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*ISRAEL ZINBERG AND HIS GESHIKHTE*  
*FUN DER LITERATUR BAY YIDN*

Israel Zinberg's *Geshikhte Fun Der Literatur Bay Yidn* was published originally in Yiddish in Vilna in the decade 1927-37. The history was translated into Hebrew and published in Israel in the late 1950's and early 1960's, and will soon appear in the United States in an English translation prepared by the author of this paper. The work is undoubtedly one of the last and greatest monuments of European Jewish scholarship. It is also unique among the considerable number of histories of Jewish literature, dealing with the entirety or a substantial aspect of the field, that have been written since the closing decades of the nineteenth century by such scholars as Joseph Klausner, Simon Bernfeld, David Kaufmann, Gustav Karpeles, Max Weinreich, and Meyer Waxman.

Zinberg's *History* is unique not only by virtue of the fact that its author, unlike the other figures mentioned above, was not a "professional" scholar in Judaica, nor a certified researcher, nor the holder of an academic position. Instead, he earned his living for more than forty years as a chemical engineer in Petrograd (later Leningrad) and his work on Jewish literature was merely an "avocation." However, it was a consuming avocation, one to which he gave virtually every moment of his leisure time over a span of many years. As far as thoroughness of research and scholarship is concerned, as far as linguistic competence and a close reading of the original sources are concerned, Zinberg sustains favorable — and, at times, even more than favorable — comparison with the most able and learned of his fellow workers in the field of the history of Jewish literature. He ransacked the great libraries and the superb collections of Jewish books and manuscripts that Leningrad boasted in his day which were freely accessible to him. It was a matter of deep personal regret to him, a regret which he expressed with obvious pain, when he could not secure a copy of a work with which he had to deal but had to depend, instead, on a second-hand report. In the matter of documentation and footnoting, the chemical engineer of Leningrad was far more fastidious than most of his fellow workers who spent their lives in universities, theological seminaries, and research institutes.

Zinberg's work is unique mainly by virtue of the fact that it was motivated by a fervent love for his people and their literary creations. To be sure, he is within the tradition of *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) and *Hochmat Yisrael*, or *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. His father was an ardent *maskil* and he himself was deeply involved in such *Haskalah*-oriented enterprises as the Russian-Jewish journal *Voskhod*, the *Yeveryyskaya Entsiklopedia*, and the Leningrad Society for the Dissemination of Enlightenment and Culture among Jews (*Hevrat Marbei Ha-Haskalah*). Furthermore, he had read and mastered the works of Leopold Zunz, Moritz Steinschneider, Heinrich Graetz, David Kaufmann, David Kahana, and practically all the other important figures both of *Haskalah* and *Hochmat Yisrael*. He shared the

ideal professed by Zunz and Steinschneider: the attainment of an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the literary and historical documents of the Jewish people. However, he did not naively accept their assumption that a strictly objective and disengaged understanding was either possible or desirable.

In a letter written in 1936 to Joseph Opatoshu, Zinberg remarked on the history of the Hasidic movement that had been written by his friend of many years, the illustrious historian Simon Dubnow: "Dubnow's work disappointed me greatly. He tried to be strictly, scientifically objective, and so the book was written in a tone that is neither hot nor cold. In cultural history strict objectivity is an impossibility, for when the historical investigator illuminates the facts, his own *Weltanschauung* must reveal itself." Only rarely do the pages of Zinberg's *Geshikhte* display the tepid tone that he lamented here in Dubnow's work. On the contrary, everywhere one senses his deep and abiding love for his people and his profound admiration for their literary achievements. Furthermore, Zinberg had no hesitation about injecting his personal judgements, in evaluating and appraising, in lauding or condemning the writers, books, ideas, and movements with which he was concerned. And his own *Weltanschauung*, his fundamental personal convictions and values, colored his work throughout.

The central existential questions of Zinberg's personal philosophy – or, to put it more correctly, of his inward spiritual wrestling – were the questions of the ultimate meaning of life and that problem which the theologians call theodicy: the reconciliation of the massive suffering, injustice, and evil that obviously exist in the world with faith in a presumed omnipotent, beneficent, and righteous God. Zinberg, therefore, saw these questions as the fundamental themes pervading the entire literature he examined, whose scope stretched from Arabic Spain in the tenth century to eastern Europe at the end of the nineteenth. Thus he wrote: "But no matter how different the periods in the cultural life of the Jewish community in Europe, they are all united by one main problem which runs like a red thread through all aspects of the national creativity. The basic motif, the life nerve of Jewish literature, is the question concerning the purpose of human life. To what end does man live? In what does the goal consist? How can man's great suffering and the endless sorrows of the 'chosen' people be justified? How is the tragic mystery of the world to be explained? How can one resolve the great enigma, the profound contradiction: the Creator, a God full of compassion, and the world so steeped in evil and corruption?"

Zinberg spent his adolescence – indeed, his entire life – in an atmosphere saturated with the thinking of Karl Marx as expounded by numerous Russian socialists and communists, and with the Marxist notion of historical-dialectical materialism, or economic determinism, as the major key to the interpretation of history. There is no evidence that he ever became a member of the Communist Party, but he himself indicated clearly that in his youth he was attracted to dialectical materialism. In a letter of 1914 to Samuel Niger he wrote: "In my younger years I went

for a time to the Marxist synagogue, until I realized that very important prayers are missing from its prayerbook.”

That the Marxist influence remained a significant one on Zinberg's thinking, however, is evident throughout the pages of his *Geshikhte*. It is clear, first of all in his general view — a view which pervades his entire work — that the spiritual and intellectual history of European Jewry has been largely dominated by two major tendencies which developed along parallel lines but also frequently came into sharp conflict with each other: on the one side, an “aristocratic rationalism,” which sought to broaden man's mental horizons and to liberate him from irrationality, superstition, and dogmatism, but which attached relatively little importance to the ordinary man's feelings and aspirations and generally lacked any broad social and humanitarian concern; and, on the other side, a “democratic religion of the heart,” in which the living individual, with his emotions and longing for a fuller and richer life, was primary, and the vision of a more just and equalitarian society was constantly maintained as the goal of human striving. Zinberg himself clearly opted for the latter interpretation of Judaism. Here, clearly, is a powerful reflection of what has not entirely unjustly been referred to as Marx's secularized version of the Hebrew prophetic passion.

The influences of Marx's historical materialism is also evident in Zinberg's treatment of specific movements and writers. Unlike many historians of Jewish literature before him and after him, Zinberg did not naively assume that literature is a free, autonomous, independent creation of the spirit taking place in some kind of vacuum; but rather that it necessarily reflects the specific socio-economic-political realities of the environment in which it arises. Zinberg himself insisted in the introduction to his *History* that “the development of literary forms will here be investigated on the basis of the entire Jewish cultural environment, with its intellectual and social tendencies, strictly connected with the general European civilization of that period.”

Thus, for instance, Zinberg explained the spread of the rationalist ideas propounded by Maimonides and his followers as a simple consequence of the fact that the Moslem world in which they lived had appropriated the rationalist philosophical heritage of the Greek academies and developed outstanding rationalist theologians and philosophers whose works were avidly read by Jews. Instead, he also related Maimonidean and post-Maimonidean rationalism to the social and economic interests of the upper classes in Spanish and Provencal Jewry. Many of these Jews exploited rationalism as a means of liberating themselves from the commandments of the Torah and from traditional Jewish customs. Jewish restrictions had hindered their intercourse with the Moslem and Christian nobility and government officials with whom they came into constant contact, and also prevented them from fulfilling their lust for pleasure and sensual gratification and the possibilities of a larger and freer life that had been opened up to them by exposure to the world outside the Jewish quarter, where they had been confined, as it was, within the “four cubits of the law.”

To give another example, Zinberg explained the growth and popularity of the mysticism and messianism of the Lurianic Kabbalah as more than the necessary return, with a vengeance, of mythological modes of thought into the very heart of a rationalist Judaism, a Judaism that had strenuously attempted to remove all elements of myth from its structure. Nor did he see the popularization of the idea that human sexual union is a paradigm of the cosmic union between God and His *Shechinah* as an ideological reaction to the puritanism and anti-feminism of the rabbinic tradition. He interpreted this mysticism and messianism rather as the result, mainly, of the destructive effects of the social and economic condition of the Jewish masses in Europe of the Crusades and, later, of the expulsion from Spain. Mystical messianism was indispensable to sustain the crushed and beaten people which had seen the social and economic foundations of its life crumble into dust.

In similar fashion Zinberg stressed the socio-economic roots of the great upsurge in rabbinic scholarship and learning that occurred in sixteenth and seventeenth century Poland. Unlike most historians of Judaism and Jewish literature, he did not eulogize this phenomenon as a shining exemplar of *Torah li-shmah*. Thousands of students spent years of assiduous study in *yeshivot* and exercised their mental acumen in endless elaboration of pilpulistic subtleties not necessarily, or even primarily, because of a burning desire to become more perfect *b'avodat ha-bore* and in the understanding of His precepts, he suggested, but more because they realized that this was the indispensable means to the attainment of social and economic status. Given the fact that the local *kahal* as well as the national *Vaad Arba Aratzot* utilized as its operative *corpus juris* the Talmud, Talmudic codes, Talmudic commentaries, and super-commentaries, to become a skillful "swimmer" in the sea of this literature and to acquire renown as a brilliant pilpulist and dialectician was the most assured way to achieve success: to marry the daughter of a wealthy family, to obtain appointment to a prestigious rabbinical post, to become a *rosh yeshivah*, a *parnas*, an influential member of the oligarchical *kahal* with all the opportunities for financial profit and self-aggrandizement that such membership entailed. Zinberg not only declined to overlook these factors in favor of an idealized vision of pure devotion to Torah for its own sake but stressed them strongly.

In this connection it may be noted that Zinberg also resisted the common tendency to portray Jewish communal organization in eastern Europe as always a model of sweetness, charity, and undiluted concern for the common good of all the members of the *kehillah* — from its wealthiest merchants and financiers to the lowliest "hewers of wood and drawers of water." In his discussion of such works as the sermons of Ephraim of Luntshitz and Tzevi Hirsch Koidonover's *Kav Ha-Yashar* our author emphasized their complaints that the rich and powerful who dominated the community council frequently exploited the poor in the most shameless fashion and enriched themselves at the latter's expense. Particularly in the era of economic destruction following the Chmielnitzki massacres, when the social tensions which had previously been dormant under conditions of

general prosperity suddenly came to the surface, the “class struggle” in the Jewish community became, according to Zinberg, overt and sharp and continued to be an endemic factor for the remainder of Polish-Jewish history.

The protracted and sometimes violent quarrel between the Hasidim and the Mitnaggedim in the closing decades of the eighteenth century was also interpreted by Zinberg as more a socio-economic than a religious struggle. To be sure, the antagonists wrapped themselves in the garments of religious dispute and some of them — notably the Gaon of Vilna — were sincerely convinced that religious issues were fundamentally at stake. But the Gaon, Zinberg maintained, allowed himself, in his naivete and other-worldliness, to be exploited by scheming communal leaders and rabbis to denounce Hasidim because these men despised the new movement and perceived in it a democratic, revolutionary power that threatened their authority and vested economic interests.

In his treatment of *Haskalah*, too, Zinberg refrained from portraying the movement as led by personalities all of whom were high-minded, principled intellectuals, and humanitarians who, purely out of love and compassion for their benighted brethren, sought to draw them out of the morass of superstition and obscurantism into the Elysian fields of enlightenment and culture. Thus, for instance, in treating the work of Herz Homberg, who attempted forcibly (but unsuccessfully) to enlighten the Jews of the Austrian empire after the *Toleranzpatent* of Joseph II, he adduced considerable evidence to support the view that Homberg was little more than a petty careerist and scoundrel who was motivated primarily by the desire to obtain power and influence, as well as the opportunity to win substantial pecuniary gain by writing insipid catechisms and textbooks that all Jews in the empire would have to purchase.

One could cite numerous other examples of Zinberg’s attempt to discover the economic and power motivations underlying phenomena that appear to be of a purely ideological or religious nature. In all of these, I suggest, his reading of Marx and his early absorption in Marxist modes of historical analysis are at work.

Personally, I am not altogether convinced that Zinberg is always justified and fair, nor that he does not on occasion miss the mark. Nevertheless, it is refreshing to read a historian of Jewish literature who does not unquestioningly accept the customary hagiographical and panegyric accounts of individual authors and of cultural, religious, and literary movements that generally adorn the pages of most other histories of Jewish literature.