

My Father Peretz Markish

By SHIMON MARKISH

Bruno Bettelheim said: after the Holocaust no Jew can renounce his Jewishness — that would be the deepest immorality, an affront to God and to Man.

This formulation seemed odd to me: in the Soviet Union you cannot renounce your Jewishness; you can try to hide it, to fool the government, to falsify documents, but to renounce it, that is, to choose consciously between Jewishness and something else — Russian-ness, say — that is an impossibility. Not until I came out into the free and responsible world, the Western world, and became accustomed to the freedom, did I understand what Bettelheim had said. I also understood, however, that my previous inability to understand was not merely a result of living under Soviet conditions, but primarily because I had the good fortune to be born the son of Peretz Markish.

On the surface, we, his children, grew up one-hundred-percent assimilated. At home we did not speak Yiddish. Mother didn't know the language at all; her mother — our grandmother — only a tiny bit. And Father spoke a perfect Russian. Yiddish we heard only when Father's friends — or his relatives from the Ukraine — came to visit. Yiddish was Father's language, absolutely. We were forbidden to enter into it, just as

we were forbidden to enter his study when he was working. We were given no Jewish education — in any form whatsoever. Religious education was out of the question (not only our parents but even our grandmother was completely indifferent to things religious). But even a non-religious, secular Jewish education, such as Jewish history, in an objective, pedagogic manner — that we did not receive either.

Nevertheless, we grew up Jews. To be a Jew was for me just as natural as breathing, as loving my grandmother. There were no problems, no doubts whatsoever, about that — nor could there be. Jews — and that's it. A Jew at birth — and forever, just as one is born a boy, with black hair and brown eyes. This "organic-ness," this thoroughly natural Jewishness of mine, of my belonging to the Jewish people, I have been safeguarding all my life in the very same way I learned it from my father when I was a child. An exclusive belongingness, which does not permit another or a dual belongingness, no matter how harmonious, but at the same time, not one that is smug, not one that is arrogantly or aggressively contemptuous, a belongingness that makes no attempt to convince anyone of anything, and has no need whatsoever for self-conviction or self-affirmation.

*I was almost 50 when, with great effort, pausing over every word, I read the Shema** in a synagogue for the first time. The words

* Judaism's affirmation of faith, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."

— "You shall teach them diligently unto your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down and when you rise up," simply overwhelmed me. Although I knew the Bible quite well, (in Russian, naturally), the meaning of this commandment revealed itself to me for the first time. Father never "drilled" anything into me, but today it seems to me that you cannot teach children loyalty to Jewishness better or more effectively than Peretz Markish did it, by his very existence.

Most certainly, he was a man with extraordinary charm, a charismatic personality, but charisma alone is not all-embracing.

Now I am looking at him with the eyes of a young child, later — of a grown boy. Father is always busy. "Quiet! Papa's working!" That is, he's writing. He's hammering away at his typewriter. He's writing, but not like the neighboring Papas in the Writers Building on *Ulitsa Furmanova*. He writes only in Yiddish. His profession is different from theirs. The neighbors are writers; he — is a Yiddish writer. In his studio, all is quiet. Father is not at home. He is at a meeting in the Writers Union, or in the theater, or he is away on a tour. I have no doubt that if it's the theater, he's in the Yiddish theater with Mikhoels, and if it's a tour, he's in Minsk, in Kiev, or in Birobidjan. And if he's at the Writers Union, he's with Khatse (Dobrushkin), with Pinya (Der Nistor), with Nusinov, Bergelson, Halkin, Kushnirov. In any case I don't catch any other names — non-Jewish ones — when he tells Mother, on his return, what he did, whom he met, what the arguments were about.

Only during the war did I hear — and it surprised me a little — other names which sounded odd to me: Fedayev, Leonov...

Papa is at home. We have guests. In his office, then in the dining-room, then back in the office — a fearful hullabaloo. Everyone seems to be talking at once. And everyone

in Yiddish. That's how it should be. I can't imagine it any other way... When I look back now, I come to the conclusion that I not only grew up in a Jewish atmosphere, but in the very heart of a *community* life, of *community* interests and concerns.

The community is utterly different from what it was in the recent past, but the spirit and the tradition of the Jewish community, as a separate organism, which differs from the surrounding majority and does not mix with it — the spirit and the tradition are alive, healthy and cheerful. It was not their own personal interests that the people in Peretz Markish's house were all excited about, and it was not about the interests of their "multi-national socialist fatherland," but about what this or that matter meant for Jews, for Jewish culture, for the Jewish fate, for the Jewish future.

During the war my "instinctive" Jewishness became a conscious one — I realized my ignorance and demanded a Jewish education. I told my father that I wanted to learn Yiddish. No doubt he was happy about that, although he accepted my demand as something quite natural, with the openness that was a result of my and his life, of our common life. He found me a teacher — Lazer Podriatchik.

He encouraged my shy reverence for the unforgettable, highly learned and marvelous Elya Falkovitch.* But he himself did not try to help me. To speak with me, in order to correct my mistakes? What for? One fine day his son would speak to him in his, in their, language, with the same ease and naturalness that he himself had spoken with *his* father. I'm certain that's how he felt and I'm certain that's how it would have been one truly beautiful day, were it not for that darkest day of my life — January 27, 1949 — when they took him out of my life forever.

* Podriatchik and Falkovitch were Soviet-Yiddish linguists and grammarians; Falkovitch died in 1979; Podriatchik lives in Israel.

It goes without saying that Peretz Markish had a great love for Yiddish, but it was from him, from my father, that I first heard spoken Hebrew — in our Ashkenazic pronunciation, of course. I read Bialik in Jabotinsky's Russian translation and told my father about it. He asked me which poem I liked best. I replied, "In the City of Slaughter."

He took a volume of Bialik off the shelf and began reading aloud. He read for a long time and with obvious enjoyment, more for himself than for me, who didn't understand a word of it. He read with that same fervor that he read his own poems. The "bottom line," however, was that he *was* reading for me, because ever since that day I have had an awesome respect for Hebrew. Perhaps that's not appropriate for the living language of my nephew the sabra, Peretz Markish Jr., but it has become another cornerstone in the foundation of my Jewishness.

I don't remember my father ever talking about God, or the Bible, or about *mitzvot* or the Jewish holidays. But much later, when I understood his behavior, especially his reaction to my childish mischief, I appreciated how much that behavior was based on the religious tradition, how this behavior — completely unnoticed and thoroughly casual — also brought us, the children, closer to that tradition.

One day I referred to Moyshe Rabeynu as "Moses." Father was furious. "How dare you! Is he a school-chum of yours, or what? Either Moissaye, in Russian, or Moyshe, in Yiddish."

I couldn't understand why he was so angry. I tried to explain that I had seen it in a Yiddish folksong.

"That's a lie!" he exclaimed. "Or else you didn't read it right! And even if it's true, there are more fools among the folk than we need!"

The great figure of Moyshe Rabeynu was for him a sanctum, so the Germanized form

"Moses,"¹ in itself innocent and ordinary, seemed to him to be an insult to some majestic divinity. Another time, while playing with my sister, I put on Mother's robe, crept into her high-heeled shoes and painted my lips. Just at that moment, Father happened to come out of his study and caught me. I'll never forget his face — white with anger. He tore the robe off me, lifted me up out of the shoes and dragged me into the bathroom to wash the paint off my lips. That time he didn't lecture me, but the idea entered my head forever: It is absolutely forbidden for a man to put on women's clothing. [See *Deut. 22:5*. — M.R.]

Trivialities? Of course. But with what, if not with trivialities, does one mold the wax of a child's soul?

After the war, in the few years he had left, when my sister and I grew up and he grew older and closer to us, more interested in us, he began telling us about his childhood years in the *heder* at Polona, about the synagogue in Berdichev, where he sang in the choir until his voice changed... It was those stories about the Jewish past that stayed in my soul and in my memory like bricks in a solid foundation.

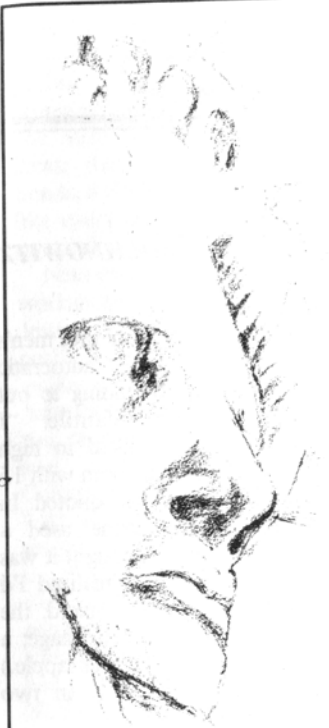
My father never taught me to *davn*.² I remained a non-believer, an agnostic. He didn't teach me to be a believer, but he taught me to be faithful — faithful to the Jewish past and the Jewish future, to the Jewish fate. Upon this pillar my life rests, and it was this pillar that he fortified with his own hand. I know: I am only a feeble spark of his vast flame; but my eyes are always and continually fixed upon him.

Once, at a colloquium in Brussels, I heard Emanuel Levinas,³ one of the greatest living philosophers of our time, say: "Remembering — that is already prayer." My

1. Apparently Russians are unaccustomed to the sound of this form of the name.

2. To recite the prayers.

3. A leading French philosopher.



THE NEW COLOSSUS

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land,
Here at our sea-washed sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome, her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Emma Lazarus

A limited edition artprint, "The New Colossus," created by Rita Peranio for the Centennial of the Statue. This print is 16" x 18" on beige parchment stock, ready for framing. Each print is numbered and signed by the artist. It will become a treasured memento, a handsome gift for all occasions. Price: \$15. (Includes first class postage.) Make (tax-deductible) checks payable to: Association for Promotion of Jewish Secularism, Inc. c/o Berger, 6655 Lawnton Avenue, Phila., PA 19126.

God, how true that is! I didn't even know that it was already 36 years that I have been praying for my father, about my father, about myself, a minute part of my father. And when I, the non-believer, enter the community of believers, who "say *yizkor*" four times a year, and I beg the Almighty to remember the soul of my father and teacher, who has gone to his eternity, I am not lying and I am not being hypocritical. Not only

did he give me life and shape me, but he also put me on a road that I walk on to this very day. And the remembrance about him — my prayer — I want to share that with everyone and continue it until the end of time. *Yizkor Elohim nishmas aba mori Peretz ben Dovid sh'holakh l'olomo...* (May God remember the soul of my father my teacher, Peretz son of David, who has gone to his eternity.) ■