

# SECULAR JEWISH EDUCATION IN THE U.S.A.

## The meaning of secularism and the state of progressive Jewish schools

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*As part of our continuing discussion of progressive Jewish education, we publish these excerpts from MR. I. GOLDBERG's report to a conference of progressive Jewish organizations initiated by the Service Bureau for Jewish Education (1123 Broadway, Room 1005, N. Y. 10) and held in New York June 6.*

**S**ECULAR Jewish education, like Jewish secularism in general, is undergoing the most serious crisis of its history, a crisis of such dimensions as to discourage those of faint heart or faith.

Secular Jewish education came into being, both in the United States and Europe, more than half a century ago. Its early beginnings go back even further. It was in 1907 that the Czarist police arrested most of the delegates to the first conference on secular education, held in Vilna. Secular education was never a majority voice in Jewish life but always an articulate and creative minority, progressive in its thinking and methodology, striving to develop an educational expression apart from Jewish religion. The very coming to life of secular education was in itself a revolutionary phenomenon in Jewish life—the first separation of religion and education in the history of our people.

Twenty-five years ago there was a

world-wide net of Jewish secular educational institutions, with a student body of close to one quarter of a million: about 20,000 in Poland, 90,000 in the Ukraine, 50,000 in the other Soviet Republics, 20,000 in the United States, plus those in schools in Lithuania, Latvia, Mexico, South America and elsewhere.

Little remains of all those. Children, teachers and schools were equally extinguished by fascism. Only small remnants survived in France, Poland and Rumania.

*In the U.S.A.*, according to the last report of the American Association for Jewish Education, about 1.3 per cent of the 553,600 children receiving any Jewish education attend the secular or Yiddish schools, or about 7,000 children.

In our opinion, the overall attendance is greater than the Association report indicates. The last convention of the Jewish National Workers' Alliance (Labor-Zionist) reported 5,000 children in the Alliance schools. The Workmen's Circle claims about the same number of students, the Sholem Aleichem Schools more than 1,000. Deducting about 3,000 children in the Canadian schools of the JNWA and the W.C., there will still be a student body of about eight-nine thousand. Add the 5,000 students in the pro-

gressive Jewish schools, which were not included in the AAJE figures, and the total is about 13-14 thousand children.

Budget-wise the total is impressive, although small as compared with that for religious education: the W. C. annual school budget is about half a million dollars, the JNWA, \$750,000 (including the budget for the Kinereth Day School), the Sholem Aleichem schools, \$70,000, the progressive schools, over \$250,000.

**The general state** of the secular schools may be summarized as follows: There are fewer children in the schools than in the '30's. The teaching staff has grown considerably older and there are very few new trained teachers. The schools have ceased to be language-institutions. Although Yiddish is taught in all of them, English is used in the teaching of history, customs, etc. Many secular schools have been transplanted to the suburbs and are accepted by the second and third generations of Jewish Americans.

Ideologically, the secular schools have undergone basic changes within the last decades. On the positive side, there has been a tendency to adopt and integrate more Jewish traditions into the school curriculum. This positive development has effected, however, under the pressure of a growing conformism and spread of religion (or congregationalism) in Jewish life, the undermining of the secular ideology. There is a growing tendency to jettison secularism and to compromise with religion, to introduce Hebrew at the expense of Yiddish and generally to sacrifice the humanist spirit, which was characteristic for secular Jewish education since its inception, to nationalistic and chauvinistic expressions in education.

Several years ago, the JNWA, Work-

men's Circle and Sholem Aleichem school administrations subscribed to a resolution adopted at a national conference of the American Association for Jewish Education, called "the Charter for the Jewish Child," stating that "it is the purpose of Jewish education to perpetuate the *religio-cultural* values of our people." This was an abandonment of the very basic precept upon which Jewish secular education is predicated—Jewish secularism as a lasting expression in the overall pattern of Jewish life.

This tendency continues. To cite some examples: the program of the JNWA Kinereth Day School in Brooklyn is formulated as follows: "In the kindergarten and in the first two grades, only Hebrew is taught, in the third grade Yiddish is introduced . . . *davnen* (praying) is introduced in the fourth grade. The Kinereth leadership seeks to introduce religion gradually. . . . During the classes in *davnen* the boys put on their caps. . . ." (Asher Pen, *Yiddishkeit in Amerika*, New York, 1959, p. 360).

**The program of the Sholem Aleichem Schools** is thus characterized by Mr. Pen: "In regard to Hebrew, the Bible and traditions, the Sholem Aleichem schools are very close to the schools of the JNWA" (p. 382). In the same book Mr. Saul Guttman, head of the Sholem Aleichem schools, is quoted as follows: "Our secularism has also undergone an evolution in the direction of traditional Jewishness, especially in the Sholem Aleichem *shules*, where we struck a balance between secular Jewish culture like language, literature and history on the one hand, and the traditional subjects and rituals like Bible, prayers, holidays and Oneg-Shabos on the other hand . . . we have ceased to fear religion. . . ." Dr. Solomon Simon, one of the leaders of the Sholem Aleichem schools, issued



*Pupils, teachers and administrators of progressive Jewish schools lay Centennial wreath at Sholem Aleichem memorial, Mt. Carmel Cemetery, Brooklyn, March 1, 1959.*

a call: "Back to Torah . . . without the Sabbath and holy days there can be no sanctity in Jewish life. . . ." (in *Der Goirl fun di Idishistishe Shulen*—The Fate of the Yiddish Schools).

The Workmen's Circle Schools are not far behind. The teaching of Hebrew—at the expense of Yiddish—is begun in the third class. Asher Pen writes: "In some W.C. schools the teaching of a number of prayers for Sabbath and the holidays and the preparation of boys for Bar-Mitzva was instituted" (p. 30). Mr. N. Chanin, General Secretary of the W.C., remarks: "And still we did not include Bar Mitzva preparations in our program, but each individual *shule* finds its own way to prepare each Bar Mitzva. No misfortune in this. Does that mean that we have become a religious group? No."

There seems to be too much protestation, especially when we learn from Dr. Simon that a good many

W.C. schools employ *melamdim* (religious instructors) to prepare their children for Bar Mitzva. How different this is from the secular "Bar Mitzva" or the secular equivalent to Bar Mitzva that has been developed in our progressive schools!

There can be but one conclusion: the need for a truly secular educational expression in Jewish life, without compromise and without apologia, is as great as it ever was. We should remain consistent not only in our secularism but also in our progressivism, and thus be able to influence the general development of secular Jewish education in the U.S.

**T**HERE are more than 80 progressive Jewish schools in about 20 cities and towns with a student body of about 5,000. Only about 25 of the 80 are one-day schools. Two are two- and three-day afternoon schools. There are high schools, six high school classes and one small school for advanced

study. The teaching staff is about 80, about 30 of whom are European-born professional Jewish teachers, graduates of Jewish teachers' seminaries. The others are part-time teachers; about 25 are themselves graduates of the progressive Jewish schools.

The schools are independent institutions, cared for and maintained by the parents of the pupils. All of the schools use materials (text-books, outlines, etc.) published by the Service Bureau for Jewish Education. Although there are still some of the old-time Yiddish speaking *Shule-tuer* (school builders) in the leadership of the schools, the great majority of the people maintaining them consists of American-born women and men.

This has been the trend for over 15 years in some schools.

Who are these new people in the *shules*? All of them are American-born, most of them in the middle thirties, professionals, white collar workers, business men and some workers. In general education, they are high-school and a good many are college graduates; their Jewish education is limited, with the exception of some who had a *shule* education. Their reason for coming to the *shule* is their concern for their own children.

**The outstanding trait** of these people is the fact that they passed by the alternative of joining the local religious school, consciously selected a Jewish progressive secular school and took upon themselves a socio-cultural task which, until then, was the exclusive province of the Yiddish-speaking. They possess a high sense of the value of secular and progressive Jewishness, else they would not adhere to a minority expression in Jewish life.

The road to secular Jewish education was much easier for the Yiddish-

speaking elements one and two generations ago. They were riding on the crest of a vital culture, a daily press, nurtured by a common folk-language and strengthened by a challenging ideology, for the cultural expressions were usually an integral part of social struggles and strivings within Jewish life. It was much simpler for these generations to create for themselves a secular outlook on life although they had to go against the majority stream of Jewish life. They lived secularism, all their cultural needs were satisfied by secular expressions, the language served as social nexus, the struggle for culture was part of their struggle for social recognition, acceptance and the right to shape the life of the people.

It is much more difficult for the new generation, living under changed conditions, faced with a new beginning as far as Jewish secularism is concerned. The shadow of conformism and expanding congregationalism hangs over them. Yiddish for them has ceased to be the nexus of cultural creativity. Above all there is a tragic dearth of secular traditions among the English-speaking Jews. It is difficult for them to create a *new way of life as Jews*, for that is what secularism basically means to us. It is within the secular progressive schools that a new beginning is being made.

**It is, therefore,** with a sense of historic pride that we point to these secular progressive schools. They have, if only in a small degree, integrated Yiddish and the works created in Yiddish, into the overall cultural pattern of not only the children but also the parents. The schools try to prove that Yiddish can become an integral part of the cultural heritage of a generation of Jews in America to whose parents the Yiddish language was already

alien. Oh, to be sure, we perform no miracles in our language education. However, each step ahead is in itself a miracle. We create a sense of affinity, warmth and love for the language and fortify it with as much knowledge of Yiddish as possible under our very thankless conditions.

Let no one minimize the value of a little Yiddish, or hide behind the technicality of time limitation, especially in the one-day schools. There is a basic principle at stake. We never considered Yiddish as only a superfluous receptacle for a culture, which had lost its usefulness. We consider the language as part of our cultural heritage. To your reporter Yiddish is the greatest expression of creativity of the Jewish people since the Bible and the Talmud. No matter how conditions of Jewish life might change, we are not ready to accept the demise of Yiddish, neither in the USA nor anywhere else. Of course, the works created in Yiddish should be translated into English, for with the works you bring the spirit of humanism and social justice which permeates them. But alongside the translations, we are eager to bring with us as much of the Yiddish language as possible.

We are as much averse to assimilationism in all its manifestations as we are to chauvinism in all its shadings.

*We speak for* Jewish schools which have remained consistent in their secularism as well as in their social progressivism. Under the heading, "Progressive Jewish Schools also come closer to traditional Jewishness," Asher Pen, after several interviews with your reporter, writes that the basic differences he found between the progressive and other schools is that "the problem of Negro discrimination is brought home very clearly to the

child" and "the progressive schools also take pride in the fact that they stress for the child a knowledge of Jewish life not only in Israel but in all other countries," and again: "the progressive Jewish schools are also coming closer to traditional Jewishness." This is basically a correct evaluation of the progressive schools provided there is agreement on what "traditional Jewishness" means.

There is no secularism without tradition. It is merely a matter of *selecting* and defining tradition. We are striving to bring the child closer to the heroic freedom and justice traditions of our people—from the Prophets of old to the struggles of Jewish workers within the last generations, to the struggles in the ghettos and in Galilee, to our fight for civil rights and freedom and equality in America. All these represent the expressions of our people's tradition.

Similarly the story of the Bible and the legend of the prophet Elijah and the outcry of the Prophet against injustice and the song of Yehudah Halevi and the story of Eliyohu Bocher, and Fishke of Mendele Mocher Sforim and "The Little Girl in the City" by Morris Wintchevsky and "I Am a Jew" by Itsik Feffer and David Bergelson's Penek in Old Russia and Issac Raboy's "I" in the West of the U.S. and "Give Me Your Tired" by Emma Lazarus and the anger of a poem by Bialik—all these are links and traditions. Great traditions, so great that they carry the seeds of the future in them. This is *our* "traditional" Jewishness, these are the traditions we accept; to the perpetuation of these the progressive schools are dedicated.

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