

TEACHING YIDDISH IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL

Robert A. Hess
Milwaukee

For a period of a year there has been conducted in the Abraham Lincoln House in Milwaukee by the Yiddische Folkschule a school for the study of Yiddish, Hebrew and Jewish history. This school was being conducted along modern lines and without any suggestion of religion, that is to say, the children were and are being taught the Yiddish and Hebrew as languages and without any reference to the Bible and to matters religious. The Yiddische Folkschule is altogether a voluntary association. Its teachers are men and women who have been giving their Sunday mornings gratis and in the course of a year have built up an institution which has been teaching, as above outlined, the Jewish youth. There has been an average attendance of 125 children for the past six months. This with an enrollment of 200 and a waiting list of some fifty odd or more.

We were prompted to go to the School Board to apply for the use of a schoolhouse in the community (which is a half block distant from the Abraham Lincoln House) chiefly because of the fact that the Abraham Lincoln House could not accommodate the school. It was a physical impossibility for the Abraham Lincoln House to quarter the number of children that desired to attend the Folkschule and for this reason a committee representing the Folkschule appeared before the School Board and put the proposition to the Building Committee of the School Board plainly and bluntly.

We told them just what the situation was, and that because we needed more room, better quarters, larger schoolrooms, more blackboards, a greater number of writing desks, etc., that therefore we asked for the use of the Ninth Street School Sunday mornings from 9 to 12 o'clock. At this meeting of the School Board the question naturally arose on the part of various members of the Building Committee as to whether there was anything in our teaching of a religious nature and we convinced the School Board that there was not.

After a roll-call of the members the Chairman announced that the entire Build-

ing Committee was in favor of granting the use of the school.

Such opposition as there has been and as has arisen comes not from any member of the School Board but entirely from our own people. As usual, the enemy is not from without, but from within! as is always the case whenever any real constructive work is attempted to be done on the part of any of our people; the strongest opposition comes from our co-religionists.

A great number of objections have been raised against the use of the school for the study of Yiddish, Hebrew and Jewish history. The gentlemen opposed to the plan argue that, to begin with, you cannot study the Hebrew as a language without coming in contact with the religious problem and reasoning along this line, they say that to use a public school for the study of a language that is co-related and permeated with religion is establishing a dangerous precedent and opening the door to possibility for abuse. Again they say that the study of Yiddish is objectionable because the Yiddish is not, properly speaking, a language; that Jews coming from various parts of the Old World speak a varied Yiddish; that it is neither euphonous, useful nor necessary; that it is a tongue born of stress, nurtured in the ghettos and has no reason for being in free America. With reference to the study of Jewish history the objection is raised that it is inconceivable that Jewish history can be studied without studying the Old Testament and again the possibility of the danger of raising a religious question becomes objectionable.

Now, then, let us see: let us analyze the objections. Let us try to be fair. Isn't it altogether within the realm of the possible that under the guidance of modern methods you can teach the Hebrew language as a language without any reference to religion? Isn't it just as possible to take up the study of the Hebrew as a language just as it is possible to study the German, the English or the French? As in the graded schools, so the Folkschule has its primers. They teach the children the A, B, C of the lan-

guage, the "alef, baas." After the children have been taught the A, B, C of the language they are taught to construct words of the letters, sentences of the words and stories of the sentences, in every respect just as the child is taught in the public school the use of the English language. The trouble seems to be that the objection comes from gentlemen who have never visited the school, who are not acquainted with the work that is being done, who have never taken the time to investigate, who do not know how to differentiate between the modern method of teaching the Hebrew from the old-time Talmud Torah method.

Again the gentlemen of the opposition are up in arms about the study of Yiddish. Above, I have outlined what their objections are. They say that to begin with it is not a language at all; the best proof that it is lies in the fact that it is being used by 12,000,000 people and if 12,000,000 people were to communicate with each other by means of the hands and the feet or by motions of the lips or by any method conceivable that particular method by them so used would become a language. They say that it is a language of derivation, that it is a language that has been largely stolen from the German, all of which is true, but is it not equally true that the English is largely a derived language, and what language in its essence has not been derived from some other language? They say that the continued use of the Yiddish among American Jews is a continued obstacle to their becoming more Americanized. We answer that and we say that if that is a valid opposition it is equally true of the German and of the Pole and of the Bohemian and of the Greek. Yet in our city the public school is used for the study and preservation of the languages above named. Any means used universally by a great number of people, through which means they have a medium of common interests, cannot be said to be a real obstacle.

Now, then, it is contended that serious danger lies in the study of Jewish history, because, as they put it, you cannot study Jewish history without studying that portion of it which is purely Biblical. This is a fallacy; the history of a people extending upward of five thousand years is broader in its scope and embraces a great deal

more than that which is embraced in either the Old or New Testament. We study other histories in our schools; we study the histories, for instance, of England and we read with interest concerning Cromwell and we don't for a moment associate the life and the activities of Cromwell with things religious. We read of Luther and Huss in our study of German history without becoming fanatically religious and we read of the Crusades and of the religious wars merely as historical facts rather than having any bearing on our individual beliefs with reference to religion. And history records the activities of Voltaire, and yet when we read French history we don't think we are studying matters Biblical. And just so, there is much of the history of the Jews that can be read as historical facts without in the least adding or subtracting from the sum total of our religious beliefs.

The cry was raised that our project would make us subject to criticism because we are not sufficiently imbued with Americanism and patriotism for America; that our project accentuated hyphenism, and we say, and we say it boldly but sincerely, that you cannot build healthy Americans unless you build first healthy Jews and Jewesses; and that you cannot build either healthy Jews or Jewesses unless you permeate their youth with a healthy self-respect, and that you cannot hope to make men or women respect themselves unless you tell them who and what they are and from whom and from what they originate, who their people were, what their language is and tell them something of the history of their past. Ludicrous though it may seem, it is none the less the fact that our youths or at least many of them are under the impression that all Jews are either the proverbial peddler or rag-picker and you cannot hope to have them think otherwise unless you teach them otherwise.

Our work is going on though we have not succeeded in obtaining the use of the public school, but it is only a matter of time. We are educating the people to know and understand us better and if we had only the non-Jew to deal with the task would be a comparatively easy one. Our greatest difficulty lies in gentlemen who have up until now been our strongest opponents.