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Rabbi Yaakov Meir Zalkind: Aphorisms, Short Stories, Essays and Fragments (a book review)

Julian Langer

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I have read this collection of writings, compiled, edited and translated by Hayyim Rothman, over the course of an evening, a day and a morning, with increasing appreciation for what Rothman has done as I read through the text. So at the start of this piece I wish to articulate my gratitude to Rothman in putting out this collection of translations.

Rabbi Yaakov Meir Zalkind was a Yiddish Jewish-anarchist, involved in the early 20th century London Jewish and anarchist communities, and an individual involved in the Arbeter Fraynd (Worker's Friend) publication, where many of the pieces in this collection were originally published. But what struck me as most significant about Zalkind's thought and legacy today is that he was a Zionist, who believed in the Zionism of the nationstate, who walked away from Zionism and embraced anarchist thought and praxis, as part of his Jewish-revolt.

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As an advocate for socialism and organisation, and as an opponent of individualism within anarchist discourses and praxes, Zalkind is arguably no more inspiring (or boring) than practically any other individual making the same pushes – and can easily be critiqued in the multitude of ways that individualist and post-left anarchists have done so towards such pushes. He was a devotee of Kropotkin and Kropotkin's vision of anarcho-communism and translated his teacher's Philosophy of Anarchism into Yiddish in order to encourage the spread of the anarchist prince's thought within Yiddish-speaking Jewish communities. This is, after his earlier Zionist pieces, the aspect of Zalkind's writings and thought that I resonated with least. He also, as part of his appeals to anarchist-socialism, critiqued Bolshevism. This is all articulated across many essays in the collection.

The more brilliant aspects of his thought and writings in this collection are where I wish to turn to now. His aphorisms contain several beautifully articulated gems of thought and are more comparable to the aphorisms of Shestov than those of Nietzsche – perhaps what is most striking about these aphorisms is that many would serve well as critiques for many of his political essays. Zalkind's arguably more interesting and brilliant political essays deal with subjects such as suffering, justice and rights, and where he brings in his critiques of Zionism as an anarchist who once embraced Zionism. But where Zalkind perhaps shines most as a writer is in his stories, which reminded me of two of my favourite short story writers, Oscar Wilde and Franz Kafka. His short stories are undoubtedly the pieces in this collection that I will return to most of all. *The Crow*, *I Want To Be A Soldier*, *The Abyss* and *The Envy-Inspiring Chicken* were particular favourites of mine. His tale *In The Land Of Cockaigne*, the second story in Hayyim's collection, could easily serve as a critique of rebels who fantasise of the other-world that will be better than this one, rather than

engage in revolt in this world, in a Nietzschean-type critique – which is striking against Zalkind’s anarcho-communism.

What I see as most valuable in what Hayyim Rothman has created in this compilation of writings, is an opportunity to engage in the thought of someone who was a Zionist and then came to walk away from Zionism, to favour anarchist thought instead. But Zalkind did so whilst recognising an aspect of Zionism that holds truth and needs recognition in anarchist thought; that Jews need to be able to live somewhere where they do not need to fear being murdered or executed, as individuals or on mass, for being Jews – this is the truth that antisemitism exists. For Zalkind this truth held better answers, better responses, in anarchist thought compared to the responses and answers provided by Zionism, which he regarded as a “false messiah”. In making these writings available to English-speakers (be they Jews or any other peoples), my belief is the Rothman is inviting readers of this text to reflect upon critiques of both antisemitism and Zionism with greater depth and consideration, with the invitation to consider anarchist thought and praxes as a means of responding to both.

In this environment, where antisemitism is worsening and Zionism being so much part of the global political conversation, Rothman’s collection of writings by Zalkind has most of all brought the Hebrew word *tikkun* to my mind; as it means repair. I have also found myself reflecting upon the idea of “an eye for an eye” not meaning anything of justice and revenge, but to mean healing and fair restoration – if I harm your eye it is fair for me to try and help your eye heal, and if I take your vision of the world away from you then I have somewhat of a responsibility to help you find your vision as well. With this, it strikes me as fair that those of us who are critiques of Zionism provide something of an alternative vision for those Jews who seek safety in Zionism; not as an ideal, which Zalkind would

call a lie, but in action. With this, maybe, there is the possibility of repair.

In the closing of this piece I again want to express my gratitude to Hayyim Rothman for putting out this collection. I am sincerely looking forward to rereading the pieces I found most engaging; especially Zalkind's stories.