

Heroes of Poetry in the Flesh

By M. J. OLGIN

We had a unique experience last Sunday evening. We were present at one of those gatherings to greet a poet on the occasion of his publishing a new book, gatherings that have become quite frequent in our midst. The poet was Menke Katz. The book was a two-volume war poem "Burning Town" ("Brenendik Shtetl").

On the surface this evening resembled many other evenings of the same kind. There was some singing, some recitation, some play-acting and quite a lot of speaking. The crowd, as is usual on such occasions, was quite young. There were also a few of a more advanced age—those stalwarts who would always visit an evening devoted to proletarian literature because they are friends of Jewish culture and friends of its proletarian brand.

Everything was as is customary at such evenings, including that spirit of holiday, of festivity, where people would rather talk to friends, exchange opinions than listen to speeches from the platform. There was something unusual also, however, and this is what I wish to relate.

Menke Katz has had a remarkable career as a poet. He started with an almost mystic fear of life. His extraordinary talent was directed towards depicting horrors, cruelty, degeneracy, abysmal sufferings of the darkest kind. There was something unwholesome in the performance. Because the man was obviously endowed with a tremendous gift, and because he counted himself among the Left he was severely criticized for leading his readers into a dark corner with hopelessness and despair as the only logical emotions. Criticism, the example of other writers, and his own adherence to the ideology of the class struggle helped him re-orientate himself. His second volume of poetry, "Man in Dawn" (1935) differed radically from the first volume, "Three Sisters." After this volume he began to work on a war poem which, to a degree, explains the origin of his brooding attitude towards life in the early years of his literary activities. It is the description of a small Lithuanian town, Mikhaillshok, during the World War—a town that suffered both from war and pogroms and changes of government and was repeatedly looted and ravaged both by Russian and German armies. It was a record of his own

with people suffering tortures that could hardly be believed. The name Badana to me was a name of a fantastic figure woven out of the tortured imagination of the poet. The child, Yaske, born in the midst of the war, with his mother dying in childbirth and himself raised by Badana, his mother's sister, seemed equally fantastic. So were the other brothers. What he told about them could spring only from the mind of an Edgar Allan Poe; perhaps it could even put Poe in the shade. The constant horror, the continuous hunger, the state of mind almost inevitably bordering on insanity. The shapes of actual insane crowding upon the family.

Yet here they were, almost all those whom Katz describes in his book. His mother sat on the stage, Badana in the flesh. His brothers and sisters sat in the hall, and it was so strange to hear the chairman call Yaske to come up to the platform—that Yaske that was a purely poetic creation to me. Also present were many former citizens of Mikhaillishok and Sventsyan, another town depicted in the poem. They are all simple people now, working people. They are far from the Left. Yet they are proud of their native son who "made good." They came to celebrate the appearance of his books. They came to tell him that they appreciate what he has done for their town. He is an outstanding member of their landsmanschaft—the society of immigrants from Mikhaillishok.

Strange, isn't it? To me the whole thing looked somewhat unreal. I still can't believe it.

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Comrades, the contest is not proceeding so as to make us proud of the support given this column. During the last three days we received only \$15.00: from H. J. Friedman \$5, J. Cooper \$5, Washington Heights Icor \$5. Total \$288.86.

Can we not make it somewhat more lively? We should have had by this time at least \$100 more than Comrade Novick's column. And remember—we must make \$1,000 and make it faster than the "Tog-Ein, Tog-Ois" column. Let's go, the