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IN MEMORIAM

Dr. Aron Syngalowski

by Julius Hochman

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WORLD ORT UNION

I N M E M O R I A M

Dr Aron Syngalowski

It is strange to be at an ORT conference without Aron Syngalowski. We know that life is not eternal, yet who among us ever visualised an ORT conference under these circumstances.

We are gathered for another memorial - as we have done so often since he passed away and as we shall do many times in the years to come. We have lost a great leader. Many of us have also lost a friend and a teacher.

Unfortunately for myself, I knew Dr Syngalowski a relatively short time and I can only speak about him to the extent that I knew him personally.

I first met Aron Syngalowski in the year 1946, at the first post-war international conference of ORT in this very city. After the conference, I informed him that I had arranged to visit the D.P. camps in Germany. He insisted that on my way home I stop over in Geneva and spend a few days with him to give him my impressions.

When I was through my "Jewish Journey", I went to Geneva to report to Dr Syngalowski. I arrived a sad and angry man. I was saddened by what I had seen in the camps - and angry at myself for not having retained a closer relationship with our people - and for not being able to do more to help them.

It was in this state of mind that I met Dr Syngalowski for the second time.

There was Geneva - quiet and peaceful - as if on a different planet from the world of the D.P. camps from which I just had returned. And there was Dr Syngalowski - with no outward sign of the pain and sorrow the war had brought upon him and his family. He seemed above his personal tragedy --- he was concerned only with the plans for ORT's place in the reconstruction of Jewish life.

He assumed the role of teacher and introduced me first of all to the technical aspects of ORT's work ... to the refugee school in Geneva ... to the special pedagogical approach used by ORT ... to the new textbooks at that time in preparation.

But this was only an introduction. What followed was an exposition of Dr Syngalowski's interpretation of ORT and its role in the future of Jewish life.

For Syngalowski, the roots of ORT lay deep in the Jewish tradition. He found its sources in the basic Jewish concepts of work and freedom - the oldest principles on which Judaism is founded. He pointed out that the Jewish nation had its beginnings in a revolt against slavery and forced labour. With this revolt, the Jewish people elevated work to its highest dignity ... and placed it on a level with learning.

Thus, Torah V'avoda has been the distinguishing mark of Jewish culture. Syngalowski pointed out that the word m'lacha (labour) is applied in the book of Genesis to the creation of the world by the Almighty : "And God finished on the seventh day his work which he had made".

Therefore, in the Torah itself, work is considered creation and a process of creation.

Modern psychology confirms this point of view. It is today recognized that work to the average person is what creativeness is to the great artist ... that work, for the average man, is not only a way of making a living ... it is a way of life.

Syngalowski cited, as another pillar in support of his philosophy the fourth commandment : "Six days thou shalt labour and do all thy work - but the seventh day is the Sabbath", - which has been interpreted in Talmudic literature as being as much a commandment to work as it is a commandment to rest.

Out of the depths of his great scholarship, he drew upon talmudic and post-talmudic sources to support the thesis that work is sacred. Syngalowski tied up the whole of Jewish existence with the ORT idea.

What started as a movement at the beginning for the solution of a particular problem of Jewish life in a special country - and was later extended by necessity and circumstances into many other countries - was raised by Syngalowski to a philosophy of life in which the "Work Idea" became a condition for the fulfillment of human existence and human happiness.

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It is one of the popular prejudices that a philosopher or scholar cannot be a practical man. That is, of course, very often untrue. And certainly it did not apply to Dr Syngalowski.

During the same week, as we were talking, he turned to me ... his face lit up with a shy smile of his and that unforgettable charm, and he said : "Friend Hochman, I am in trouble - I need help".

He then proceeded to tell me that for a long time he had felt that ORT required an institute of high scholarly and technical standards, to train and prepare teachers for our schools. There had always been a shortage of good teachers. In 1946, when the best of our youth had been destroyed in the war, the need was particularly acute.

Dr Syngalowski knew that - in the interest of our future work - we had to find men who were both masters of their trades and good teachers.

This, we must remember, was the summer of 1946 - that fantastic year of Kafka-like unreality ... the end of the war without a beginning of peace ... and in Jewish life, even greater uncertainties. Most of us were thinking only of the moment ; but not Aron Syngalowski.

He told me of an opportunity which had presented itself - to buy an estate not far from Geneva that would be suitable for establishing a teachers' institute he envisioned even in 1946. The price had been reasonable, and with the help of friends, he had bought that place. But now the building had to be completely renovated before it could be used as a school. Syngalowski wondered aloud how he could raise the necessary funds to remodel the building and a small budget to start a school.

Frankly, neither I nor any of my colleagues believed that this was the time to spare the funds and the energies for one of Syngalowski's "dreams", while so many other, more critical projects cried out for attention.

But we know now that Syngalowski was very practical indeed in projecting the institute at that time, in 1946.

Today, no one could imagine ORT without that institute. It is one of the great contributions ORT is making to meet the need for skilled and competent teachers. Syngalowski's dream of 1946 is today an acknowledged necessity.

Another act of courage was Syngalowski's singlehanded effort to establish, in the face of many odds, the ORT schools in Israel.

The moment the Jewish State was established and the great masses of wanderers from the D.P. camps began moving into Israel, Syngalowski concluded that ORT must follow and must organize also its program in Israel. He anticipated that he personally might not be welcome in view of his past Jewish political associations, since he had never been an official Zionist. He suspected also that there might be resistance from the established institutions of vocational training.

But these were only obstacles to overcome and not to deter as far as he was concerned. After all, ORT has a special mission and a special place in Jewish life - a special mission to perform. And so, he lifted himself up. And he went to Israel. He knocked at the doors of President Weitzmann, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and others whom he had known in and from his students days, and with deep conviction and great eloquence, he paved the way for the ORT program that is recognized by the Israelis as one of the great contributions to the economic development of Israel.

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In recent years, one of the big events in the life of American ORT was the annual visit of Dr Syngalowski. These yearly visits were the result of a resolution adopted at the international conference in 1948, providing that the World ORT Union should participate in future negotiations with the Joint Distribution Committee. We urged Dr Syngalowski then to come for the next negotiations. But he hesitated. He was not sure how he would be received. He came finally in the winter of 1949. And he was pleasantly surprised at the warmth of his welcome.

With the passing of the years, he came to love New York and to feel at home in it. He had the sense of the

beauty of New York ; by the fact that there were so many Jews in that city. He was fascinated by the development of Jewish cultural life in America. And he came to understand the reasons for the sense of security that the Jews of America feel because they live in a "nation of nations", where Jews are expected to retain much of their original cultural and original values.

During his yearly visits, from the first moment of his arrival until the last moment when he stepped into the plane to leave, Syngalowski was in a rush. There was so much to be done, so many calls on his time. There were, first of all, the negotiations with the JDC. There were meetings with Women's American ORT and luncheons with Labour ORT. He gave lectures to Jewish cultural groups on general Jewish problems. And through his room flowed a stream of writers, poets, journalists, friends of his youth - and just people who wanted to shake his hand. And he refused no one. Yet he was, especially in the last few years, a weary man and a sick man. Syngalowski did not spare himself. I wish to God he had.

It is another popular misconception that public figures have neither time nor inclination for personal feelings, for personal friendship, for concern with the individual. This, too, is a myth.

After Syngalowski's death, there appeared in a Jewish newspaper in New York a memorial article written by Daniel Charney, the brother of B. Charney Vladeck, one of the most beloved figures in Jewish life in the United States, and also the brother of Shmuel Niger, one of the great Jewish literary critics of our time.

Charney tells in this memorial article that he had known Dr Syngalowski from his early student days, and that he had many happy memories of their association. But he had not seen him for more than fifteen years. On a dismal, snowy day, Charney who is now a T.B.

patient, confined to a sanatorium at that time, in a strange place, he quieted his loneliness by reading the Yiddish press. There he read that Syngalowski had arrived from Geneva to negotiate an agreement with the JDC. He began to dream of the joy it would be in these long moments if Syngalowski would meet him again. Suddenly - he tells in this article - he heard a knock at the door and there appeared Syngalowski with his brother Shmuel Niger. Charney was filled with such happiness - he wrote - that he began to weep.

But Syngalowski realized that these were not altogether tears of joy. He sensed that were also tears of a sick man in an unhappy environment. Turning to his brother Shmuel Niger, Syngalowski said : - "We have to get him out of these surroundings. We must get him into a more cheerful atmosphere". Without a moment's delay, Syngalowski sat down at the telephone and within an hour had found a better place for Charney where he still is.

Charney writes that then he realized that to Syngalowski to save the "Yochid" was not less important than to save the "Klal". To save an individual to him was no less important than to save the many, the group, than to save the community.

There was much talk for a long time, and even criticism directed against Syngalowski, for his failure to visit the D.P. camps and personally participate in the organization of the ORT schools in Germany. But there was a reason why it took Syngalowski many years before he could bring himself to visit Germany after the war. He had spent, as you will know, a good many of his youthful and formative years studying in Germany and being active in German Jewish life. Next to Yiddish and Russian, he was most eloquent in the German language. He had absorbed much of German culture, and because of this he could not forgive the people who were responsible for the destruction of millions of our

people. It was not, therefore, until 1950 that he could bring himself to cross the German border.

Aron Syngalowski belonged to a generation of giants and pioneers in Jewish life. In a time filled with shattering events, he was one of the trailblazers of Jewish survival.

He was the last of the founders of our Movement. He not only continued the tradition of ORT, but gave it a poetic cast and a practical guidance ; he provided not only for the present but also for the years to come.

He left us a rich inheritance. Let us cherish it, build it, enrich it, expand it. And in this way we shall honour his memory.

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