



Reception of the writer Shalom Asz with his Kutno townsmen – in Israel (1952)

## SHALOM ASZ NEAR HIS TOWNSMEN IN ISRAEL

*by Abraham LUSTIGMAN, Tel Aviv*

Just at the time when Shalom Asz was creating controversy in Israel, the great writer felt the need to enter the country.

This was in April 1952.

There was trouble not only in Israel, but in all Jewish cultural centers. Asz's latest works, "The Man from Nazareth" and "Moses", caused a great stir in the Jewish world. The great writer was downplayed on all sides and his face blackened. Suddenly, his friends from yesterday persecuted him, boycotting him and designating him a missionary writer. Others went further and openly accused Shalom Asz of being a "sold soul", that he wrote his Christian books for... money.

The attack against Asz first erupted in the United States and soon spread to Israel. Here, the fire became even more intense. Religious circles had thrown pitch and sulfur on Asz, settling accounts for an old debt – his play "God of Vengeance".

And although Shalom Asz was himself happy to be in Israel, these were difficult and horrible days for him.

He then lived in a boarding house on Mount Carmel, in Haifa. A number of Kutno townsmen wanted to arrange a reception for him. However, there were opponents who argued that Asz should be shaken off. The position of our honorary president, Mr. Aharon-Shlomo Elberg, was decisive. He protected Asz. It was decided to hold the reception in a large hall in Tel Aviv. A delegation of three was elected: B. Epszajn, Efraim Wajchselfisz and the writer of these lines. We left for Haifa, to "Pension Badeneimer", where Asz lived. However, he refused to accept the delegation. We understood his bitterness and asked the pension-owner to persuade Asz to receive us. Mr. Badeneimer was able to accomplish this.

It was in the morning hours. Shalom Asz was going down the stairs. We saw the tall, majestic figure with white head hair and large sad eyes, surrounded by dark circles. We approached the stairs, greeted him and introduced ourselves. Asz stopped on the last step. For a while he looked at us, shook his head, as a sign that he agreed to

receive us. But soon, he took a nervous stride forward. He turned away from us and apologized:

— I'll eat breakfast first and then hear what you want from me, Asz said in a mischievous tone.

We decided to wait.

After breakfast he approached us. Nervously, he blinked his eyes and immediately asked:

— What do you want from me?

— We have been delegated by the Hometown Society to invite you to a reception.

At first, he straightened up to his full height, then his face became a little gloomy. He shook his white head, walked forward with slow steps into the garden. His lips quivered as if he was talking to himself silently. His shoulder bent slightly and he asked in astonishment:

— What do you mean by arranging a reception? For whom?... We are arranging a reception?!... For the Jew, who is non-kosher and is shouted at?...

He was puzzled. His whole body shook. We only heard ragged words:

— Townsmen... Reception...

Suddenly he straightened up, hastily stepping back and forth. Soon he stopped and faced us. Calmer, he started with a soft tone:

— Why do I need this? And why do you need it? To what and when?

He was a bit annoyed and soon continued:

— "You want to give me a reception and they all want to shout at me and drive me away. Yes, yes, they want to burn me!" He was shaking out of annoyance. "They are plotting against me. My enemies do this out of jealousy. Yes, yes", Asz sighed. "If all my Jewish readers were living, they would not dare to do so. But all my readers are no more, who will stand by me? To whom should I shout out that all they are throwing at me is a big lie, a nasty lie?"

He remained silent and tears flowed from his eyes. We were left petrified. It was only now that I came up with the idea that the great Jewish writer had really become a pariah. His tens of thousands of readers had been exterminated. Thousands of Jewish libraries in Europe, where his books were kept, had been burned. The new Jewish generation will not read his work in the language of Asz, the Yiddish.

Gradually, Asz calmed down and sat down on a bench. He asked about our Kutno Hometown Society in Israel: how many members, what activities do we carry on. When we returned to the reception, he replied:

— I will first consult with my close friend, Abraham Sutzkever<sup>1</sup>, about the reception. If he agrees, I will accept your invitation. Without Sutzkever's consent, I will not come to any reception!

We accepted his terms. Sutzkever's attitude was a positive one – and as early as April 29, 1952, we held a solemn reception for Shalom Asz in the Pioneers' House, in Tel Aviv.

All those who said that "no one will come to Shalom Asz's evening" were bitterly mistaken. The place was packed with all the Kutno townsmen, writers, artists and invited guests. Everyone was curious to hear Asz.

Shalom Asz stood up like a... lion, in that evening. He expressed the same thoughts and let us hear the same words as in the conversation with us. He spoke with fiery and knocked on the table:

— I never got away from the Jewish people! This is a lie and a libel! There is a plot against me that was imagined by my enemies!

After the reception that our townsmen had arranged for Asz, different winds have blown. Different groups and institutions have welcomed Asz. In truth, it must be said that there were also many opponents. Many newspapers have criticized our initiative to give Asz such a warm welcome and wondered how come "that a Jew with a white beard, that is Mr. Aharon-Shlomo Elberg, should publicly greet the 'Christ-worshiper'". Mr. Shlomo Elberg did not respond to the criticism, but made a statement:

— Does that mean I kosherized Asz...

There is also much truth in this statement. Because the reception evening created the warm atmosphere, Asz could settle in the land. Without "the road that we had broken," Asz would not have dared to take such a step.

In 1956, Shalom Asz settled in his home. The town<sup>2</sup> was still undeveloped at that time. Several streets were surrounded with sand. But Asz chose to live in the house, although it was not so easy for him.

As soon as they started building a house for Asz, a fire of hatred broke out again. Religious Jews have put up placards in the streets calling Asz "convert", "missionary." They did not stop at making threats, they warned the



Shalom Asz with his townsmen in Tel Aviv (1952)

<sup>1</sup> TN: Yiddish poet, July 15, 1913 in Sorgon, Belarus – January 20, 2010 in Tel Aviv.

<sup>2</sup> TN: i.e., Bat Yam, southern suburb of Tel Aviv.

mayor, David Ben-Ari, that he should not let Asz enter in the city.

In 1958, Y. Panner<sup>3</sup>, Asz's private secretary in Bat-Yam, published a book of memoirs about Shalom Asz in which he recalls the reception of the Kutno Hometown Society. Here is a quote:

*... Apart from this unofficial boycott there were: The Jewish Press and the Jewish Writers in Israel. The "Golden Chain" is, it seems, the only journal in the world that has given Asz "asylum", long before he came to settle in the country. Someone else did not join the 'passive resistance' – the Kutno Hometown Society... The Kutners in Israel were the very first who organized a celebratory reception for their famous townsman. A Jew with a white beard, Aharon-Shlomo Elberg, the chairman of the organization, a childhood friend of Asz, who studied with him at the Beit Midrash in Kutno, said in his*

*welcome speech: "Asz has not sinned against us, but we have sinned against him. Asz always meant only our good. His intention was to dispel the abyss of hatred that reigns between 'them'<sup>4</sup> and us." The Jew spoke with heart and choked with tears – wrote Panner.*

Panner's book also provides an explanation of why Shalom Asz settled in Bat Yam and not in another city in Israel. Panner wrote:

*Talking to me once about her new home, Matilda Asz said that Bat-Yam reminds her of... Kutno. The same appearance, the same small shops and businesses. The same small town... Maybe Asz really chose for that this quiet town for his last home? Perhaps, after all the storms of recent years, he has longed for the idyllic town of his childhood – whose continuation and new incarnation is Bat-Yam?*

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<sup>3</sup> TN: Yitzhak Panner, Yiddish poet, excerpt probably from "Shalom Asz in his last home".

<sup>4</sup> TN: i.e., the Christians.