

THE DRAMATIC CIRCLE "YAB"

by Chaim Ben MENSZE, Holon

(A bunch of memories of the "Yiddishe Arbeter Bine¹" and its director Hersh-Meir Glowinski)

I first saw him in the Perec Library. He sat quietly, with a cigarette in his mouth. The slow rise of the smoke made his face serious and added an air of dissatisfaction. This face and pitch-black fringe were etched in my memory. Also, he cast a sharp, piercing gaze on everyone.

When I and my friend Osher came in, we scoured the catalog and found the number of the book we were looking for and we both happily ran to the librarian Shmuel Sobutki and asked for the book. We got the book and impatiently flipped through it. At the same time, my friend was quoting a piece of prose by heart and Hersh-Meir Glowinski, who was sitting there, was watching us both. He must have noticed our confusion, mixed with contentment. The thing intrigued him, apparently. He immediately asked:

— Who is rehearsing with you? What is the name of the play you are preparing to perform?

— "I am", Osher replied proudly.

— Who are you and what is your name?, asked Glowinski with a good-natured smile, but in a contemptuous tone.

— My name is Osher and I am the grandson of the Ciechocinek shoemaker. I have long been playing theater. According to my mother, as a child I used to show a penchant for theater. Now, when I work in my grandfather's workshop, we both sing to the beat of the hammer. After my grandfather has drunk a couple of glasses, he immediately put the hammer away and dances like an eighteen-year-old boy. Him. Dancing a *kazaczok*, a kind of dance, so much so that the neighbors come together to see that wonder.

Without wasting any time, my friend Osher immediately sung two stanzas and asked Glowinski:

— Are you at least an expert of this song?, showing at the same time an idiotic face.

This freedom of speech and bold attitude made a good impression on Glowinski.

— And you, my young fellow? He turned to me with irony. Do you also play "theater"?

— I did not start so early, I replied a little bit embarrassed. At the synagogue, I recited various poems, we made a show on Purim and also played Goliath and the Philistines. This was the first time that, during the evening classes, I was incited to participate to the dramatic circle,

with Nisan Frenkel, Menche and Pessa Prync, in Shalom Aleichem's one-act play "*The Doctor*". The director was Shaye Trunk, the Rabbi's son. I played Chaim Leib, — I answered with pride, — Now we have a team of ten girls and boys, we want to play "*Motie Melech the Carpenter*". This is an American drama (I did not even know the author's name). We've been rehearsing for several weeks, but because of the outdated script of the rewritten drama, it was hard for us to read. We have therefore made some research and, indeed, we found the original.

Glowinski asked us for the address of the house where the rehearsals were taking place. He began to show himself and pay attention to the improvements that Osher made from time to time. Hearing the mangled Yiddish we used made him very upset.

— Boys, do you want to play in a theater?, he asked, quite upset — Teach yourself to speak as you need to and throw away the useless pathos. Speak simple, humanly, do not overdo it.

We asked him to take over the direction. He does this with satisfaction. We torment ourselves, as a matter of fact, strive to meet his demands, adapt to his comments. After several weeks of hard work, we prepare for the performance. Glowinski changed the name to "*The Dancer*". The name is more attractive, he said. Glowinski got the approval from the "Cultural League" and the performance happens at the set time.

Glowinski and Osher share the profits equally. We are content to have our names written down on the posters and inside, in the programs.

The team disintegrated because Glowinski could not tolerate Osher who, by the way, had great impudence. They quarreled. Osher left Kutno and went to play in his hometown — Koło.

We formed a second team. Glowinski recalled his famous amateurs: Yosef Pakulski, Israel Epszajn, Shaye Lichtensztajn, Pesa Prync, Ruzge, Chaim Grinbaum, etc. We began the repetitions for the "*Wild Man*". Glowinski put effort and work into the performance. He demanded from us a pure language, a clear Yiddish word and good Hebrew.

— Artists, he shouted, you will never be, but let's hear at least a word in a correct Yiddish.

¹ TN: Yiddish for "Jewish Worker's Stage", hence "YAB".

He could not demand this from Shimshe Maczik, or from Reuven Treger, or from the guy standing around in the market. But from the stage he wanted to hear Hebrew. Also, curiosities were not lacking. When Israel Epsztajn said in his prose with pathos: "Today is Shabbat, laughter are on the table", Glowinski shouted in a tooth-grinding outcry:

— It is not "laughter", but "candlesticks"². How many times will I tell you, eh? Why are you shedding my blood?! And when Shaye Lichtensztajn needed to repeat two words of Hebrew, as "*nekevim nekevim, chalulim chalulim*"³, darkness fell. Glowinski awarded Lichtensztajn with all the epithets he had in his "*repertoire*," for his analphabetism.

I am reminded an interesting episode of when our prompter, Yaakov Meir z"l, stood in the prompt corner and looked at a player and meanwhile forgot to give the required words. Shaye Lichtensztajn hit the chair on which she was sitting, shouting "Enter the mother" in delicious Russian... The spectators, who seemed to have recovered from the sudden eruption, gave Lichtensztajn a long-lasting applause. Hersh-Meir on the other hand pulled his hair and shouted: "*Gevald*, what has he done?!"

Later, a curiosity was done by Mendel Kohn. He played as a cantor. In the first act, of course, with a beard – this was in Russia. The second act was then taking place in America, where our cantor had to perform without a beard. A Jew native of Russia meets him and asks:

— Eh? Where did you put your beard and *peyot*?

— Here, you understand, it's America, he replied. Nobody wears a beard here so I took it off...

Hersh Meir created a framework for our team and gave it a special name "YAB" – "Jewish Workers' Stage" in the Cultural League. Young extras were attracted, especially girls with good and lovely voices. Their names: Necha Caler, Rozenblatt, Rachel-Leah, Esther Frenkl, Royza Pitl and others. Among boys: Zaken Asz, Feivish and Chana Blum. Zalman Kam became the technical stage leader and took care of the repertoire. Glowinski wanted to prepare a revue, something extraordinary, surprising. Scenery, music, and props were required for the revue. Kopel Kirsbaum took advantage of his relationship with Abraham Opoczinski. We allowed him to be present at our rehearsals. He listened and organized various parties and became an ardent supporter of our drama. His decorations were of great importance and significance to us.

Glowinski saw this, was pleased with the new forces and that our team was developing and moving forward. He put his whole talent and even more forces into the performances. He also created the music. Anshel Freund and Abraham Sztift helped him. The play "*Chai Gelebt*"⁴ that was just prepared, was created in the same way. It had a great success. Several times it was played in the old theater and partly also in Michalewicz House⁵. It

was a revue performance. The popular program was presented with taste and flavor, pleasing to the eye and ear. The sketches and enactments of Shalom Aleichem, Perec and others, stood on a very high level and were also masterfully executed. More than half of the program included songs, poems, humorous dialogues, and staging. The Gypsy Camp with its rich musical content got a great reception from the public. Its dances in special costumes, accompanied by various soft instruments, light reflectors, etc. – literally captivated the audience.

With great love and appreciation, a serenade was recorded, sung by a stubbornly in love young man with his chosen one – a maid, who is afraid of her mistress. This was carried out by Necha Cyler⁶ and Zaken Asz.

A big surprise was the performance of Chelemer Cantor with his poets, performed by Cuper, Nisan Frenkl and other members of the team.

It was an evening of humor, satire and grotesque. The extraordinary success was naturally a result of the effort and effort of the team, and especially of Hersh-Meir Glowinski.

Nor should the great contribution and achievement shown by Abraham Opoczinski with his artistic talent for selecting and adapting the decorative part to each item be diminished. The success was the recognition of the team and a great satisfaction for Glowinski.

With the performance "*Chai Gelebt*", we also traveled around the neighboring towns, where we were received with great warmth. In the town of Kowal, near Włocławek, we had a bit of a failure due to the strong influence of the Left-Wing *Poalei-Zion*. This town was very much of a fortress.

Our arrival was planned on a certain Friday by night. As the placards carried the caption "YAB" in the Cultural League, it turned out that it smelled like "*Bund*". This made a lot of fuss in town. The posters were torn down. With some effort we got the key to the room, which had been booked before. The police came to the room and demanded our permit. Our arguments did not help and evidence did not help and the evening was reported at the police station. We had to cancel the performance.

But Glowinski did not give up so easily. In a few weeks' time, he once again, with the help of the Włocławek Bundists, organized an evening, which passed with success. We later tried Peretz Hirszbajn's "The Green Fields", but without success, because Glowinski did not stop demanding from us more than we could give.

This is how it ended, until he left Kutno in 1933. He traveled, giving recitations in the western part of Poland and trying to alleviate his pain due to his unsuccessful career in the artistic world. Most recently, he has been an active artist in Danzig.

Honor his memory!

² TN: Yiddish "*laachter*" ("laughter") and "*leychter*" ("candlesticks").

³ TN: Hebrew, words of the Prayer to the Creator, meaning "openings and hollows".

⁴ TN: Hebrew and Yiddish, could mean "live lived".

⁵ TN: the building of the *Bund*, in Kutno.

⁶ TN: probably the one referred as "Necha Caler", above.