

Zhitlovsky: Philosopher of Jewish Secularism

By MAX ROSENFELD

THE work of Chaim Zhitlovsky should long ago have been available in English. That it is not is symptomatic of the gap in cultural continuity which developed in the United States between the Jewish immigrant generation and its children. Part of the reason for this failure is traceable to Zhitlovsky's own theory of Yiddish as the primary symbol of modern Jewishness. But the ideas expressed in his work far transcend the limits of language or of his own principled Yiddishism.

From 1888 to 1943, for the Yiddish-speaking intellectual and the literate Jewish worker, first in Russia and then in the U.S.A., Chaim Zhitlovsky was teacher, goad, trail-blazer, storm-center, visionary, idol. Throughout his long public career, he was linked with people and movements that struggled for human progress.

His works are a thoughtful and carefully reasoned fusion of social and national ideas. And he strove constantly to give his ideas a living form. He was among the very first to argue for the establishment of Jewish secular schools. His public lectures were legendary. His essays now fill a dozen volumes and most of them, I think, would be of interest to modern Jews, especially to those of us concerned with secular Jewishness.

Reality has come to mock some of his ideas. But to study his works is to receive a thorough grounding in all the problems which have occupied Jewish thinkers for the last hundred years—and which challenge us still. "He was not so much the leader of his generation as its guide," says Itche Goldberg, "a pathfinder who stood at the crossroads during one of the most decisive moments in the history of his people. In this lies the guarantee of his durability."

Chaim Zhitlovsky was born April 19, 1865 near Vitebsk in Byelorussia. While still in his early teens he became active in the Russian revolutionary movement. In 1885 he organized a Jewish Socialist Revolutionary group called *T'shuas Yisroel* (Salvation of Israel), whose aim primarily was to fight simultaneously against the "Return

to Zion" movement and for the idea of progressive Jewish nationalism on socialist foundations.

In 1888 he had to leave Russia "for political reasons." He moved to Berlin, which he also had to leave for similar reasons. He then went to Switzerland, where he studied at the Zurich and Berne universities and received his doctorate in 1892, his dissertation being on Abraham Ibn Daud. (c.1110—c.1180; Spanish Jewish philosopher and historian). It was around this time, too, that he helped found the Russian Socialist-Revolutionary Party.

In 1905 he returned to Russia where he participated actively in political life. His successful candidacy to the Duma was invalidated by the government. In 1907 he came to the U.S.A. and launched a campaign for the ideas of socialist Jewish nationalism. In 1908 he helped organize the Czernowitz Conference, an important international meeting which proclaimed Yiddish as a national language. The same year he founded *Neilebn*, a periodical for which he wrote a continuing series of essays on Jewish and general philosophical problems.

In 1910 he published a two-volume work, the first attempt in Yiddish to present a systematic history of philosophy. For the rest of his life he remained active on all the theoretical and practical fronts which stirred the Jewish progressive community. When he was fatally stricken on May 6, 1943, he was in Canada on a lecture tour under the auspices of the Yiddisher Kultur Farband (YKUF).

EXAMINING HIS WORK, WE FIND THAT IN A SERIES OF ESSAYS COMPLETED in 1932, *Meine Ani Maamins* (My Credo, YKUF, 1953), Zhitlovsky deals with the following major subjects: Religion or Nation? A Religious Nation or a Secular One? Our own country, Diaspora Nationalism, or a Cultural Center? Zionism or Territorialism. He sets forth the following account (here telescoped and paraphrased) of the emergence of these "modern Jewish problems."

Our modern Jewish problems began to arise in all their seriousness only in the last 150 years. The problems are concerned with the essence of our Jewish existence in the world; with the reasons for our suffering in the Diaspora; with the outlook for our future; with the methods of holding together a people outside its own country; with the way or ways toward complete emancipation of the Jewish people.

They were not problems at all for our ancestors, who believed: We are a people to whom the one true religion was revealed from on high and this religion is the single attribute of our national sub-