

# David Pinski: Nestor of Yiddish Literature

By Sol Liptzin

**D**AVID PINSKI is an able interpreter of the Jewish past, an ardent seeker for the meaning of the Jewish present, a firm believer in a glorious future for the Jewish people. He is a prolific writer, who has written works that will endure, and also works that are ephemeral. A bibliography of his more significant writings embraces more than two hundred items: plays and novels, volumes of verse and of essays, collections of short stories and travel sketches.

Pinski is not of the titans of this earth. He is of the good of this earth. He does not demolish or devastate; he comforts and consoles.

The term *classics* must be reserved for the Big Three of Yiddish literature: Mendeley, Peretz and Sholem Aleichem. Pinski arrived somewhat later. He learned from these giants the art of interpreting the Jewish soul in the Yiddish tongue. He continued many of their traditions in style and content. But he went further, enriching Yiddish literature with new themes and original approaches. Above all, he brought to mere living a note of optimism and joy which was so necessary to Eastern European Jewry but was lacking a half-century ago. The smile of Mendeley is a sardonic smile barbed with bitterness. The wisdom of Peretz is the melancholy wisdom of *Koheleth*. And the laughter of Sholem Aleichem is the disillusioned laughter of the pessimist who, according to the inscription on his tomb, "Poked fun at life as but a jest, laughed up his sleeve at all that mattered; when other men were happiest, alas, his heart was bruised and shattered."

**P**INSKI is, of course, aware that life may be bitter, but he holds there are blissful moments which make it worth living. These moments are way-stations for whose sake the whole trip is undertaken. His play, *The Mountain-Climbers* (*Die Bergsteiger*, 1912), is an allegory of the mountain of life we all climb. At its peak is the inn where the innkeeper, Death, has arranged for us to spend the night after our tortuous upward journey. Pinski's heroine voices his basic sentiment in her final hour before entering the inn, saying, "Just to be alive is the highest happiness. To have come out of the unknown into this life is happiness. Though we be poor and wretched, sick and disappointed—we are alive. Every day we should be thrilled by this fact. Our last breath should be exultation that we have lived . . . We need happiness but not the happiness of the victor who strides over the corpses of his victims. We need the inner happiness that warms and irradiates and which only goodness can confer upon us."

And Pinski is good. In his opinion, the key to happiness is goodness, not power or wealth or fame. In the play, *Alexander and Diogenes* (1927), the dramatist concludes that Diogenes, who had no earthly possessions except the barrel in which he lived, was, by virtue of his inner goodness, happier than his contemporary, the world-conqueror Alexander, who sat on a golden throne surrounded by hundreds of flattering courtiers. When Alexander reproaches Diogenes as a nay-sayer to life, as a barrel-dweller and a wearer of rags, Diogenes replies, "It is true that I have lived in a barrel. It is true that I have

(Hand. 20:35), *gierigheid is die wortel van alle kwaad* (I Tim. 6:10), *waar jou skat is, is ook jou hart* (Matt. 6:21), *hoogmoed kom voor die val* (Spr. 16:18), *vandag Hosanna, môre kruis hom* (Matt. 21:9), *as hulle dit doen aan die groen hout, wat sal met die droë hout gebeur* (Luk. 23:31), *wie ore het om te hoor, laat hom hoor* (Matt. 11:15), *wie die swaard neem, sal deur die swaard omkom* (Matt. 26:52), *ondersoek alle dinge en behou die goeie* (I Thes. 5:21), *wie 'n gat vir 'n ander gawe, val self daarin* (Ps. 7:16), *laat jou linkerhand nie weet wat jou regterhand doen nie* (Matt. 6:3), *'n goeie naam is beter as olie* (Pred. 7:1), *geen profeet is in sy eie land geëer nie* (Luk. 4:24), *niemand kan twee here dien nie* (Matt. 6:24).

'n Besonder vrugbare terrein in die Afrikaanse volkstaal is die honderde woorde en uitdrukkinge wat verband hou met die duiwel. Dit is egter 'n

studie op sigself en ons wil ten slotte net daarop wys dat baie van die spreuke en spreekwoorde uit die Bybel wat as gangbare munt in verskillende tale geld, oorspronklik onder Israël bekend was.

Uit die Ou Testament: *Is Saul ook onder die profete; soos die moeder is, so ook die dogter; 'n goeie vrou is 'n gawe van die hemel; die grysheid is 'n sierlike kroon; daar is 'n tyd om te swyg en 'n tyd om te praat; die rawe sal dit openbaar; een dooie vlieg bederf die salf; wysheid gaan bo krag; uit die Nuwe Testament: Die dissipel is nie meer as sy meester nie; die gesondes het geen heelmeester nodig nie; wat die mens saai, sal hy ook ook maai; 'n klein vonkie ontsteek 'n groot brand; die gebed van die regverdige vermag veel; alle mense is leuenaars; wie homself verneder, sal verhoog word.*

En so leef die sinrykheid van die Bybelwaarhede in die volkstaal voort.



"Forest Rays" (oil) by Tamara Kaplan, who is having an exhibition in Johannesburg on 17th March.



worn rags. But I have not been a scorner of life. I have loved life no less than you. I have loved the sun by day and I have also known the night with its charm. A beautiful flower could delight me with its loveliness and fragrance. I have enjoyed the brook and its murmuring. Was this not enough of life? What more did I need in order to say *Yea* to life? I have assimilated all of nature into my being. I have acquired wisdom and knowledge in fullest measure. Did you, with all your battles and bloodshed, gain more for yourself?" Pinski clearly infers that happiness lies not in conquest and dominion but in peace of mind, in self mastery, in rising beyond self to pure goodness.

**I**N the original unpublished version of *The Treasure* (*Der Oitzter*, 1906), Pinski's most successful play, he incorporated two simple characters who stand aloof from the feverish hunt for the buried treasure. They do not partake of the hysteria which swept over the entire Jewish community. These two unassuming individuals are happy and serene amidst their poverty because they have inner fullness, while all the others quarrel and wrangle over the division of the non-existent treasure.

Pinski's sympathy, like that of most Yiddish writers, is ever with the poor, the underprivileged, the simple-minded. But he is not content merely with depicting the warm humanity of these forgotten creatures of God. He pours

fire into their veins; he makes them battle for a better world-order. His poor do not accept in a fatalistic mood their abject condition. They are fighting individuals who strike out for a more equitable social order. The odds against them may be overwhelming, as they are for Isaac Sheftel, the title-hero of Pinski's first proletarian drama (1899); but at least they roar out like a raging lion. They do not grovel and whine and plead.

More than a half-century ago, when pogroms broke out in Russia, Pinski transferred this tone of revolt from the social and economic arena to the Jewish field. Jews, he felt, were a small minority in the vast Russian realm and, therefore, no match for the Cossack hordes. But they must not let themselves be led to the slaughter like dumb oxen or slink away into cellars like rats. They must resist their ruthless oppressors and go down fighting for the Jewish values they hold dear. Accordingly, Pinski wrote the stirring tragedy, *Family Tzvi*, in 1903 and 1904, with the heart-rending pictures of the Kishinev Pogrom before his eyes. This is the message of the play: we have had enough of vague talk about brotherhood, internationalism, cosmopolitanism. We are not stray individuals let loose in the world. We are Jews, part of a living social and historic entity. We must take our proper place as disciplined members of the Jewish people. Pinski, thus combining his faith in social justice with a faith in Zionism, took his position at the forefront of the Labour Zionist movement from its early founding.

**P**INSKI came to America in 1899 and lived in New York for a half-century. He wrote, spoke, and agitated for his two ideals: Zionism and social justice. At first his was a voice crying in the wilderness. The tendency in the early decades of the present century was to flee from Jewishness to Americanism. Jewishness was then often equated with ghetto existence, Czarist oppression,

pogroms, and minority status. The Melting Pot was the ideal.

Against this mirage of the Melting Pot, Pinski issued a solemn warning in his two novels of American-Jewish life: *The House of Noah Eden* (1929) and *Arnold Levenberg* (1925). Not decay but renaissance, was his slogan. He saw regeneration of the Jewish soul in Israel, which he visited in 1932 and 1936, and his essays of those years became impassioned hymns to the new Jew on the old-new earth.

In his seventy-fifth year, he saw his lifelong dream of a Jewish state become a reality. In 1949 he left America and took up his domicile atop Mt. Carmel overlooking Haifa Bay. A smile wreathed his lips and joy reigned in his heart. In Israel the weight of years was lifted from his shoulders. New visions floated about him and new songs sang within him. A rejuvenated burst of creativity came to this Nestor of Yiddish Literature, this golden link between the age of Peretz and our own age. Dramas of Samson and of King Saul were completed in the ninth decade of his life, presaging other biblical dramas to follow.

The reader who delves into Pinski's works in prose and verse, in drama and fiction, stands in the presence of a writer who is beneficent and serene, tolerant and wise, a guide to more moral living, a dreamer of messianic dreams, a source of consolation along life's troubled ways, and a champion of Jewish values in this embattled world.

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"Chassidim—Simchat Torah Dance" by Herman Wald.

*He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty;*

*And he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.*

**Proverbs**