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Reflections on Jabotinsky

For some time, I have considered writing a biography of Ze'ev Jabotinsky. Immediate preoccupations have interposed delays; but I suspect I may also have shied away from the formidability of the task. This may be the reason why others, intrinsically perhaps more qualified than I, gazing at the picture of Jabotinsky they have built in their minds, and seeing how difficult it is to take in its dimensions, its intellectual and spiritual variety, its profusion of colours – have also not taken up the task.

In his *Story of the Jewish Legion in World War I*, Jabotinsky recalls that during the campaign in Transjordan a Bedu, caught stealing ammunition, had his ass confiscated. "The men, though dead tired, decided to give it a name... There were more than 50 men named Cohen in the battalion and... their initials exhausted all the letters of the alphabet except X. The ass was consequently named Cohen X... The Bedu demanded a receipt for the confiscated animal... At one stage in my life I studied law... and that is enough to upset a man's balance for the rest of his days: I gave him a receipt. He put it away carefully and took it along to the depot at Jericho, and for weeks afterwards letters went back and forth between G.H.Q. and our battalion relating to Cohen X."

Who ever recalls that Jabotinsky had had a legal education? It is common knowledge that he knew a number of languages. How many people know that in addition to the seven of which he had complete command – Russian, Italian, French, German, Hebrew and Yiddish – he had a reasonably adequate knowledge of at least 20 more, including nearly all the remaining European tongues. He took a profound interest in language, and had a most rare talent in speedily acquiring a knowledge of any language he studied. He surprised Scandinavians by quoting long passages from the Nordic sagas in the original; he electrified an audience in Belgium by delivering his speech in Flemish. The stories told by his friends of his linguistic researches are endless and fascinating.

He could, without difficulty, have been a leader in the field. Yet how small a corner of Jabotinsky did this occupy?

You move your gaze, and you discover Jabotinsky the classical translator – a giant in the realm of poetry. He translated Bialik into Russian (and it was said the translation excelled the original). He translated Edgar Allen Poe into Russian, and his *The Raven* established him as a Russian poet. He translated Poe into Hebrew. His Annabel Lee, set to music, is sometimes heard on our radio. It is ingenious – and beautiful. Into Hebrew he also translated *The Rubayat of Omar Khayam* (from Fitzgerald's English rendering) and it is a Hebrew gem. He found time to translate only about one-third of Dante's *Inferno* – and his translation has been described as probably unequalled in world literature.

His studies in Hebrew gave impetus and shape to the language in the formative years of its rebirth. He was one of the first (if not the first) to write Hebrew poetry with the Sephardi *milra*

accentuation. He gave the early Habimah theatre players lessons in Hebrew diction (and published a booklet on Hebrew pronunciation). He preached the need for writing Hebrew in Latin characters. He studied Maltese in order to help him evolve a system; and he often used it in his Hebrew letters to his son. His little book for English speakers, *Taryag Millim*, is a light-hearted introduction to the study of Hebrew – in Latin characters.

His literary output in Russian was not inconsiderable. He was 16 when, studying in Italy, he began contributing to one of the big Russian dailies in Odessa. The pen-name he used for his feuilletons – Altalena – soon became well-known throughout the Russian intelligentsia.

He wrote plays and poems and short stories. He wrote two novels, both of Jewish content. One of them, *Samson the Nazirite*, (published in the U.S. as *Prelude to Delilah*), surely the most delightful and penetrating fictionalized account of the Samson story – and it is not lacking in allegorical content, startlingly appropriate to this day.

Maxim Gorky is said to have charged the Zionist movement – with having stolen Jabotinsky from Russian literature; indeed when I had the privilege, as a very young man, of a friendly chat with Jabotinsky, he told me that he had “11 novels milling around in my head – but who knows if I shall ever get round to writing them?” He died three years later.

You can turn to Jabotinsky's writings on social questions. He could not devote much time to them: as they related to the shape of society in the Jewish State and the state did not yet exist. Yet his essays contain, *inter alia*, the complete philosophy of what came to be known as the Welfare State – intertwined with the social philosophy of the Bible.

And his concept of *hadar*? How many people realize that the ideas he laboured to inculcate in the *Betar* movement (and in the people at large) provide the answer to all these problems of behaviour which plague our society? Courtesy, civility, flowing from concern and consideration for others, together with punctuality, punctiliousness, neatness and cleanliness – for all his grim pre-occupations with the problems of his tragic period, he sensed the need for impressing the urgency of these qualities in the newly-coalescing Jewish people.

Capacities which would have sufficed for several brilliant and academic and literary careers appear, in the context of Jabotinsky's historic role, as a minor, at most contrapuntal, phenomenon, merely adding depth and shading to the most colourful Jewish leader of the century.

He was indubitably also the most controversial – the most beloved and the most maligned. Seeing far ahead of his contemporaries he inevitably aroused their antagonism and even hatred. His struggles against established opinion and against the Establishment are the stuff and the drama of Zionist history. His public life was a saga. He was a man of utterly unflinching courage, of a natural unassuming dignity, of a warmth of manner which even now, 40 years after his death, one cannot recall without emotion; his faith in the justice and the ultimate victory of the Jewish cause was unassailable, and was unclouded by any calculation of personal fame or profit.

So he began his first great political campaign, in December 1914 – for the creation of the first modern Jewish army unit, to fight alongside the Allies to free Palestine from the Turks (an undertaking for which he was excommunicated from the Zionist Organization – until the venture succeeded). So he continued until his last tragic campaign, two decades later, for the evacuation of the Jews of Europe before disaster overtook them, for which he was vilified by all the other Jewish leaders.

As time goes on the picture of that campaign becomes ever more clearly etched: of Jabotinsky, his heart breaking in the anguish of understanding the horror of the Jewish scene, standing out in lonely eminence against the darkling sky of a Europe rushing headlong to Hitler's war.

In the 20 intervening years, as leader of the Revisionist-Zionist movement, as the inspirer and mentor of the underground Irgun Zvai Leumi, he was the teacher of two generations who played a crucial role in the miracle of our national rebirth. The texture of his teachings, passages from his political thought, find their way, years later, again and again, into the thinking and the articulation of his disciples and his opponents alike.

He did not see the fruit of his labour: the unrelenting cold logic of his mind, expressed in precise, incisive language, yet shot through with the fire of faith, was manifestly that of a prophet.

Thus – prophet, statesman, poet, philosopher, soldier, linguist, novelist, leader of men, living out a life of drama, and of almost continuous tension and conflict – this, briefly stated, is the complexity of his would-be biographer's problem.

Pondering over Jabotinsky – unbidden comes the thought of the quality that apparently moved and predominated in his make-up. In 1937, at the height of his conflict with the official Zionist Organization, he was urged and pressed to restore unity in the movement. But he found the prospect was too slender: and he said, *"God's name is not Unity but Truth."*