad into American life; when he saw our growing hatred of the immigrant, our

immigration restriction laws, our suspicion of one another, Zangwill became bitter in his criticism of America; and you will recall that when he last visited us he said many things that we did not like. But Zangwill said things even more caustic and bitter about his own people, whom he loved,--about the Jewish people. "He whom the Lord loveth he despiseth." And Zangwill loved America with a deep and sacred love, and therefore he sought by means of speech and pen to warn America against the dangers which were besetting it.

Zangwill was of the heroic breed. He was in direct line of descent from the prophetic school of our people. Sometimes people found in his wit and humor much that was excessive and artificial; sometimes people found in his manner and in his mannerisms much that was unpleasant and antagonistic. But be it remembered that beneath the surface of this wit and brilliancy and mannerism there was a profound moral earnestness, intensity and integrity. Zangwill was no dilettante; Zangwill was not a player with words for words own sake; no one ever accused Zangwill of being a self-seeker, the exploiter of causes for personal aggrandizement; Zangwill was a profound moral individual, caught up by the flaming passion of heroic ideals, and he served them with utter self-abandon and with complete consecration of spirit.

The world has lost in the death of Zangwill a humanitarian,--a humanist, rather; a friend of all that

goes to the enrichment and the ennobling of human life. Zangwill will be long remembered, especially by his own people. He did not forget his people; his people will never forget him.

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