

Memories of Ben-Adir

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I would like to say a few words about my grandfather, the man you know as Ben-Adir and whom I knew as 'Deda' (the Russian word for 'Zeyde'). Deda died when I was 5 yrs old. Two years before he died, he wrote his last book, "Afn Geshichtliche Yom HaDin" and inscribed a copy to me with the words "a ma chère Gisele". This was in Paris, 1940.

My only personal memory of him is his standing in his small NY apartment, cane in hand, saying "ya eedu na zaseedahneyeh" (I'm going to a meeting.) Stories my father told about him paint a sketchy picture of his life:

He was born in 1878 in Krutchka, a shtetl of 1000 Jews. His grandfather was the rabbi of the shtetl as were many generations before him. He received a traditional Jewish education, i.e. he was 'home-schooled' by his grandfather and uncle. At the age of 16 he left the shtetl and went to Odessa to take university examinations as an external student. As a small town Yid this was his first contact with the Jewish intelligentsia, a pivotal point in his life.

As a child, and most of my adult life, this was the extent of my knowledge of my Deda, Ben-Adir. I knew nothing about his political evolution as a thinker, writer, and activist: about his disillusionment first with Communism and later with Zionism, and most significantly about his life-long struggle to convince the Jewish intelligentsia of the moral imperative of creating a homeland for the Jewish people.

It was only after I retired in 2002, and finally having some time on my hands, that I realized how precious was Deda's gift to me so long ago. Knowing no Yiddish, I bought the best dictionary I could find, and proceeded to translate the book he wrote in 1940. I first became truly acquainted with my grandfather through this

book and by researching his life as a thinker and activist. This book was followed by a pamphlet written in the US a year later entitled "People and Land" as well as an article published shortly before his death entitled "A Bitter Testament".

All evoke the image of a prophet pleading with his people to recognize that they stand at a historical crossroads. The only salvation was finding an uninhabited territory for establishing an autonomous Jewish settlement, a safe haven for the millions of Jewish homeless anticipated at the end of the War as well as a permanent refuge in future times of need. In this land all daily affairs would be conducted only in Yiddish, and Yiddish culture and Jewish ingenuity would flourish.

As you know his territorialist dream never materialized. Yet we gathered here today are witness to his vision that Yiddish language and culture live on.