

What Should We Write?

Present day dilemma of American Jewish writers.

By Shlomo Katz
May, 1940

“If I had ten lives to live, I’d gladly spend one of them as a Jew.” This unofficial declaration was made to me by a young man who, technically, was far from indifferent to things Jewish. As a matter of fact, he was, at the time of this declaration, a member in good standing in one of the Zionist groups and regularly paid his dues. But in private conversation that was not entirely free of youthful bravado and assumed cynicism he came to the above conclusion.

It would be unfair to accuse this particular young man of hypocrisy. On the contrary, he was probably more honest than many another who would repeat mechanically a pledge of allegiance and participation in the fate of his people, without actually feeling that tragic fate as a part of his inner being. This young man, born and raised in the United States, was at the age of the great hunger. He wanted to be a chemist, a globe trotter, a labor leader, a success, a tragic (and slightly melodramatic) failure and a dozen other things at the same time. He had not yet decided in which direction to turn his energies and was still leading a dream life parallel to the definitely undreamy routine tasks which he was performing daily in a garage for a not very substantial wage. It was while speculating on these varied careers that he decided that being a Jew full time might also be interesting, but as a choice could wait until a number of other things had been sampled. For no matter how hard he tried – and although he was proud enough not to deny his Jewishness and generous enough to be willing to help the work in Palestine, relief in Europe and a number of other Jewish causes – he could not see that being a Jew had anything to do with chemistry or any of the other careers which he visualized as the main theme of his life. He was honest enough to realize that being a Jew introduced a new and different element into his life, but this element occupied a back seat in his waking hours and only remotely affected his subconscious desires and reactions. Not being cursed with too introspective a nature nor tormented to distraction by “problems,” he therefore did some chronological classifying and listed the life of a Jew as being tenth most satisfying and interesting.

I was reminded of this young man’s arithmetic during a recent conversation that took place between a number of young Jewish writers. But in this case the arithmetic was reversed and they came to the conclusion that there was no choice in the matter. Each one had but one life and was impelled to but one career, that of writing, from which he could not possibly escape. But the one life with which each was endowed was divided into a number of readily recognizable segments – one of which was Jewish. And there was the rub. The factor of being a Jew and reacting to Jewish fate created a problem which none of them could escape, nor, under the circumstances, easily solve.

The problem which each one in the group had to contend with resolved itself into a practical one – what should he write about these days?

On the face of it, this question may seem absurd. Surely no writer worth that name lacks subject matter. But this is a very superficial view to take, as soon became evident from the conversation. It was not a question of lack of subject matter as such, but attaining the state of mind and the creative ability to translate the subject matter in artistic literary terms. Hardly any of the young writers who participated in the discussion had written on Jewish matters for a long time. They had either been born in the United States or had immigrated into this country at an early age. Due to childhood memories from abroad, where Jewish life was integrated, or as a result of having been brought up in a compact Jewish environment here, some “felt their Jewishness” more than others. While still in high school they wrote bright compositions vividly describing memories of a pogrom, of being a refugee, or scenes from Chicago’s West Side. But as they grew to emotional maturity in the American environment they became sensitive to the landscape about them. Childhood memories receded even further into the background and lost their intensity only to be supplanted by more immediate and stronger responses. They then wrote left wing “proletarian” stories, sketches of regional interest and deeply introspective and sensitive poems and prose-poems that dealt with such immediate subjects as the impact of the large industrial city both in its economic as well as psychological phases.

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Hemingway's "Killers" supplanted the Cossacks in the pogrom story and Wolfe's and Saroyan's stories were studied as patterns.

Now this became almost impossible to do any longer. The difficulty did not arise overnight. It has grown during the past few years, roughly beginning with the ascent of Hitler. But as the news of the mounting tragedy in Europe kept piling up during the years it painfully penetrated consciousness and confronted them with a dilemma. The awareness of their Jewishness transformed the news from Europe into a personal injury and tended to replace other subjects in importance.

"How can I write of loneliness in new York, or poverty, or the despair felt by one of the economic outcasts, after I had just read some particularly gruesome piece of news from Germany or Poland?" declared one of the group. "True, one does not rule out the other, objectively. But keenly as I may feel the situation I wish to write about, I cannot help repeating to myself the particular piece of news I read about, and the loneliness of the great city as well as the tragedy of poverty recede in importance; for I visualize the victim in Poland or Germany and I know that he would be happy to exchange positions with the lonely soul, and be thankful for it. I am then confronted with a new theme which in artistic intensity overshadows the one I originally conceived. You will admit that the prospect of one so crushed as to be humbly thankful for that against which we protest, and mind you, honestly and sincerely, is certainly a more moving subject. My first hero who tears his hair in the loneliness of his room while listening to the monotonous ticking of the clock (but after a fair meal) and my heroine who is about to jump off the George Washington Bridge because she cannot practice her art as freely as she would like to while she remains on a W.P.A. project, become shadowy in outline. Again, I repeat, these subjects are still powerful and justify treatment, but I lose my approach; I fall out of the mood and can no longer do these subjects that justice which I feel is their due."

This feeling of loss of contact with immediate subjects because of the emotional impact of the news from Europe was shared by the others present. Judging from the various reports as well as intuitive conclusions it seems to be quite characteristic of the mood of a great many of the younger Jewish writers of today.

This mood of depression is quite natural to any person who is sensitive to events about him and, in itself, would not be of great importance. Under normal circumstances it should not present the writer with any particular problem. On the contrary, such a mood, being the result of a deeply felt experience, might serve to boost the creative efforts of the writer. Ordinarily the writer would seek release of the accumulated psychic tension by giving vent to it in the form of story, poetry or drama. But herein lies the difficulty of the young American Jewish writer. He lives in two different milieus neither of which is strong enough to cancel the other completely.

If any writer feels as described above, one might ask, why doesn't he choose Jewish themes for his work, in addition to the others that had been haunting him? This, precisely, is his dilemma. He frequently cannot. Born or raised in this country, the process of cultural assimilation has progressed quite a distance. The ties that bind the young Jewish writer to Jews are almost certainly entirely those with the immediate Jewish community with which he comes in contact, whose peculiarities he not only knows but also shares. The concept of the Jewish people throughout the world as a unit may not be strange to him ideologically; he may even argue in favor of such a concept where political theories are concerned. But personally he has already lost the feeling of unity with the larger whole to a great extent. Only the slimmest cultural and psychic ties bind him to Jews of Poland, Palestine, Germany or Russia. That is why he cannot feel about the tragic fate of the European Jews in the same distant and detached terms as he feels about the fate of the Chinese people, for example. But at the same time he is too far removed from them to be able to identify himself with Polish or German Jews in a personal manner. The immensity of the tragedy appalls him; he feels directly concerned, but not sufficiently to make him a living part of the drama. Between him and the European scene there lie years, years that count in building up one's personality, of life in

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America. These years, with all the cultural baggage that was accumulated in them, he does not share with Europe's Jews; and they stand between him and them.

I am not speaking of the type of writing which is done more or less to order, to conform to a deadline. This can be done fairly easily, as it is always easier to carry out an assignment, with which one agrees, than to establish a natural relationship between oneself and a given situation. The dilemma described confronts the young Jewish writer not when he is supposed to give his views on the Jewish situation, but when he communes with his typewriter to write what he most wishes to write. It is then that the weight of Polish and German Jewish tragedy prevents him from giving himself completely to his immediate subjects, because of its staggering immensity, and it is then that he also feels incapable of writing honestly and without editorial affectation about this all-Jewish subject.

It is true that a writer is not the only one to suffer from this dualism. The Jewish community as such is also subject to the same malady. Anyone who has given even cursory attention to organized – or for that matter unorganized – Jewish reaction to events in Europe cannot but help notice this manifestation. On the one hand there are editorials full of sorrow, indignation and protest. Occasionally there is a protest meeting here and there. If the meeting is well prepared and there is an imposing array of cantors to intone the deeply moving chant for the victims, there are tears shed by those who do not have their emotions well in hand. Otherwise – aside from people that have relatives in the affected countries and are thus directly involved – there is no group response of any significant intensity to what is probably the most tragic event in our century. Individual Jews sigh and have done their duty. The group as such feels that something should be done but is, perhaps unconsciously, also too detached to have the inner strength and imagination to think of some strong way in which to express its feelings. Hence the far from adequate results of the boycott against Nazi-German goods, which could only be successful as a mass movement in which every individual feels directly connected. Hence also the fact that the Jewish community in America did not succeed in working out successfully, some fitting symbolic act through which each could express his feelings.

I venture a guess that the Nuremberg laws, which branded Jews under German rule as racially inferior and hence defiling, had far greater repercussion in the minds of American Jews than all the other Nazi legislation and persecutions. Where the "race" was concerned, American Jews felt directly attacked. They began to have misgivings about their own status and relationships with non-Jewish neighbors. It was a slight to Jewish self-respect and, as Jews, they felt affected and more than one suddenly began to doubt and to develop morbid suspicions that he was being looked down upon. But all the other anti-Jewish legislation – confiscation, executions, exile – these one could only sympathize with from a distance; they could not be felt as personal hurts.

This curse of dualism, of belonging to two cultural organisms, affects both the writer as well as "the man of the people". But in the case of the former the dualism is keenly felt on many occasions whereas the latter stumbles along almost unaware until some historic event – which may not occur for a long time – jolts him out of his complacency.

The dilemma of the young Jewish writer is still further complicated today by the current confusion and loss of values which many had cherished. In former years (or should we say months?) many had sought salve for their split personalities in the left wing movement. The revolution would solve the Jewish question, they said, or left unsaid. The communist party is fighting fascism more actively than any other group. One could thus calm his inner hurt as a Jew by helping this party, even through writing "proletarian" or "popular front" stories and poems. One killed two birds with one stone – he wrote of the subjects that were nearest his heart – American subjects – and also assuaged his desire to fight the monstrous movement which singled him out as a Jew. Many a Jewish volunteer of the International Brigade that fought for loyalist Spain was just as strongly moved by the desire to "fight Hitlerism" as by the desire to fight for democracy.

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But even now this last escape of some young Jewish writers is pretty badly washed up. Russia and the communist party have lost their absolving power even for the majority of those who clung to them to the last minute. Other groups are mere little sects at this time and give no consolation to the heavy-laden. The news from Europe piles up like a mountain of darkness and demands some compensating action. And the writer can neither ignore it nor completely merge with it and give it expression.

This does not mean that writing has ceased. It still continues and will continue under all circumstances. Writers would not be the people they are if they could easily stop covering paper with words and, likely as not, being sure that they are doing something great and indispensable. But many a young Jewish writer will get up from his typewriter these days without having turned out a line, unable for the moment to continue working on the subject that he started because his mind is staggered by the Jewish tragedy of today without his being able at the same time to identify himself with it and to give voice to it.