



## SHALOM ASZ

*translated from the Hebrew by Sara Mages*

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Shalom Asz (born in 1880, Kutno, Poland) was a Yiddish writer; author of novels, plays and essays. His father, Moshe, son to a family of ritual slaughterers, was a cattle dealer and innkeeper. His mother was related to one of the Rabbis of Łęczyca<sup>1</sup>. According to Asz, he inherited from his mother a heart that knows no rest and immersed in dreams, while from his father he inherited faith and security. Asz's first education was in the *cheder* and later in a *yeshiva*. When he left *Beit HaMidrash* (and he was 17 years old), he came across a German translation of *Tehillim* in Hebrew letters and from it he tried to learn German. Later, he studied the German alphabet and began reading the German classics, and because of it he was suspected of heresy in his home. Other than that, a spirit of restlessness entered him and he could no longer sit in one place. And so, he stumbled upon a village, to the house of relatives. There, he taught the Torah to their sons and at

the same time he observed the lives of the Polish peasants. It was, according to him, "the elementary school of his life." His "high school" was in the city of Włocławek where he made a living from writing letters – a craft "that opened to him the hidden corners of life."

Under the influence of Hebrew, Russian, Polish and German written works, Asz began to try his hand at composing literature – at first in Hebrew. In 1899 he showed his writings to Y. L. Peretz in Warsaw, and according to his suggestion Asz began to write in Yiddish. In 1900, his first writing named "Moshe'le" was published in *Der Yid*<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, his drawings and short stories were published in *HaDor*<sup>3</sup> and *HaTsifra*<sup>4</sup>, and in 1902-1903 his published stories and short dramas in Hebrew in *HaShiloach*<sup>5</sup> and *Luach Achiasaf*<sup>6</sup>. In those years, a collection of his drawings was first published in a book form in Hebrew – "Stories" (Tushiya Publishing House), and in Yiddish – *In A Shlekhter Tsayt* "In Terrible Times" (Progress Publishers). The sadness of his childhood years is reflected in his first writings, and it is possible that they also have some of the literary influence of Avrom Reyzen and Hersch Dovid Nomberg, whom Asz socialized with from the day he came to Warsaw and

<sup>1</sup> TN: Malka Frajda Asz born Widawska (October 1, 1850, Łęczyca – 1938, Kutno), second wife of Moshe Asz. See article on p. 255 of the original book.

<sup>2</sup> TN: Yiddish, "The Jew."

<sup>3</sup> TN: *HaDor* (lit. 'The Generation') – Hebrew-language literary journal published in Cracow, Poland, in 1901-1904.

<sup>4</sup> TN: *HaTsifra* (lit. 'The Epoch') – a Hebrew-language newspaper published in Poland.

<sup>5</sup> TN: *HaShiloach* – Hebrew language literary journal.

<sup>6</sup> TN: *Luach Achiasaf* – Hebrew language almanac.

"lived with them in dark and damp holes and came in contact with human distress." A change took place in his life when he met the Polish Jewish writer, M. M. Shapira, whose daughter Matilda he later married. The needs of his life multiplied and with it, his literary achievements expanded.

In 1904, Asz published in the *Der Fraynd*<sup>7</sup>, chapter by chapter, his story *Dos Shtetl* ("The Town," 1913), and this story, which appeared the following year in a book form, opened a new chapter not only in Asz's work. A new, more cheerful tone has been felt since than in the Yiddish literature. The place of the poverty of the "bad times" is inherited by the innocent idyll of the "town," which is full of the spirit of family. Similar to Perec's "Folk Tales," to the humorous stories of Shalom Aleichem, and "Shlomo's Life," Mendele's last story, the new turning point, which applied to almost all the literature of the Jewish people at the turn of the twentieth century, is also noticeable in Asz's "The Town": romantic admiration for the way of life of the people, instead of the negative attitude of the educated, faith instead of despair, and humor instead of satire.

In the same year (1904), Asz wrote his first play "Left and came back" (published in *HaShiloach*. It was published in Yiddish in book form as "*Mitn Shtrom*" ("With the Current" in Perec's "Yiddish Library"). After "The Town" it was his second step on the road to fame. Two of the plays that he later wrote: the *Meshekh's Tsaytn* – *A kholem fun mayn folk* ("Messianic times" – "A Dream of My People," 1906) and "*Got fun Nekome*" ("God of Vengeance", 1907), were presented in Russian, Polish, German and other languages. Asz's name was then published in the centers of world literature in St. Petersburg, Berlin and Munich. In the following years he wrote the plays "*Sabbtai Zevi*" (1908, in Heb. 1928), "*Yikhus*" ("Pedigree", 1909), "*Der Landsman*" ("Townsmen", 1910), "*Der Bund fun di Shvakhe*" ("The Ties of the Weak", 1912), "*Yiftakhs Tokhter*" ("Yiftach's Daughter", 1913), "*Far Undzer Gloybn*" ("For Our Beliefs", 1914), "*Dos Heylike Meydl*" ("The Holy Girl", 1916), "*Der Toyter Mensch*" ("The Dead Man", 1920), "Yosef" (1924), "*Koyn*" ("Coals," 1928) and more three-act and one-act plays.

In his dramatic works, whose themes and motifs are individual, psychological or national and social, his strong ambition to break through the town's boundaries and enrich his literary work in terms of content and form is felt as one. This ambition is also felt in his new stories. The first of his novels "Mary" (1912), and its sequel "*Der Veg tsu Zikh*" ("The Route to Oneself", 1913), deals with the life and problems of the Jews in many cities and countries. By its scope, "Mary" is a novel of the Diaspora, but it lacks architectural unity.

Asz began writing novels after making several major travels, starting in Europe and later in *Eretz Israel* (1908). The fruit of his travel to *Eretz Israel* was "In Eretz

Israel" (Warsaw, 1911), and the fruit of the travel to America – plays and stories from Jewish life in America. In 1908 he participated, with Perec and other Yiddish authors in the "Czernowitz Yiddish Language Conference," and there he lectured on the gathering the treasures of ancient Israeli literature in Yiddish (he himself translated the "Book of Ruth" into Yiddish).

In the same years he wrote the long story "*R' Shlomo Nagid*" (1913, in Heb. 1917), in which he returned to deal in the matter of the town, but now he treated it after he had matured his talent. In the new story Asz meant to say something and not just sing. This story became an artistic scale for him and, in the stories that he wrote after it, Asz asked to return and reach this peak. However, this aspiration was not soon fulfilled. The social novel "Motke the Thief" (1917, in Heb. 1929) – the first part is very touching, but the rest is nothing but the kind of a story found in the life of the "underworld." "*Onkl Mozes*" (1918), although it is not full of life like "Motke the Thief," it surpasses it on the part of its unity and the wholeness of its parts. Once again, it occupies a place here at the head of the Polish town, but in American style, and is no longer a matter of patriarchal idyll, but is more like a comedic drama. More than that was his success in, "*Kiddush HaShem*"<sup>8</sup> (1920, in Heb. 1927), a story from the days of the decrees of 1648 and 1649<sup>9</sup> – one of the first historical stories in modern Yiddish literature. In the manner of Asz in other stories as well, he presented here the holy Shabbat against the gray mundane of Jewish life, against foreign slavery – domestic freedom. The semi-melodramatic work, "*Di Kishefmakherin fun Kastilyen*" ("The Witch of Castile," 1921, in Heb. 1928), is a continuation of "*Kiddush HaShem*" according to its spirit, even if not according to its content.

Asz immigrated to America at the beginning of the First World, but returned to Poland a few years after the war and later settled in France. In 1938 he settled in the United States and became an American citizen.

In 1920, on the occasion of Asz's fortieth birthday, a committee was formed in New York (headed by Dr. Y. L. Magnes), which published in 1921 the collection of his writings in twelve volumes, with an introduction by Sh. Niger. In 1930, his fiftieth birthday was celebrated, and in 1932 he was honored by the Polish Republic with the medal of "The Order of Polonia Restituta."<sup>10</sup> At the same time, he was appointed honorary president of the Yiddish Pen Club (a job he retired from in 1936), and was a delegate to several congresses of the Literary International. In 1937, the "Jewish Institute for Religious Studies" in New York awarded him the title of "Honorary Doctor of Hebrew literature." For many years he was a member of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Asz took the material for his stories and novels from the general Jewish life of the countries in which he lived. "*Di Muter*" ("The Mother", 1923, in Heb. 1929) is a two-

<sup>7</sup> TN: *Der Fraynd* ("The Friend"), the first Yiddish daily newspaper in Czarist Russia.

<sup>8</sup> TN: Hebrew, "Martyrdom."

<sup>9</sup> TN: years of the massacres, in Ukraine, of about 100,000 Jews.

<sup>10</sup> TN: The Order of the Rebirth of Poland.

part novel, one Jewish Polish and one American. This novel is rich in descriptions of the environment and characters of individuals, but imperfectionless. *"Toyt Urteyl"* ("Death Sentence", 1927, in Heb. 1930) – a longer story of general American life – is clean of this flaw, and that is the case in his story *"Khaym Lederers Tsurikkumen"* ("The Return of Chaim Lederer" 1927, in Heb. 1930). Similar to the main character of "Death Sentence," Chaim Lederer belongs to a group of personalities that is very typical to Asz: each of them, as the author himself, misses an ideal, seeks faith. The sort of souls full of longing and seeking these ways, is also Zachary Mirkin, the main hero of the trilogy *"Farn Mabul"* ("Before the Flood": St Petersburg 1927; Warsaw 1930; Moscow 1932) – a monumental work that in some respects should be seen as a sequel to Asz's first novel ("Mary") and its sequel ("The Way to Oneself"), but its structure is vastly improved from that of these novels and the scope is much larger. In the first part St Petersburg, the former capital of Russia, is described as the center of Jewish intelligence in Russia in the period leading up to the revolution. In the second part, Warsaw is described as the former center of the life of the Jewish people, and of the major movements in the life of the Jewish people, as a Zionist movement and as a socialist movement in Poland; in the third part – Moscow – events and leaders of the Communist Revolution are described. Artistically, the finest of the three parts of the trilogy is the middle part, where Asz unfolds a sheet of life with deep roots, that he was well acquainted with it and the turbulent currents of life of revolutionary Moscow.

After the novel of the great social generation, "Before the Flood," Asz sought, so to speak, to relax in a quiet book – a story of a personal hidden life *"Gots Gefangene"* (*"der Goyrl fun a Froy"*) ("God's Prisoners" ["The Destiny of a Woman"], 1933). A year later he wrote *"Der Tehilim-Yid"* (1934, in Heb. "The Psalms' Jew", 1935-6) – a book in which Asz repeatedly folds the main motifs of almost all of his writings, and especially the motif of faith in faith. In 1937, he published *"Baym Oprunt"* ("At the Abyss"), a novel from the days of inflation in Germany after the First World War, which Asz saw as inflation of all values, and of spiritual values in general. *"Gezang fun Tol"* ("Song of the Valley"), which was published in 1938, is a poetic depiction of the lives of the pioneers in *Eretz Israel*, in the place Asz visited in 1936.

The first part of his second trilogy, which deals with the creators of Christianity ("The Man from Nazareth" – the Yiddish source was published only in 1943, while its English translation in 1939; "The Messenger" has not yet been published in Yiddish and was only published in English 1943; "Miriam" – in English in 1949), is psychologically a sequel to "The Psalms' Jew," and in terms of the subject – of some of his first stories. "The Man

from Nazareth" was received enthusiastically in the English press, but not so in the Yiddish press. Not only that *"Forverts,"* which served until then as a permanent hostel for Asz, refused to publish the novel, and also came out openly against the author claiming that he was "preaching Christianity," "leading to conversion from Judaism," etc. Most of the Jewish press followed the editorial board of *"Forverts,"* and since then a partition has been established between Asz and the Yiddish literature, and to some extent he was also banished from the Jewish society<sup>11</sup>. In everything he has written over the last ten to twelve years they began to search for and find "religious preaching" and all kinds of "impurity." So it was with his novel of Jewish life in America *"East River"* (1946), in his stories about Hitler's decrees *"Der Brenendiker Dorn"* ("The Burning Bush" 1946), and even in the novel *"Moshe"* (1951).

Even in these works, as in all his works that preceded them, before us is a storyteller, who writes first-rate plays and novels, excels in an idealistic outlook on life, in a romantic imagination and a lyrical mood and in a realistic style. The national and social environment of his heroes is no less important to him than their private "self". Their moral thoughts, and religious pursuits, are no less in his eyes than the rest of the lines of their character. Typical to Asz, as a creator, flared tempers, aggression and incessant migration to new areas. Therefore, there is no wonder in the matter, that Asz, who began the literary action as the town's poet, was destined to take the Yiddish literature out of the immediate vicinity of the town. As an artist of thought, as a writer of a religious ethos, he sought to destroy the partition between the truth of beauty and the beauty of truth. His roots are deeply rooted in the heritage of his people, and especially in the values of "faith and security," not only that the gates of world literature were not locked before him, he was helped to enter them. His writings have been translated into all the languages of culture. In Hebrew, in addition to what is mentioned in the body of the assessment, were published: *Collected Writings of Shalom Asz*, Odessa 1912; *"Kiddush HaShem"*, Tel-Aviv 1927; "Warsaw", idem 1934; "Moscow", there 1934-1935; "St Petersburg", there 1934; *"Baal HaTehilim"*, there 1935; "Moshe," Jerusalem 1953; "The Man from Nazareth," Jerusalem 1953.

Sh. Asz, autobiography (*Forverts*, 28.5.1922); Z. Reisen *Lexicon* 1, 1926; Sh. Niger *"Dertseylers un Romanistn"*<sup>12</sup> 1, 1946, pp. 320-530; the aforementioned, *"Algemeine Encyclopedie"*<sup>13</sup>, v, pp. 5-12; *Bal-Makhshoves*<sup>14</sup>, *"Geklibene yerke"*<sup>15</sup>, 1953; Yochanan Twersky, *Yiddish writers in America*, Achisefer 1943, pp. 264-271.

Sh. N. (Shmuel NIGER)

<sup>11</sup> TN: see article on p. 472 of the original book.

<sup>12</sup> TN: Yiddish, "Narrators and Novelists."

<sup>13</sup> TN: Yiddish, General Encyclopedia in Yiddish.

<sup>14</sup> TN: Yiddish, "Man of Thought" – pseudonym of Isidor [Israel] Eliashev.

<sup>15</sup> TN: Yiddish, *"Geklibene yerke"* – "Collected Works."