

Eliezer Schindler (1892-1957)

Biography

Compiled by Miriam Oles, July 15, 2021

Eliezer (Leyzer) Schindler (1892-1957) was a Yiddish writer, idealist, and activist during the interwar period in Europe and after WWII in the United States. A fascinating character, well-known and beloved for his simple, beautiful poetry, he was also an integral part of the intense intellectual, cultural, and religious life of this period. He was a prolific writer with over 31 published books, and wrote for numerous newspapers and journals. His poems and songs were sung in secular and religious homes throughout Europe. He was an activist and organizer, having been one of the founders of several Yiddishist and Zionist organizations, and was described as a “pillar” of the Bais Yakov schools for Jewish girls, a revolutionary movement that established schools to provide Jewish education to girls.

Born in Tychin (Tzycyn), Poland, to a Chassidic family, Eliezer was given an intensive education in traditional Jewish texts and observance, which is reflected in much of his poetry. Eliezer was also educated in secular subjects through public school and his passion for self-education – including reading German, Russian, Hebrew, and English literature.

When Eliezer was eight years old the family moved to Munich, where they struggled economically for periods of time, necessitating Eliezer to leave school not long after his Bar Mitzvah and go to work. When the financial situation of the family later improved, Eliezer travelled to Budapest, Prague, Breen, and back to his birthplace Galicia, eventually returning to Munich where he worked as a Hebrew teacher, wrote poems and articles, and engaged with others in community organizing of Yiddishist and Zionist groups. His first book of poetry was published in 1912.

When World War I broke out in 1914 Eliezer was drafted into the Austrian army. He was wounded and was then a prisoner of war in Siberia and Kirgistan for over three years. There he encountered a community of people living as Jews (though not formally converted) known as Subotnikim. He worked with them in their

fields, led them in prayer, and taught them Judaism, Hebrew, and Zionist ideas. In his later writing, Eliezer expressed his admiration for the spirituality and devotion of the Subotnikim and wrote a number of poems reflecting his experiences during this time.

After World War I, Eliezer returned to Munich where he worked as a teacher of Hebrew and Jewish subjects and continued his writing. To earn a living he started an antiques business, and 'to nourish his soul' he continued his work in community organizing and writing focusing on his ideals. Among the causes he championed and worked toward were the revolutionary movement of Bais Yakov schools, providing Jewish education to girls, who had previously been ignored in terms of opportunities for Jewish education (he was referred to as 'a pillar' of the Bais Yakov schools); and the 'Oylim' movement started by the Jewish philosopher Nathan Birnbaum, to whom Eliezer was very close, with the ideal of having groups of devout, spiritual Jews settle in the land of Israel. Other focusses of Eliezer's writing and community organizing were his love of the Yiddish language (he started the first Yiddishist organization in Europe, B'nei Yehuda) – his poem 'Yiddish Loshen', which was set to music, was one of his most famous, with several recordings made by various performers in America; and his ideal of bringing Judaism to assimilated Jews and to non-Jews, where he collaborated with Zhitlovsky and others.

Eliezer became a tutor for the four children of the Hoyda family, coming to their home several times a week to teach Hebrew and other Jewish subjects to the two daughters and two sons of Chaim and Leah Hoyda. One of those students – Sali Hoyda – later became his wife. Eliezer and Sali eventually eloped in 1922, because Sali's father Chaim disapproved of the match of his daughter with a writer and Hebrew tutor. According to family lore, Eliezer and Sali would meet in the local cemetery before they were married, so that her parents would not know of their relationship.

Sali had taken business courses and became a businesswoman, running a large mail-order company in Munich, 'A&S Schindler'. Sali and Eliezer had two children – a daughter, Eva, born in 1924 and a son, Alexander, born in 1925.

After Hitler's rise to power in Germany in the early 1930's, the Nazis began arresting 'political prisoners', often Jews, and imprisoning them in Dachau, which was very close to Munich. Eliezer was warned that, due to his being a well-known Jewish figure, he might be in danger. Eliezer's daughter, Eva (my mother) said that her father was 'a prophet', as he early on foresaw the coming catastrophe for the Jews in Europe – he expressed his foreboding in two powerful poems, both written in Munich in 1933 – 'Viglid Tartsag' ('Lullaby, 1933') and 'Di Tille fun Gerudefte' (The Prayer of the Pursued'). Eliezer decided to leave Germany and live in Switzerland. Sali wanted to stay in Munich with her business, and the children remained with her there until 1938 when it was clear that they needed to leave. My mother told me that she and her brother, Alexander, would travel often to vacation with their father in Italy and other locations, and at times Sali would join them for a family vacation.

Sali wanted to stay in Germany to sell her business. In 1938, she sent Eva and Alex out of Germany permanently, to join their father in Switzerland. My mother remembers saying good-bye to her grandmother, Nechama Schindler, who gave her a gold bracelet – "I think she knew she was not going to see me again." She also remembers that Sali had checked herself into the hospital to be safe. Eva and Alex were accompanied on a train by a non-Jewish woman and also a Jewish woman, Mrs. Werfel (the wife of the Schindler's lawyer) who travelled on the train as an observer, to ensure that the children arrived in Switzerland (incidentally a few years ago I found the daughter of Mrs. Werfel, Ruth, via the internet - who still lives in Zurich, and I have been in touch with her).

Sali later left Germany disguised as a nun, with false papers saying she was going to a religious conference. She was accompanied by Eliezer's brother, Alexander. My mother remembers waiting with her brother and with Eliezer to get a call indicating that Sali had made it out of Nazi territory. They were eventually reunited in Switzerland and later travelled to America (I read somewhere that some relatives by the name of Klaristenfeld helped Eliezer and Sali obtain visas to America. It should be noted that many of Eliezer's family were killed in the Holocaust – his father Avraham Yitzchak, and his three sisters Yehudit, Chaya, and

Kayla Chana were murdered in the Holocaust together with their husbands and children. Eliezer wrote a memorial to them in his book “Yiddish un Chassidish’.

The family lived in Washington Heights in New York for several years and eventually they bought a chicken farm in Lakewood, NJ. While working as a chicken farmer, Eliezer continued to write and Sali ran a kosher bed-and-breakfast in their large farmhouse. Eliezer published his first book in America, ‘Yiddish un Chassidish’ in 1950. It is an amazing book - in many ways it is the story of his life through his simple, beautiful poetry, in some ways a memorial to the family, friends, and way of life that were destroyed in the Shoah – at the same time a story of strength, hope, and continuity, as in his beautiful, joyous poem to his first grandchild, born in 1947 (me).

In the mid-1950’s Eliezer became ill, and he and Sali moved to Worcester, Massachusetts, to be near their son, Alexander, who was a rabbi there; he passed away in 1957.

After Eliezer’s death, there have been many articles about the beauty and impact of his poetry, about his contributions to Jewish intellectual and cultural life, and about his personal warmth. He is mentioned in a number of recent books about Jewish literary and cultural history – such as ‘Carry Me in Your Heart’ by Pearl Benish, regarding his contribution to the Bais Yakov schools and journals; in ‘Nathan Birnbaum and Jewish Modernity: Architect of Zionism, Yiddishism, and Orthodoxy’ by Jess Olson regarding his work with Birnbaum and the ‘Oyolim’ movement, and in Adina Bar-El’s book ‘Yiddish and Hebrew Children’s Periodicals in Interwar Poland’ (Hebrew) where she has an extensive discussion of Eliezer’s writing for children. Eliezer’s writing has continued to be published to this day in various forms – a beautiful children’s book of his poetry ‘In Kinder Malchus’ (‘B’mamlechet Hayaldut’ in Hebrew) was published in Israel some years ago, available translated into Hebrew and in the original Yiddish. Individual poems of his have been published in numerous books in the U.S. and Israel, and many of his publications have been digitized and are available to view on the Yiddish Book Center website, the Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library (his name is sometimes spelled Shindler, or Schindler). His poems set to music continue to be played – for

example, recently by a group singing his Bais Yakov school anthem which can be seen/heard on the Bais Yakov Project website. He has also left several archives of his papers – one in a library in Munich, one at the YIVO Institute in New York, and 700 of his letters to Nathan Birnbaum are in the Birnbaum Archive in Toronto.

Eliezer and Sali's family has continued to grow and thrive as well – his seven grandchildren (Miriam and Deborah from his daughter Eva and her husband Rabbi Arthur Oles; and Elisa, Debby, Joshua, Jonathan and Judy from his son, Rabbi Alexander Schindler and wife Rhea), eighteen great-grandchildren, numerous great-great grandchildren who hopefully will continue to learn about and preserve Eliezer Schindler's work and legacy for future generations.