

FOUR YIDDISH PROLETARIAN POETS:

I: POEMS OF MORRIS WINCHEVSKY

Translated by Aaron Kramer

OF the four immortal proletarian Yiddish poets, Morris Winchevsky was the first to be born and the last to die. The other three: Morris Rosenfeld, David Edelshtat and Joseph Bovshover—sprang directly from him, building upon his revolutionary themes and innovations of style, expanding the huge audience which he had helped to create. He was affectionately known all over the world as the *Zayde* (grandfather) of Yiddish proletarian poetry.

He was born on August 9th, 1855, in a Lithuanian village. Afterwards his family moved to the capital, Kovno, where he grew up in an atmosphere of extreme poverty. He received advanced rabbinical training, but rebelled against the hypocrisy around him. He became a bank clerk and in

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that capacity was transferred to a post deep inside Russia (1874) where he made contact with the revolutionists who had come from the universities to carry on propaganda among the peasants and live among them.

In 1877 he had a bank post in Koenigsburg, Prussia; here he saw the first socialist newspaper for Jews, edited by Aaron Lieberman. He joined the German socialist movement. When Lieberman was arrested in 1878, Winchevsky became editor of a Hebrew newspaper. A number of his poems of protest appeared in its pages. He was soon arrested and deported. After a short stay in Paris he settled in London.

Here for the first time in his life he saw tens of thousands of Jewish factory workers—and realized that in order to reach them he would have to write in Yiddish. He was soon closely associated with William Morris in the founding of the British Social Democratic Federation. He wrote a revolutionary pamphlet, *Let There Be Light!* and put out a socialist weekly, first called *Dos Poilische Idl* (The Polish



Morris Winchevsky

Jew) and afterwards, *Di Tsukunft* (The Future). In 1885 he was one of the founders of the first Yiddish labor daily, *Dos Arbeiter Freint* (The Worker's Friend). Here were

published his fighting songs and "London silhouettes"—immediately sung and loved throughout the world. His Yiddish translation of Thomas Hood's *Song of the Shirt* also appeared in this newspaper, which circulated as widely in the United States as in Britain.

In 1894 Winchevsky came to America, where he was greeted by many thousands of workers. He continued, in Boston and New York, to edit socialist journals. He wrote many fables, plays, feuilletons—and poems, none of which achieved the popularity of his earlier songs. His autobiography, however, was a major contribution, not only as literature, but as a history of the revolutionary movement throughout Europe in the '70's and '80's.

During the first world war Winchevsky consistently opposed the imperialists on both sides, thereby rejecting the Socialist Second International. He cheered the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution, and in 1924 paid a visit to the Soviet Union, where he received a tumultuous welcome in city after city. He was hailed as a pioneer in the war for socialism.

He contributed to the *Morning Freiheit* as long as he could write. On his seventieth birthday the *Freiheit* published his collected works in 10 volumes. His last essay was called, "My Communist Party Card."

He died on the 18th of March, 1932. Tens of thousands who had come to pay their last respects, were kept from viewing the body by Winchevsky's anti-communist children, who, together with the *Forward* editors he had hated so intensely, ordered the police to push back the crowds. But these anti-communists were powerless to bury the songs.

AARON KRAMER

I: LONDON SILHOUETTES

In Rain, in the Wind and the Frost

What can they be doing—two waifs—on the street,
in rain, in the wind and the frost?
with cold little fingers, and wet little feet,
with blue little lips, and with pale little cheeks?
How far is their home—are they lost?
Their home?—only *I* am their home, says the street,
in rain, in the wind and the frost!

And where can two children be going so late,
in rain, in the frost and the wind?
No friends? and no parents to lovingly wait?
Orphans? Too bad! Am I seeing straight?
No doubt of it—one of them's blind!
The street says, But *I'm* their friend, early and late,
in rain, in the frost and the wind.

And why are they suddenly standing so still
in rain, in the wind and the frost?
Too young to go begging, and too poor to sell;
for stealing they've neither the strength nor the will.
Who'll feed them? Who'll throw them a crust?
Ah, this time the stone-hearted street keeps still,
the rain, too, keeps still—and the frost.

Jack the Thief.

Jack, being simple, could not understand,
could not see the rhyme or the reason
that for three apples he'd picked from a stand
they put him away in a prison.

Jack had a mother—an old scatterbrain—
who clung to the foolish belief
that such a law must be simply insane,
for Jack was a child, not a thief.

Jack went away with a sorrowful feeling;
his mother turned paler than pale.
What can a child know of taking, or stealing?
A child—she thought—young and in jail!

Jack served his sentence—each day was a year—
at last he walked freely outside.
Ah, but the price of the apples was dear:
he learned that his mother had died.

A Little Girl in the City

Close by the Market, the temple of loot,
a poor child keeps haunting me, day after day;
stands like a little chick: motionless, mute,
beside a blind man who is feeble and gray;
 holding out batches
 of unwanted matches,
murmuring, begging the gentlefolk there:
"Two boxes a penny, one penny a pair!"

Even in rain, in the lightning and thunder,
calmly she stands and refuses to stir.
"My matches," she worries, "some rain might get under
the covers!" but nothing else matters to her;
 puts out her pale little,
 fair little, frail little
hand, and beseeches the gentlefolk there:
"Two boxes a penny, one penny a pair!"

She fears not the wind nor the lightning that flashes.
But how much storm can she weather—poor waif?
Consumption devours her lungs, and the matches
she clings to more stubbornly now than her life—
 soon, soon another
 without home or mother
will vend, as she vends, to the gentlefolk there:
"Two boxes a penny, one penny a pair!"

II: SONGS OF STRUGGLE

My Vow

A good many years ago, while I was rotting
in jail, at a tyrant's command,
and while, like a corpse, I was being forgotten
by lover, and laughter, and friend—

I uttered an oath once, the holiest oath,
to battle for truth and for rights;
to give up my comfort, to give up my youth,
to give up my days and my nights,—

as long as a man can be chained like a slave,
as long as the world is a jail,
as long as the toiler, from cradle to grave,
hears only a curse and a wail.

Yes, many years back, in the dark prison hell,
divided from brother and bird,
I uttered this oath in the gloom of my cell,
—and night was the witness that heard.

A Battle Song

Lift to the breezes our banner of red!
Get into line now, and strike up the band!
Waken the ragged half-living half-dead;
say to them: Brothers, see here's where we stand,
there stands the bloodthirsty foe.
Here marches freedom, and justice, and light;
there lurks oppression, and evil, and night;
brothers, come march with us now!

Wipe all the tears of the workers away,
tell them that now is no time to be crying;
let no lamenting be heard on this day:
this angry day when we send bullets flying,
we and the bloodthirsty foe.
We—who believe every man is a brother;
he—who would like us to hate one another;
brothers, come march with us now!

Lift to the breezes our banner of red!
Strike up the band, and alarm every street!
Keep in your memory the glorious dead—
reckon the victims of gold and deceit,
slain by the bloodthirsty foe!
Offer new blood to the pale ones, the drained ones;
offer new hope to the stooped ones, the chained ones;
tell them: Come, march with us now!

In Battle

When the drums of liberation
shall at last begin to sound,
you may find me at my station
on the bloody battle-ground.

And my brothers, I shall lead them
not in a commander's post;
only with my songs of freedom
shall I move the mighty host.

For, beside the ammunition,
at that hour—hot and grim—
we'll be needing, in addition,
an inspired battle-hymn.