

The Departure

BY BASIL DAHL

[The following poem was written in English by Joseph Bovshover (1873-1916), a Yiddish poet who wrote under the English pseudonym of Basil Dahl. Though it was not his native tongue, this gifted poet, soon after his arrival on these shores in the early 1890's, began to write poetry in English as well as in Yiddish. In his early days in New York, Bovshover worked as a furrier, but later abandoned his craft to devote his full time to a literary career. This brilliant and sensitive artist was a political radical and anarchist, devoted to the furtherance of the proletarian masses, whose sufferings touched him deeply. "The Departure" is one in a group of English poems written no later than 1898, only a few years after the author had begun to study English. The poem reflects the great Jewish immigration into this country from Eastern Europe which was taking place at that time, just as Bovshover in his idealism and yearnings symbolizes the spirit of the Eastern European Jew. A manuscript copy of the poem is found in the American Jewish Archives. — EDITOR.]

It was in March. The sun stood low;
Beneath its crimson, warmer glow
The snow hath long begun to thaw
From roofs of shingles, tile, and straw.
The pendant circles melted fast,
And winter seemed to breathe his last.
But though the winter's gloom and blast
Were almost vanished in the past,
Which made all bosoms white and glad,
Mine was depressed and chilled and sad.
For I was soon to leave my home
Resolved to distant shores to roam
In search of that which to possess
I thought was bliss and happiness.

No more to walk the scented wood
Not far from which my cradle stood,
No more to measure with fond looks
The well-beloved familiar nooks

Of house and garden, yard and street,
The friends of youth no more to meet,
To see no more the faces near
Of parents well-beloved and dear:
Alas, this thought was hard to bear.
And yet, though hard, I could not tear
My heart away from its desire
Which was to 'scape, as from a fire,
The Czar's oppressed and knouted lands
And seek the happier, freer strands.

My mother wept, my sire grew pale,
And, like a leaflet in the gale,
I shook in all my limbs with fear,
Yet checked the course of many a tear,
Partly because I would not swell
The sad news of their last farewell,
And partly, too, because I wept
Full oft before, and waking kept
Long hours at night beside their beds,
Kissing in thought their hoary heads.

At last this parting hour drew nigh.
The sun was set, and on the sky
Where the horizon's bound expands
Red streaks of clouds like blood-tugged bands
Gleamed with an awful, ominous light
And filled my bosom with affright.
Like lump of lead were both my feet;
I clenched my fists, rose from my seat,
Grasped with one hand my coat and trunk,
And with the other, like one drunk,
Embraced both parents in the gloom,
Ran to the door, and left the room.
But when the open street I'd gained,
I stopped and turned and then remained
Some moments rooted on the spot.
For by the door of our poor cot,
All heedless of the evening's chill,
I saw my mother standing still,

Surrounded by some female friends
 With drooping head and wilted hands,
 But pale and trembling like a reed.
 Alas, alas, my heart did bleed
 To see her there, so lone and lorn,
 Away from her, her youngest torn.
 Mine eyes grew dim, my spirits sunk.
 A while I thought to dash the trunk
 Against the pavement, to return
 To her whose heart I knew would yearn
 For me with pure, maternal love.
 But strong, resistless forces drove
 Me suddenly from where I stood.
 I left her. Was it right and good?

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